

A close-up photograph of a man with a beard, wearing a dark suit jacket, a white dress shirt, and a dark tie. He is adjusting his tie with his hands. The background is dark and textured.

DON'T FIGHT
The feeling

MONICA WALTERS

DON'T FIGHT THE FEELING

A BEROTTE FAMILY BOOK

MONICA WALTERS

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CONTENTS

Preface

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

Also by Monica Walters

PREFACE

Hello, readers!

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

This is book seven 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 later books. It is highly recommended that you read the previous books of this family series before indulging in this one, because it typically picks up right where the last one left off.

Love On Replay

Deeper Than Love

Something You Won't Forget

I'm The Remedy

Love Me Senseless

I Want You Here

This book is about Anissa's son, Dexter Dent, who is an honorary Berotte. His story backtracks a bit from Chad's story. So if it seems events have already occurred in Chad's book, you're right about that. I had to go back and recap things between him and Shavozz.

This book is also reminiscent of Sheldon and Anissa's story, *Love On Replay*. It's like an introductory book of sorts. In this book, you will get to know more about the sub characters, Jamel, Ali, and Arrow, so you will see a lot of them and parts of their pending stories.

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.

DJ and Shavozz's story contain some back and forth that can be unnerving but so worth it in the end. Issues from previous stories are resolved and/or updated, and new issues have surfaced. So I hope you enjoy the ride this story is going to take you on.

Monica

Dedication...

Thank you, Shavozz, for being so supportive of me in this journey. I remember when you started reading my books back in 2018 when I first signed with B. Love Publications. When I found out that you lived close to my extended family in Lafayette, I was beyond excited, knowing that we would eventually get to meet. We finally did in 2019 in the parking lot of The Best Stop in Scott, Louisiana. I was so excited to make your acquaintance.

Seeing you grow as a single mother for the past few years has been inspiring. Getting your nursing degree with the odds stacked against you only proves just how strong you are. Thank you for allowing me to use your name and image for this book. Although the Shavozz in the story is stubborn, I believe that I still embodied your personality a bit. LOL! I hope you enjoy the story, and I also hope I did you justice.

Thanks again for your undying love and support, and tell your mom, Mrs. Red Anderson, I appreciate her too. LOL! Love y'all!

PROLOGUE

D J

“WHAT’S UP, BEAUTIFUL? WHILE WAITING FOR MY ORDER, I saw you over here and knew I couldn’t leave without making your acquaintance.”

She smiled and bit her bottom lip, causing her glasses to lift on her face. Her cheeks turned rosy, and she said, “Actually, I was about to approach you for my friend.”

I frowned slightly and glanced at her friend. That heifer was ugly as hell. Looking back at her, I said, “Naw. You should have been coming to me to introduce yourself. I’m Dexter, but everyone calls me DJ. What’s your name, gorgeous?”

“Shavozz. Nice to meet you, DJ.”

She turned to walk away, so I gently grabbed her hand. “Hol’ on, Shavozz. I mean, I wanna get to know you. You too fine for me to just let walk away. What? A nigga ain’t yo’ type?”

She smiled again and looked away for a minute. She seemed sweet as hell, and her curves were sharp enough to have muthafuckas cutting themselves, ruining their lives. Those hips had me hooked along with her golden-brown skin, auburn streaked hair, and gorgeous ass smile. *Damn.* Not to mention how sexy her glasses were. She was stacked and definitely had some meat on her bones that I could grab ’hold

of. I wasn't against skinny women. I didn't discriminate; however, I definitely preferred a thick woman. If I judged by my past relationships, it seemed they could handle me better... sexually and physically.

Hell, if I was honest, it seemed that they could handle me better emotionally as well. It was like they were more sensitive to the shit I was dealing with, especially when my dad was in and out of our lives. That nigga made me have to grow up fast as hell. The only time I could really be young and immature was when I was with Chad at school. We didn't really hang out too much outside of school, because I had to go home and see after my mama and lil brother.

Shavozz blushed harder, and she swept her curls from her face. "I just divorced an ain't shit nigga. I'm not ready to put myself back out there, DJ. You seem cool and all, but I need to get reacquainted with myself, now that he's gone and it's just me and my babies."

That only made me more sensitive to her, because it reminded me of how my mama struggled taking care of us without my dad being around. Everything was on her, and it was a big adjustment for all of us. "Will you at least take my number? Whenever you ready to move on, call me."

She smiled again, and I swore I was smitten. She slid her hand away from mine. I barely realized that I'd been holding her hand the entire time. It just felt so natural and comfortable as hell. After glancing back at her friend who was staring at us, she said, "Okay."

"A'ight. You betta not give my number to yo' friend either. I'm not gon' be disrespectful by saying what I think of her, but if she call me, I will be."

She chuckled, then bit her bottom lip, trying to hold in her laughter. She knew her ugllass friend wasn't gon' pull no nigga like me. She needed to find somebody as ugly as her. She handed me her phone and looked at me over her glasses as she said, "I won't. Type it in. I mean, ain't no harm in just talking. Just because I'm not ready to date, we can still talk, right?"

Man, she already had my mind in the gutter with the way she looked at me over those glasses. Porn had been my best friend lately because I was sick of fucking random broads. I was ready for something real. It had been nearly a year since I had sex. Her looking over those glasses was gon' have me tryna get in her guts prematurely. "Yeah, of course. When you're ready, you'll already know me," I responded.

"Order for DJ!"

I turned to the man at the counter and lifted my hand. "Give me a sec, Shavozz."

I went and got my food from him, then headed back to her. She handed me her phone again, and I finished typing my number in her phone and saving it under DJ. "I had to save it in there. I couldn't risk you losing it. You eat here a lot?"

"No. My friend does though. She loves their links."

I lifted the right side of my lip in disgust. I liked links, but just imagining her friend eating one made me nauseated. Shavozz chuckled again. "DJ, you seem really cool."

"I am. You'll find out in time."

I lifted her hand to my lips and kissed it just as her friend walked over. "Damn, Vozz, you coming or what?"

I could already see that her hatin' ass was gonna be a problem. I frowned at her as Shavozz said, "Girl, yes. Don't be rushing me. I'm the one driving."

She smacked her lips and rolled her eyes. I swore it looked like her ass had morphed into a damn gremlin. Shavozz turned back to me and said, "I'm sorry. She's so damn impatient. It was really nice meeting you, DJ."

"It was nice meeting you too, beautiful. Tonight ain't too soon for you to call me. I'm ready to start spoiling somebody, and you the first woman I've seen in a long time that looks like you worthy."

She blushed and seemed to be caught off guard by my bluntness. As she walked away, I followed up with, "Don't keep me waiting."

She turned and smiled at me. I grabbed my food from the table to head home. That shit would probably be cold by the time I got there. When I walked outside, I saw her and her ugly friend getting in an Impala. I didn't know why she was hanging with that hatin' ass broad. If she needed a friend, I could be that shit for her too. My dream woman would be my best friend anyway. If I couldn't confide in and laugh with my woman, then that was a no-go. She needed to be down to earth, and Shavozz seemed like everything I'd been searching for. Hopefully, I was everything her ex-husband wasn't so we could take this further... much further.

D J

Six months later...

“LOOK NA, YOU CAN’T BE TRYNA BREAK THE BANK NO MORE. I got somebody special in my life I want y’all to meet,” I said to my mama as she ran through Bath and Body Works scooping up candles and lotions.

She nearly dropped her basket as her head whipped around in my direction. Anissa Berotte had been waiting on the day I found someone I could settle down with and give her some grandkids. Since all my stepsiblings were having babies, her fever had simmered to a low-grade one. I was appreciative of that. Dylan and Alexz’s baby girls had kept her attention. Zay and his wife were expecting triplets, and Chad had one on the way as well.

“Since when?”

“We’ve been talking for a while now, but I just made it official. She’s my girlfriend, and I would love for her to meet my family... all fifty-leven of y’all.”

My mama giggled then gave me a one-armed hug. “I’m happy for you, baby. I know you’ve been wanting this for a while now. I hope she’s the one.”

“Yeah, me too. Dating from a cesspool is tiring.”

Her eyebrows lifted as I chuckled. “That’s what it feels like, Ma. The dating pool these days is full of shit. Thank God you and Pop clicked when y’all met. Well, at first y’all didn’t, but you get my point.”

She giggled as her skin reddened. Just the mention of my stepfather, Sheldon Berotte, did that to her. I’d met Mr. Sheldon long before Chad and I came up with the thought of the barbeque to see if sparks flew between them. He was pretty cool but kind of withdrawn, just like my mama. I knew that they needed one another, but only if they could get out of their own way. He was a good man that had practically raised all five of his kids alone.

When I met Chad, his mother had already died. I did my best to help him through not having a mom, and he did his best to help me through when my dad left us. I was in high school, trying to be the man of the house. Just having Chad to talk to helped tremendously. I knew that in order for him to help me, he had to have a great male influence in his life, just like I had a great female one. It was meant for them to be together.

“Well, I’m gonna take it easy on you then, son. I promise I won’t cross one hundred dollars.”

I chuckled and shook my head slowly. Once a month, I took my mama shopping. When she was single, we would go every other week. It started as a way to lift her spirits after she finally made up her mind to let my dad go. Whenever we were shopping, she was happy. I lived to see her smile, and I hated that Dexter Senior had wiped it right off her face. For a while, I thought that was becoming a permanent thing. It had been years since I’d seen her show her teeth when she smiled.

Now, she showed them all the time, and I couldn’t help but thank the good Lord and Mr. Sheldon for that, or Pop as I’d been calling him for at least the past ten years. I wanted to do the same thing for Shavozz. She smiled a lot, but I could tell it was fake sometimes. She’d called me the same night we met, and we talked on the phone for at least a couple of hours. I was able to listen to her be a mother to her two boys.

She reminded me a lot of my mother, and that was saying a lot. My mama was the strongest woman in the world as far as I was concerned, and any woman that could even slightly compare to the woman she was, impressed me immediately.

Shavozz had her first child when she was sixteen. She still graduated from high school on time and went to college to be a nutrition specialist. She helped diabetics count carbs and find healthy options that fit their taste buds in their diabetes education classes. She'd married the father of her oldest son, and just as she was finishing college, she got pregnant again. So she had a seventeen-year-old and a ten-year-old, mostly raising them by herself. She was married for ten years when she caught him cheating on her. What I realized was that she wasn't as trusting of me because of that. I understood her hesitancy with that, and I chose to do my best to prove to her that I was her one.

Being raised primarily by my mother gave me a slight advantage in relationships. I understood women really well. Besides Chad and my brother Jamel, my mama was my best friend. She was who I confided in the most, especially when it concerned matters of the heart. She was my sounding board when I just wanted to vent and not be called sensitive. Chad had that shit bad. He'd eased up a bit, though, since he'd gotten shit semi-straight in his love life with Lexi.

Jamel was still playing the field. I often teased him and said that he fucked whatever was moving his way. In reality, he was more selective than that. He just didn't want a relationship with anybody. I felt like it was going to hit him when he least expected it. That one woman was gonna hook the hell out of him. When she did, she was gonna tear his mouth up like a hooked fish where he wasn't gonna want anybody else. When that day came, I would be there to rub it in his face.

As Mama shopped, I picked up my phone to text Shavozz. I picked up a Mahogany Teakwood Intense candle for her because she liked that manly smell in her bedroom. She'd said that when I wasn't near her, it would smell like I was. I'd only been in her bedroom when the boys were with their dad, which

was every other weekend. Those were the only times I even went to her house. Whenever we went anywhere else, she would meet me at my place. I'd never met her boys. She said she refused to introduce them to someone she was simply dating.

For months on end, I thought she was mine. When I realized she needed clarification, I simplified shit for her almost immediately. I wasn't trying to be with anyone else. This dating shit was for the birds. I needed stability, and that was something I felt I had with her.

Hey, baby. Can I bring you lunch? What do you want to eat?

She answered immediately. Hey, love. Thank God! I'm so busy. I doubt I'll be able to leave. Subway is fine. You know what I like.

She inserted a kissy face emoji, and I sent the same back to her. Shavozz didn't even realize that she could get whatever she wanted from me. She had me at her disposal. My off days fell in the middle of the week at times. I was usually off on Sundays, but I had to work some Saturdays at the juvenile detention center with those bad ass adult kids.

Outside of the store, I sat on a bench to wait for my mama as she tried to decide which fragrances she wanted. I swore whenever I brought her here, it lasted forever. We would be at Bath and Body Works for at least two hours. While I waited, I decided to see if Jamel would be in town this weekend. I planned to take Shavozz to Pour 09 with us and then to Sunday dinner. She could meet the crew, although she'd already met Chad when he'd gotten shot. She picked me up from his house.

“Hello?”

“What's up, bruh? You busy?”

“Nigga, I'm always busy. What's up?”

“Whatever.” I rolled my eyes. The nigga was rarely busy at work. He was a damn crane operator that just sat in a glass box and waited on instruction. Nigga made ninety dollars an hour

to practically do nothing. “I wanna introduce Shavozz to y’all this weekend. We finally made it official.”

“It’s about fucking time. You been giving her loyalty for free all this time, and she been doing whatever the fuck she wanted to do.”

“Shut up, Jamel. You coming or not?”

“Yeah. Let me see if Arrow gotta work. We need to hook up with Seneca and Ali this weekend anyway. We ain’t got to hang in a minute.”

“When y’all started hanging with Ali?”

“Since Seneca been working for him, so not that long. Plus, Seneca spends more time in Beaumont now than he does in H-Town.”

“Oh, okay. Well, you know we going to Pour 09 Saturday night, so y’all will get to meet her then. The old folks will meet her Sunday.”

“A’ight. I’mma tell Mama you calling her old.”

“Nigga, I ain’t insulting her. I’m just saying. That includes her, Yolanda, Pop, and Ms. Patricia.”

“Yolanda ain’t that old with her sexy ass. She still in her forties.”

“Whatever. I wouldn’t be surprised if you hit that.”

When he remained quiet, I knew that he had. “You no good ass nigga. That’s Mama’s friend!”

“Well, shit, you need to remind her nasty ass of that. It only happened once. She was fucked up, and I took advantage. She was angry at me and herself for not being able to control ourselves. Her son had come to town, and we had turned the hell up. She had like three edibles that night. I didn’t know that at the time. I just thought she wanted some of me. I was down, because you know I always thought she was fine as hell. When we talked about it later, we promised we wouldn’t say shit about it and that it wouldn’t happen again.”

“You muthafucka. She could have said you raped her. You know that, right?”

“She love Mama too much for that, but I’m aware. That was like five years ago though, man. Now she can’t get enough of younger dick. She always fucking around with a younger man. I done turned her ass into a whole ass cougar.”

He laughed, and I shook my head slowly. I swore, somebody was gone get ahold of his ass and turn him the fuck out. I hoped it was an older woman who knew what the fuck she was doing too. Somebody that could fuck some sense into him. I heard his walkie talkie going off, so I said, “A’ight. Get some work done, and don’t fuck up nobody shit.”

“Bye, nigga.”

He ended the call just as Mama was walking out of the store with a smile on her face. “I went a little over. I spent one hundred forty-three dollars,” she said as she handed me my credit card.

“That’s okay, Ma. Let’s go get some lunch. I gotta bring some food to Shavozz. She don’t have time to take a lunch break.”

“What does she do?”

“Well, right now she’s a diabetes educator, but she’s a nutrition specialist.”

“Oh wow. That’s great. Well, let’s get her food first, then we can go to Bruno’s, my treat.”

“You done fell in love with that place. A’ight.”

I put my arm around her, and we headed out of the mall. I saw Shavozz’s raggedy ass friend coming inside, and she cut her eyes at me. I couldn’t stand that ugly ass girl, and I didn’t even know her ass. It was one thing to be ugly, but having a stank attitude to go along with it just made her uglier. I kissed my mama’s head to give her something to see since she wanted to mean mug me.

As far as I knew, she was Shavozz’s only friend, at least that was close to her. Whenever Vozz went out, if she wasn’t

with me, she was with Talisha's ass. I told her that I didn't think that ho had her best interest at heart, but she assured me she was just protective of her because of what she'd gone through with her ex, Elvis. Who in the fuck named their child Elvis? I had never heard of a black person named Elvis until this nigga. When she told me that shit, I fell out laughing. She couldn't help but laugh with me, then push me and call me childish.

I had to make her aware that childish was that leprechaun looking nigga she used to be married to. He couldn't have been more than five feet eight. I hadn't seen him in person, but I saw a picture of him with their boys, and Trayveon was taller than him. I told her that him fucking around on her was childish. I was playful and a clown at times. Big difference. She rolled her eyes, and we went on to the next subject.

So Talisha was off the hook and probably never would be on it with Shavozz because she was there to help her through the divorce and yada, yada, yada. That bitch was gon' be trouble though. I could feel it like Jesus felt when the woman with the issue of blood touched him. My damn spidey senses never failed me when it came to trifling ass women. That was why I stayed out of trouble. I avoided women that put off ignorant ass vibes. This would be unavoidable though, because I wasn't willing to let Shavozz go because of her stupid friend. She just needed to stay out of my face, and I would surely stay out of hers.

S havozz

I WAS RUNNING FROM THE RESTROOM, TRYING TO GET TO MY next class. It had been extremely busy today at Southeast Texas Medical Associates (SETMA). The stressful part about it was re-educating people on shit they were supposed to already know. Surely, after two years of being a diabetic, they knew they couldn't be drinking sodas every damn day. The shit was frustrating, especially when they had the nerve to complain and say the medication wasn't working. *Like really?*

I wanted to tell them, *No, bitch. You ain't working!* How could they expect to get better when they weren't willing to make changes in their diet? That was a question I found myself asking quite often. I wished more of them took their health seriously. It was like we were more concerned than they were. That really got old. One of the doctors that sent his patients my way had started to pretty much kick them out the door. He'd send them a nice letter saying that he could no longer be their doctor anymore and would list the reasons why. If I worked for myself, there would have been a few people I would have dismissed by now.

When I got back to the office, I had ten minutes to spare. I took the time to look at my phone before patients started coming in and saw I had a message from Talisha. *Saw yo' nigga at the mall today. I'm gonna assume this woman is his mother. However, I know this woman ain't.*

There was a picture of DJ with an older woman that I recognized as his mother. He'd shown me pictures of her before when he talked about how close they were. However, the next picture was questionable. It was of him with a woman, and they were holding hands. He was smiling and looked extremely happy with my damn sandwich in his other hand. The heat had gathered around my ears.

After dealing with my ex-husband's cheating ass, I was on guard for foolishness. That was why I had given DJ such a hard time about us being together. We'd known one another for over six months, and he was just now making us official, assuming that we already were just because we were going out and fucking. I wanted him to verbalize what he wanted. There was no way I would be a fool again, hanging on to a man that wasn't hanging on to me.

We still hadn't met one another's family, but I knew that was coming soon, well... maybe not if he was already playing me. I didn't want to believe it, but at the same time, I knew I needed to seriously inquire. When I met Elvis, there wasn't a thing anyone could tell me about him. *Everyone* had warned me, saying he was a known player, but I refused to listen. My mama had told me what she heard about him, but she wasn't sure how true it was.

Just the fact that she'd heard it should have been enough for me. My mama wasn't the messy type. She kept to herself and didn't talk everybody's business. She believed the best about people until she came to know better for herself. Still, I entertained that nigga and got pregnant when I was sixteen.

We broke up briefly, but I loved that man so much. I married him six years later while I was in college. That was when things started going downhill. A year after we got married, he stayed out all night. I was pregnant and emotional and allowed him to work his way back in. After that, he became more careful, although he said he was going to do right.

He had me looking like an idiot for the entire ten years we were married. Everyone knew he was a bitch, but I wouldn't believe it. That just made the divorce harder on me. I caught

his ass with a woman at the movies. That was when I made up in my mind that I would be different. My boys and I packed up and moved to Beaumont from Lafayette, Louisiana, and I started over. I met their punk ass daddy in Lake Charles every other weekend so they could spend time with him.

Now that I was with DJ, I refused to turn a blind eye to accusations. This shit would be explored. I would just have to make sure that when he brought my food that I didn't have an attitude. I couldn't talk to him about this at work. I was trying not to be angry at all. The woman he was with could be a friend or relative. Since I hadn't met his family, I didn't want to jump to conclusions.

As a couple of patients walked in, I stood from my seat and greeted them. I needed to start class in exactly five minutes, because I had another class that would start right after this one. I also had appointments with a couple of patients individually before the day was over. Just as I pulled out my props for demonstration, DJ knocked on the doorframe with my footlong sandwich and a gift bag in his hand.

I swore that man was fine as hell. He was about six feet three and his beard had to be manicured by God. His brown skin was so smooth, and I didn't hesitate to lick it whenever we were alone. His lovemaking gave me chills, and even though I wanted to question him about that picture, I wanted to do it while I bounced on his dick. He had the build of a basketball player, slender, but toned and he often wore a grill on his bottom row of teeth that was sexy as hell.

It didn't help that he was a nasty ass Q-Dawg. He did that damned neck roll between my legs, and I came the Niagara. When he saw that, he began implementing it whenever he went down on me. That alone caused my pussy to cream whenever I saw him. That included right now. He smiled and said, "Hey, baby. I see you busy, but I just wanted you to know I was thinking about you."

I smiled slightly then puckered my lips for a kiss. After he obliged me, I took my food and gift from him. "Thank you, Dexter."

He frowned slightly. I rarely called him Dexter, and I was mentally beating myself up for doing so now. I tried to play it off and giggled. “Thank you, DJ.”

He tilted his head. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. I’ll talk to you later, baby.”

“A’ight. You wanna meet me at Pour 09 tomorrow night? I gotta work, but I’ll be off by five. My peeps gon’ be there.”

I didn’t think I was ready to meet everyone, but I supposed I could do that. “Okay. See you tomorrow about nine.”

“You sure you good?”

“Yeah. Talk to you later.”

He kissed my head then gave me a wink and left. *God that man is fine*. He always showered me with gifts, just because. I loved that. I wasn’t a materialistic person, and I never asked him for anything, but he never hesitated to buy me things. The first time he did, I wouldn’t accept it. He got salty as hell. I soon learned that he just liked to shower me with gifts. That was his way of expressing how much he wanted me. I wanted to believe he was in love with me, but this fucking picture had me questioning everything.

I had serious trust issues because of Elvis. Not only didn’t I trust niggas, but I didn’t trust myself to make good decisions regarding them. It seemed I was attracted to players, and I hated that shit. During the four-year separation from Elvis before we hooked back up and got married, I dated two guys that both cheated on me. My mind was fucked up, but I didn’t know how to change it. I tried to trust that DJ was a good man. He already treated me better than anyone ever had, but maybe his game was just more elevated.

One time when I’d stayed at his house, I went through his phone while he was asleep. When I didn’t find anything, I went to the bathroom and beat myself up for doing so. He’d never given me a reason not to trust him. Just the fact that he didn’t have a lock code on his phone should have been proof that he had nothing to hide. It was then that I knew he was only dating me. There was no other woman in his life besides

his mother. Most of his calls were to her, his friend Chad, and his brother Jamel.

Taking a deep breath, I glanced in the bag and saw a candle and something else. I turned my back and pulled it out to see it was one of the remote vibrators. The package was open and the remote was gone. I chuckled and slowly shook my head as he texted. Quickly checking my phone, I read the message. *Be sure to put it on when you have time. I wanna make sure you satisfied even when I'm not around.*

This man was too perfect. *Too good to be true.* There had to be a flaw somewhere. He had to be hiding something. I dropped the toy back in the bag and felt the gush between my legs. I took a deep breath as I set the bag on the desk, then turned to my clients to begin class. I was hot as hell and knew that I would be going to masturbate and put that thing in my panties as soon as this class was over.

“Are you okay, Ms. Simpson? You look a little flustered.”

“I’m okay, Mrs. Jones. Thank you.”

She was one of those repeat patients that I spoke about. I wanted to roll my eyes, but instead, I smiled and began class, starting from the very beginning as to why they were type 2 diabetics and how their pancreas didn’t produce enough insulin. By the time we got to the end of class, I was drained and knew I would have to do this shit all over again in twenty minutes. I opened my sandwich and scarfed half of it down, then sent a text to my seventeen-year-old, Trayveon, to make sure he’d gotten his brother, Dalen, and that they were safe.

I was grateful that his dad had bought him a car. That lifted a load off me trying to make sure they had transportation to and from school. I had to be to work by seven in the morning, and that was too early to get them to school. I didn’t get off until five, and of course, they were out of school by then. Last school year was tough because Trayveon played basketball. His practice schedule was all over the place, and I had to find rides for him and Dalen all the time.

I wouldn’t have to find a ride for Dalen until basketball season started. Talisha got off work at three most days and

would be able to pick him up if needed. However, Trayveon would always be able to get to and from where he needed to be. He'd just started his senior year, and I didn't want him to miss out on all the senior activities. Thankfully, he'd been responsible thus far. I could only pray that things stayed that way.

He texted back. *We're good, Ma. I stopped and got us something to eat. See you when you get off.*

Okay, baby. Thank you. I love you.

Love you too.

I had a couple of minutes to spare, so I ran to the restroom and cleaned up, then put that damn vibrator in my panties. I didn't have time to masturbate. I quickly made my way back to the office and prayed that DJ didn't click that remote while I was standing up here teaching these folks about their bodies. I'd get fired for sure.

D J

“I THOUGHT YOU SAID SHAVOZZ WAS COMING,” JAMEL SAID, then took a swig of his drink.

“She is. She’s running late.”

I looked at my watch to see it was nearing ten o’clock. Shavozz said she would be here at nine. Chad had just arrived with Lexi, and I was happy as hell they had gotten their shit together, especially with her being pregnant. Shavozz had texted me about eight thirty to let me know she was running late but didn’t offer an explanation why. Her clit should have been sore as fuck. Whenever the spirit moved me today, I hit that remote.

I knew she was wearing it, because she called my office phone immediately, saying she almost bust her ass in the grocery store. I was hitting that fucking thing every ten minutes for two hours straight. I felt good about myself for doing that shit too. Now she had me sitting here questioning if I had done something wrong. I just wanted to be her everything, but I could tell that something was up, especially when I took her food to her yesterday.

She called me Dexter. Only my mama and Pop called me Dexter. That was a dead giveaway. Chad occasionally called me that when he was joking or something, but that was it. She knew she’d fucked up. Whatever it was, it was something she

either didn't want to discuss or didn't have time to discuss. I surely didn't want to ask about it when I called her on my lunch break today. The last thing I wanted to be thinking about at work was some bullshit.

I wasn't saying that whatever was going on with her was bullshit, but just in case it was, I wanted to wait until I got off work. When I turned toward the staircase and saw her walking up with a slight frown on her face, I knew I had better go meet her. The last thing she needed to do was to try to clown me in front of my people. Alexz would beat her ass. Since she'd had her baby, she was back to her normal shenanigans.

As I made my way to her, she frowned harder. She didn't look angry, but she did look bothered. "Hey, baby. What's wrong?"

"Hey. Who is this?" she asked as she handed me her phone.

It was a picture of me holding hands with Alexz. I smiled slightly. "That's my boo, girl," I said jokingly.

Before I could clarify, she rolled her eyes and snatched her phone then turned to head back downstairs. I quickly followed behind her. "Yo, Vozz, hol' up. I was just joking."

When she got to the bottom of the stairs, she whipped around toward me. "Do it look like I'm playing?"

I stared in her eyes and grabbed her hand. "Naw. I'm sorry, baby. You the only woman for me. That's real. I'll never lie to you. Come back up and I'll introduce you to my sister, Alexz."

She swallowed hard. "She's your sister? Y'all look nothing alike."

"She's my stepsister, but we don't tend to use that step word around each other. We only use it to clarify how we're related. She was getting lunch from the African place next to Subway when I stopped to get your sandwich. Who sent you this picture?"

She stared up at me, and I already knew the answer. *Talisha's jealous ass*. "Talisha. She'd sent me the picture from

the mall too, but I knew that was your mother. She's just looking out for me, DJ."

I slowly shook my head and put my arm around her. This wasn't the first accusation, and I knew it wouldn't be the last one. "She's tryna fuck wit' our relationship, but that's okay. We gon' always come out shining, and it's gon' keep her looking like a thirsty ass troll."

She shoulder bumped me as I chuckled. I kissed her hand, then led her back upstairs to introduce her to everyone. I was sure to go to Alexz first. When I stood in front of her, she stood from her seat and said, "You must be Shavozz! When DJ told us about how you put him in his place about your relationship, I liked you immediately."

Shavozz smiled big, her cheeks lifting her glasses. "And you must be Alexz," she said as she glanced at me.

Alexz walked around the table and hugged her. I could see the tension leave her almost immediately as Jamel shook his head. I'd told him about the issues I was having with her friend, and he wanted me to introduce her to him. I told him I wouldn't introduce that bitch to my dog. Duke, my Pitbull, didn't deserve that shit. His ass would look at me sideways if I let that bitch in my house.

Once I introduced her to everyone and they made her feel welcomed, she left my side and sat with Alexz, Skyler, Lexi, Joyy, and Brittany. The minute she moved, Jamel asked, "So y'all straight?"

"Yeah, man. Just like I knew, that bitch had shown her a picture. Guess who the woman in it was?"

"Who? Mama?"

"One of them actually was, but she knows what Mama looks like. It was Alexz."

"I need to be able to get at this friend."

"I'm telling you, man, she ugly as shit."

"Who ugly as shit?" Chad asked.

When he asked that, I had everybody's attention. I rolled my eyes and made my way to the bar with everyone in tow. The Berottes nosy asses made everything look suspect. Shy was practically shoulder to shoulder with me. He was the nosiest. Isaiah knew how to be discreet. He would be ear hustling from afar. However, he couldn't do that here with the music blasting.

After we got our drinks, we sat at a different table. I looked up to find all eyes on me—all four Berotte brothers, Jamel, Axton, Arrow, and even Seneca and Ali, which I shouldn't have been surprised they were here, because Jamel had mentioned that they all hung together. "Her ugly ass friend always tryna make her believe I'm fucking around on her."

"Sound like she need to be put her in her fucking place," Shyrón said.

"She would if she thought that she was doing something wrong."

He frowned and so did Seneca. "Every man she's had a relationship with has cheated on her. I'm trying to be patient. She doesn't trust herself anymore. So you can imagine how hard it is for her to trust me."

"Are you willing to deal with that? The constant accusations? At some point, that shit is going to get old," Zay added.

"Yeah. I know. I'm trying to be patient. She's worth it. I just have to somehow get her to see that I'm trustworthy."

"Naw. You have to get her to see that her homegirl is a jealous ass bitch," Ali said. "I can help you with that if you want me to."

I frowned. "Man, I can barely stare at her ass for too long. What'chu gon' do?"

He smiled. "Don't worry about that. I have gifts. What's her name?"

I slid my hand down my face. I didn't know what his ass was gon' do, but I almost didn't care. "Talisha."

“A’ight. So save my number and invite me on a double date wit’ y’all next weekend.”

“You serious, nigga? I’m telling you, she aggressive, ugly, and got a stank ass attitude.”

“Listen... she won’t be aggressive or have a stank ass attitude. She gon’ dress to impress, and I’m gon’ be the only nigga she see. I got it.”

“Then you gon’ get stuck with her ass,” Seneca mumbled then downed his drink.

“I don’t get stuck, nigga. Ask Shy about me.”

He stood from his seat and went over toward the ladies as we all watched. When that nigga smiled, they all smiled right back with all of us sitting here watching. “Fucking pretty boy,” Shy said.

That was his best friend, so he knew all about him. That was probably why he was so quiet when he said he would handle it. When Ali sat with the women and they were hanging on to his every word, I knew he could definitely handle Talisha’s pathetic ass. I mean, they were all staring at him with googly eyes and shit. “And y’all were worried about me. Look at this shit,” Seneca said.

Everybody chuckled, then just observed Ali. The women were giggling and shit. As Chad was about to get up, Dylan said, “Naw, bruh. Chill out. He showing us how he works. He smooth wit’ it. He checks out every woman that passes by him, but it’s not obvious like this nigga here.” Dylan nodded his head toward Seneca. “He’s caressed all their curves, but he respects us, so that’s where it ends. He’s friendly with the ladies, and they like that. They feel like they can trust him, even though he’s the deadliest person here.”

I took note of what Dylan said. He was right. That nigga Ali was smooth as hell. He had to be to accomplish half the shit he did. Even Skyler had her head resting on her hand while he talked. I wanted to know what the hell he was talking about though. For them, it probably didn’t matter. When Shavozz placed her hand on his arm and looked into her

phone, he turned to me slightly and winked. That nigga was over there acting all soft and shit, like he needed a woman as beautiful as one of them.

I slowly shook my head as Shavozz appeared to be showing him something. He licked his lips and nodded. Vozz was wrong for that shit. She knew that girl was ugly. She needed to hook her up with a plastic surgeon. He stood and walked back over to us. When he sat, he said, “That muthafucka rough, but I can straighten her ass out. I got her number and everything. I gotchu, bruh.”

I was about to slap his hand when I noticed Shavozz watching me. I gave her a smile and a head nod. She smiled back then turned her attention back to the ladies. When I turned back to him, I asked, “What were you over there talking about?”

“How I wish I had a woman as beautiful as all of them. Women love compliments that are genuine. They know that I wouldn’t be flirting with them right in front of y’all. To them, I’m a sweet guy that would be an asset to any woman that dated me. So when y’all get the royal treatment tonight, y’all can thank me for warming them up.”

“Nigga!” Shy said as everybody laughed.

Dylan saw right through his bullshit from the beginning. I was surprised Arrow and Jamel ain’t have shit to say. Those two were players too. Shit, maybe they were taking notes. Ali had shown us that the real reason he didn’t have a woman around him every second of the day was because he didn’t want one. The nigga could probably pull any woman he wanted. I slowly shook my head. “Well, if it works, thank you. If it backfires on me, fuck you.”

Jamel laughed loudly. “Nigga, you gon’ thank him and cuss his ass out in advance?”

I laughed too. “Hell yeah. If it doesn’t work, Shavozz gon’ think I put him up to that shit. She know I can’t stand Talisha’s ass.”

“Talisha need to get fucked. That’s all it is to it. I’ma get her all fixed up,” Ali said.

“Ugh!” I said as I shivered. “Whatever, my nigga.”

When the deejay started with “Atomic Dog”, Chad, Arrow, Ax, and I started our stroll. Lexi, Alexz, and Shavozz’s eyes were all glued to us. They all liked the damn neck roll, and I enjoyed every moment of Vozz’s attention. I hung my tongue out and showed her what she was gon’ get later as I grabbed my dick and continued our stroll. Her pussy was gon’ be crying for mercy later.

S havozz

“TALISHA, HE FINE AS HELL. THE NIGGA LOOK LIKE HE MIXED with something. He has long hair that he keeps braided, and he’s covered with tattoos. I think he’s more your type. A real pretty boy, but I can tell there’s something dark about him.”

“I don’t know if I trust your judgment. You took a picture?”

I rolled my eyes. “I snuck a picture of him. I’ll send it to you. It’s not that great of a picture. He’s going to call you tomorrow, so be ready. If I wasn’t with DJ, baby, there ain’t no way I would be telling you about him. I would try to get with him my damn self.”

She laughed then got quiet for a second. “Okay! This picture is kind of blurry, but I can still tell how fine he is. Damn. Girl, if this shit work out, I owe you and that nigga DJ a dinner. Speaking of his ass, who did he say that chick was?”

“His sister, Talisha. I met her and her husband tonight, along with his brothers and their women. I know I make horrible decisions at times, and I appreciate you looking out for me, but I think DJ is one of the good ones.”

“You don’t make horrible decisions regarding everything, Vozz. Just men. I’ll back off a bit, but I won’t stop looking out for you. I hope you’re right about him, but I just get a weird vibe about him. I don’t know what it is.”

“Well, time will tell. He’s been around over six months now, and nothing has come up. Maybe you ought to just accept that he’s legit.”

“If you say so.”

“He’s coming back to the car. I gotta go.”

I ended the call, then put my window down. “I wish you could come home with me tonight.”

“Me too. Maybe next weekend. The boys will be with their dad. The weekend after that, I’ll make introductions.”

“That’s what’s up. I can’t wait. I wanna be around you in your element and be able to show up with dinner and shit.”

I smiled at him. “I know. The time is coming. You have a really cool family, DJ, and I’m sorry about earlier.”

“You ain’t gotta keep apologizing for that. We good. I just wish you trusted me. I know that’ll come with time though, so I’ll bide my time. You sure you don’t have time to come by?” he asked as he subtly did a slow neck roll.

I licked my lips and squeezed my thighs together. “You don’t play fair, DJ.”

“So that’s a yes?”

“Yeah. I’ll follow you.”

He winked at me then went to his car. I swore this nigga had me locked with his sex game. The tongue and the dick was grade A. Even if I found out he was a fraud, I would probably still give it up to him. Sprung wasn’t even accurate enough to describe how I felt about his dick. I closed my eyes for a moment, then texted Trayveon. *Hey, baby. Y’all good? I should be home in an hour or so.*

We good, Ma. Dalen is already asleep.

Okay.

It was nearing midnight. I usually tried to be home by midnight whenever I went out and they were home. Tonight, DJ had me on lock, and I couldn’t shake it. I’d noticed his slight erection during their stroll, and I wanted to leave Pour

then, but I didn't want it to seem like I wasn't enjoying his family, because I was. They were all extremely cool. It seemed I was vibing with Lexi and Alexz the most though. I supposed it was a good thing Lexi and I were getting along since DJ was always with Chad.

They were expecting a baby. Her baby bump was so cute. I couldn't wait to get to know her better. Talisha was my only friend, and sometimes, I *did* feel that I was leaving her behind. I was maturing and had been steadily growing. She seemed to be at a standstill. I didn't need to be around anyone like that. She would only pull me backward. I wasn't sure what her issue with DJ was. Everyone around him seemed to love him.

Maybe Ali could fuck some sense into her. I loved her to death and didn't want to seem like I was discarding her friendship over a nigga, but I needed her to get a life and get it together expeditiously. I could only take so many more false accusations. The shit was getting old. It was like she was just trying to find a reason for us to not be together. Maybe she thought she was losing me as a friend because he was in my life. I didn't know.

At first, I thought she meant well, but after tonight, I was starting to question it. Even still, I didn't want DJ speaking negatively about her. She wasn't the best-looking woman, but I simply believed that was because she couldn't really afford to get her hair done and buy all the shit to keep her skin looking good, but I told her she could Google some shit she could do at home. She didn't have to get the expensive shit.

It was like because she couldn't afford MAC and all the other expensive brands, she didn't want to try anything else. Maybe she was more in a financial crunch than she'd shared with me, but damn. I felt like she could do better if she really wanted to. Maybe if Ali actually called her, she would get her shit together. Hell, I was surprised he still wanted to talk to her after he saw her picture.

When I turned in DJ's driveway, my clit stiffened. Whenever I came here, it was so he could fuck me into the next week. The boys would be in Lafayette with my ex and visiting my mama, brothers, and sisters, and I would literally

be here until Sunday when DJ left to go to his parents' house. Before I made him verbalize his wants about us being a couple, I already knew that was what he assumed. It was just that Elvis had me so fucked up, I didn't know how to accept genuineness.

Before I could get out of my car, he was already at my door, preparing to open it for me. When he saw my hand on the handle, he twisted his lips to the side. Once I removed my hand, he opened it and said, "You know better."

"Sorry. Old habits die hard."

"Mm hmm. I honestly think you just like hearing me get onto you about that shit."

"There might be some truth to that," I said as I stood.

Once he closed the door, I headed to his back door. He slapped my ass as he said, "Damn you fine. And all this ass on you is my weakness."

"Is that right?"

"Hell yeah. Everything about you is my weakness."

He stood close behind me as he unlocked the door and lightly kissed my neck. His erection was teasing the hell out of me, and I was about ready to pounce his ass right here on his back porch. "Open the door, DJ."

"Or what? Why you rushing me?"

"I have to get to my boys. I don't like leaving them home alone for so long. I don't want Tray to feel like he always has to watch his little brother like I felt watching my brother, Rondo. That's not fair to him."

"I get it. You know I do. I had to watch my brother all the time and try to take care of things my dad should have been taking care of. I'm sorry for having you out late, baby. Why don't you just go home. I can wait."

"I'm here now. I told Tray I would be home in an hour. So you have forty-five minutes to make this pussy nut a few times."

“Girl, I don’t need that long to make that happen. You tryna fuck with me,” he said as he opened the door.

He was right. He always gave me multiple orgasms. The nigga ate me until I came twice nearly every time we fucked. I guess because we only saw each other this way on the weekends, he had to express just how much he missed me. I expressed those same sentiments too. I enjoyed sucking his dick just as much as he loved eating my pussy. We could never get enough of each other. I wanted to believe that he was just as sprung on me as I was on him.

Once we were inside, DJ wasted no time getting to the point. He picked me up and sat me on the countertop in his kitchen. After going to the sink and washing his hands, he came back to me and slid his fingers right past my panties. “Had I known you was still wearing this shit, I would have been hitting that remote the entire time at Pour,” he mumbled.

“I’m going to always wear it. You know why?”

“Why, baby?”

“Because it’s always a good time to have an orgasm.”

“Nasty ass freak,” he said as he stroked me.

I loved the way he made me feel. His fingers even worked magic. As he stroked me, he rubbed circles on my clit with his thumb. It never took long for me to cum, and I loved every moment of that. It was one of the reasons I could have multiple orgasms. A close runner-up reason was that DJ knew what the fuck he was doing.

I moaned as I began grinding against his fingers. The moment I began hearing my sex noises, I knew my orgasm was about to chase my ass down and tackle me like a linebacker on the football field. “Oh, DJ! Shit!”

“Naw. You not finna cum yet,” he said as he withdrew his fingers and slowly licked them.

I was panting and on the verge of sweating as I watched him pull away from me. He took his shirt off, revealing his tatted chest, then pulled off his pants, showing off one of his best features. DJ’s dick needed to be idolized for the powerful

god that it was. Once he was completely naked, he pulled me from the countertop and began undressing me as well.

The intensity in his stare had me about to cum without him. His eyes never left mine. It was almost as if he wanted me to see what was in them. He never tried to hide from me. Everything about him said that I could trust him, but my past experiences wouldn't let me. I saw nothing but love in his eyes, and honestly, the shit scared the hell out of me. I'd only been divorced for about eight months, and it just seemed too soon to be diving into something so serious. I wasn't completely over the damn divorce and how Elvis had me on some Betty Wright shit, hanging around after all the pain.

But the way his fingertips stroked my skin as he pulled off my underwear told me that he was the man that would show me undying love and exactly how the love of a man was supposed to feel. He was always tender with me when he destroyed my insides. The man was gifted with the talents that would have me being stupid all over again. That was why I had to protect my heart, because his dick had my body confessing things it never had. She spoke to him so clearly too. I heard her loud and clear whenever I was near him.

When I was completely naked, he went to his knees and put one of my legs over his shoulder and dived into the place he felt the most comfort. I held on tightly to his head, sliding my nails through his waves. He had the most beautiful hair. I was hoping that he would one day grow it out a little. It was cut into a tapered fade.

I moaned as he licked me slowly, but I loved when his thick lips grabbed ahold of my clit. It was like my body went into an epileptic attack whenever he did that. He knew that, so he constantly played with me and teased me, making me anticipate the moment when it would happen. "Mm," he moaned.

That was another weakness of mine when it came to him. His moans could get me there just as quickly. They were so passionate sounding and sexy. *God!* He made it sound as if he were enjoying every moment to the fullest... like nothing else could satisfy him this way. If he could make me feel that way,

then I should have been ready to give everything I had to making sure our relationship worked.

He finally put those juicy ass lips on my clit and sucked it like he was trying to get something from it. *Dear, Lord, I'm coming to meet you.* I came violently, nearly losing my balance. I'd hit DJ in his head, trying to steady myself. He quickly scooped my heavy ass up and sat me on his dick, forcing me to take all his shit at once. "Deee Jaaaayyy! Shiiiiit!"

"Mm hmm. Wrap them thick ass legs around me and fuck me back, girl."

"Naw. Not until I can suck on my joystick. You gon' deny me?"

"I thought your time was limited?" he asked as he stared into my eyes.

"Not limited to where I don't have time to catch your nut."

He licked his lips, then bit the bottom one as he allowed me to slide from his grasp. I went to my knees and sucked him up like I had a relay to run, and his dick was the baton. He gripped my face and fed me his dick slowly. I loved when he did that. He loved staring into my eyes while I was sucking his soul from him. Seeing just how much he enjoyed it only propelled me forward, offering him my best efforts.

Before he could nut, he pulled away from me and picked me back up, heading to his bedroom. He slid back inside my depths and tried to walk, but I wasn't having it. I began a slow bounce on his dick, inciting my orgasm. When I came all over him, he yelled, "Oh fuck!"

He went to the nearest wall and allowed me to rest my back against it as he fucked me passionately. He'd nearly fucked the breath out of me already. "Vozz, damn, this pussy good."

After slowing his assault, he slowly pulled out of me and allowed me to slide from his grasp. I knew what that meant. I made my way to his bedroom and got a condom so he could strap up. I was on birth control, but we still used condoms. I

wasn't trying to get pregnant. We'd just established that we were a couple not long ago. Plus, DJ didn't want kids just yet either. He said he knew I wasn't ready for the nigga that would bring.

Shit, I didn't know exactly what he meant by that, but I had a clue. I was almost sure that he would be more possessive and clingier if I was carrying his baby. Whenever he was off work, he wanted to be with me, whereas I wanted to spend time with my boys. He was ready to settle down, and I could only hope that he was willing to wait for me to get my mind right to want the same things he did.

D J

SHAVOZZ HAD ME ABOUT TO LOSE MY FUCKING MIND. HER pussy was the type to grab ahold of a nigga and not let go. The problem was that my dick wasn't the only one in a chokehold. My heart was right there with it. I loved the fuck out of her, but I knew she wasn't ready for that. Zay was right when he said how hard this would be. I wanted her to see just how much I loved her, but I didn't think she had a clue.

She canceled on me for Sunday and didn't show up at Sunday dinner. She said she wasn't feeling well. Chad and Lexi had enough drama to keep the focus off me and how disappointed I was. He was pretty much explaining to everyone what Zay and I already knew—that he was the reason Lexi was a girl gone wild.

Once I left, I checked on Shavozz a couple of times. She went to work on Monday, so I supposed she was feeling better. After Monday, I decided that I would let her contact me first, just to see how long it would take her. She texted me good morning, then I didn't hear a word from her until Wednesday morning. That shit was frustrating as hell. I liked spending time with her, but if I was suffocating her, then she needed to say so.

She seemed to be happy whenever I reached out, so I didn't understand what the issue was. We definitely needed to talk, because if she wasn't going to give our relationship the

same energy I was giving it, the whole thing would be a waste of time. There was no reason why I should feel depleted. We were supposed to be pouring into each other, but this was extremely one-sided.

I lay on my couch, watching *Bull* and waiting for her to get off to see if she would call. She didn't text this morning at all, and she knew I was off today. I just didn't understand her. I'd been doing my best to prove to her that I was the man she needed. For the past six months, I'd been there whenever she needed to talk, fronted her a few ends, wined and dined her whenever she allowed me to, and constantly showed my love by buying her gifts and wanting to spend time with her.

I'd gone to lunch with my mama and Pop, then came back home to chill out until I had to clock in tomorrow. I only went out with them to try to get my mind off Shavozz, but that shit didn't work, because my mama asked about her and how she was feeling. When I talked to her Monday, she sounded fine. She said she had a stomachache and believed that whatever she ate Saturday evening didn't agree with her. *Whatever.*

I was feeling salty as hell and wanted to go to her house and shake the fuck out of her. As I stared at the TV, not really paying attention to it, my phone rang. I hurriedly grabbed it, thinking it was Shavozz, but it wasn't. It was Ali. I'd practically forgotten about his ass and what he was planning. "What's up, dude?"

"Not too much. So listen, I talked to ol' girl. Y'all gon' be free to go out Saturday night?"

"Yeah. I don't see why not."

"A'ight. She practically in love already. I made reservations at J. Wilsons for seven."

"Have you seen her in person?"

"Naw, but I made her an appointment to get her hair, nails, feet, and makeup done Saturday morning. She damn near worshipping a nigga right now. I gotta make sure I make it through this date. Has your woman asked you anything about me?"

“Surprisingly, no. But I really don’t know that much about you, Ali. So, that was what I was gonna tell her.”

“A’ight. Let’s keep it that way then.”

“Nobody will get physically hurt, right?”

“Naw. What’chu think, man? I’m just an evil muthafucka?” he asked, then laughed. “I am, slightly. Her feelings may get hurt in the end, but that’s about it.”

For some reason, I was starting to feel guilty about this. As much as she got on my nerves, I didn’t want to see her in her little pitiful ass feelings, nor did I wanna hear about it from Shavozz, although I had yet to hear from her today. Maybe I was just a clingy ass nigga. “I’on know, man. Let me think about this shit.”

He remained quiet for a second, then said, “It’s your call. I ain’t tripping. I’ll cancel all that shit. Let me know by tomorrow though.”

“A’ight.”

I ended the call sitting on the couch in my fucking feelings. I almost felt like a damn female. Everything in me wanted to call Shavozz and ask her what was up, but I really wanted to see just how long she could go without reaching out. The day had been long without talking to her. I stood from the couch and went to the kitchen to grab my keys. I might as well go to Pour and get a drink and see what I could see.

I didn’t like feeling vulnerable. I didn’t like that Shavozz was the one who had me feeling this way. It felt like I was about to drive myself crazy. Maybe I should have just messaged her and avoided all this bullshit. She probably got busy. What if something happened?

After getting in my car, I grabbed my phone to call her, but before I could click her name, she was calling me. *Praise God.* “Hello?”

“Hey, baby. I’m so sorry. It’s been a helluva day. I woke up late, so not only was I rushing, but the kids were rushing. It was nonstop at work since I was thirty minutes behind schedule. Then just as I finished up, Trayveon called, saying

that Dalen had fallen down the stairs and hurt his arm. We're on our way to St. Elizabeth now."

I felt like shit now. "I'm so sorry, baby. Let me come and help you."

"I don't know, DJ. The boys—"

"Shavozz, stop tripping and let me be there. I mean, I'm gonna show up anyway, but I would rather have your approval, baby."

"Okay. We're almost there."

"A'ight. I'm on my way."

I ended the call, thankful that she finally reached out. She probably hadn't eaten all day, and I was sitting at home on the verge of whining about her not calling or texting. I shook my head slowly as I headed to the hospital. *Selfish ass nigga*. It was selfish of me to think that she had as much free time as I did. When I was off work, I didn't have shit to do. She had two boys to tend to and work. I supposed it was true that a woman's work was never done. Maybe it wasn't selfish, but it was definitely inconsiderate.

When I got to the hospital, I hurriedly parked and made my way inside to see them standing at the front getting checked in. I waited behind them a distance until they were done. When she turned around and saw me, the wrinkle lines of stress disappeared from her beautiful face. I gave her a slight smile as they made their way to me. Her oldest son frowned slightly, then looked at her.

She held her hand out so I grabbed it, allowing her to lead me to where they wanted to sit. "Hey," she said once we were seated.

"Hey."

She smiled, then said, "Boys, this is DJ. DJ, this is Spiderman aka Dalen, and this is Trayveon."

"He's your boyfriend?" Spiderman asked.

She smiled again and said, "Yes."

He smiled at me, so I said, “What’s up, Spiderman? We gotta get you in tip top shape so you can go back to rescuing people.”

He chuckled, then said, “Call me Dalen. My mama is being silly.”

I chuckled too. “Got it, Dalen.”

I looked up at Trayveon, and he extended his hand to me. I smiled and shook it. “Nice to meet you.”

He only nodded. He wasn’t rude, but I could definitely tell he was scoping me out. Just that reminded me of how I was with my mama: extremely protective. He would soon learn that I was the last person he needed to protect her from. “So what are they gonna do? X-rays?”

“Yeah. Most of the pain is in his wrist. We don’t think it’s broken, since he can move it. He probably sprained it though.”

I nodded as I grabbed her hand again. “I missed you today.”

She blushed and lowered her head for a moment. “I missed you too.”

It was so funny to watch how shy she seemed to be. When we were alone and about to fuck, all that shy shit went out the window. When we first had sex, I was caught way off guard by just how much of a freak she was. I loved that shit though. She was the epitome of a lady in the streets and a freak in sheets.

“Mr. DJ, where do you work?” Trayveon asked, breaking my thoughts about turning Shavozz’s insides out.

“I work for the juvenile detention center.”

“That’s the kids’ jail, right?”

“Yes, it is.”

“How long have you worked there? What do you do?”

“Twelve years almost. I’m a correctional officer, which means I look after the kids and make sure they aren’t doing things they shouldn’t be doing.”

“Like a babysitter?” he asked with a smirk on his lips.

I chuckled. “More like a police officer, but basically... I guess so.”

“Do you make a lot of money doing that?”

“Trayveon... no, sir. That’s too far,” Shavozz said.

“It’s okay, baby. I don’t mind answering that.” I kissed her hand, and she turned red all over again. I knew her boys were watching as to how I treated her, and I wanted them to see that I loved her, even if I didn’t think she saw it. “It depends on what you consider a lot of money. In my opinion, I make an okay living. I was able to buy a house and car and take care of myself. I have money left over when all my bills are paid, and I’m able to take my mom shopping sometimes. I’ve been able to save money too.”

“Did you have to go to college?”

“I didn’t have to, but I did. I got a degree in criminal justice. It allowed me to make more money, and I didn’t have to start at the base position.”

“Oh.”

“You thinking about going into criminal justice?”

“Yes, sir. I think I want to be a cop. Maybe more black people should be cops. It can possibly slow down on them killing us if we *are* them.”

He was wise beyond his years. I gave him a smile and nodded repeatedly. “I like the way you think.”

“Dalen Simpson!” the triage nurse yelled out.

Shavozz smiled at me, then stood with Dalen and went to the room for them to check his vitals. When she did, Trayveon took the seat next to me. “You the same age with my mama? You look young.”

“We’re the same age. I’m about to be thirty-four.”

“Do you have any kids?”

“Naw. I’ve always wanted some though.”

“Y’all seem to know each other well. How long y’all been talking.”

I slid my hand down my waves, and he chuckled. “Six months. Your mom is a tough cookie, but I like that. She’s strong and independent.”

“Yeah, but she needs help. She ain’t gon’ ever admit it. She won’t let me get a job, because she said I need to just focus on school. Dad ain’t paying child support no more because he lost his job a month ago. That means she just inherited my car note. Man, she stressed. I hate to see her like this. She so proud.”

I lowered my head and brought my elbows to my knees. “I had no idea. Thank you for telling me. I already know she ain’t gon’ accept my help, so I’m just have to pay stuff for her. I got y’all, okay?”

He extended his hand and shook mine. “Don’t tell her I said anything. She gon’ flip.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t say nothing. Thank you for telling me.”

He nodded and said, “Yes, sir.”

Shavozz struggling didn’t sit right with me at all. What was I here for? There was no way I could idly sit by and watch her struggle. What kind of man would I be? She hid that shit well. That was probably why she didn’t typically see me during the week. It would be harder for her to hide. Things became quiet between me and Trayveon. That was why he was asking all those questions. He was trying to gauge if I would be able to help his mama.

I could take care of all three of them if she’d let me. Even after the time we’d been together and me showering her with gifts and attention, she still didn’t trust that I was good for her. That was why I hadn’t met her boys and she hadn’t met my parents. I felt like she’d only come to Pour to confront me about Alexz. She had no desire to meet my family right now.

That should’ve told her just how serious I was about her. If I was fucking around on her, why would I want to introduce

her to my family? I watched her and Dalen make their way back to us and could see that he was in pain. Trayveon moved back to his seat, and she sat next to me. “What were y’all talking about?”

“My job. He’s thinking about being a police officer.”

“Oh, okay. He told me that. So, Talisha said Ali asked her out this weekend. He basically made plans and told her to show up. She said he even made appointments for her to get her hair and nails done. Who is this guy? What does he do?”

“I don’t know a lot about him. He’s closer to my brother Jamel. He owns a private investigation firm though. Watchful Eyes is the name of it. Seneca works for him.”

“Oh. Now Seneca is a horse of a different color. He seems thuggish and doesn’t care about anyone.”

If she only knew. Ali is the same way. “He’s reckless with his mouth. Says whatever is on his mind. Other than that, he cool. He owns a business in Houston, but he used to be a dope boy. So I guess he is kind of thuggish.”

“Well, hopefully Ali is good for her. She seems so excited.”

“That’s good. Ali actually asked for us to go with them. He said he wanted to make sure she was comfortable for their first time meeting.”

“Yeah, she told me. He’s really thoughtful.”

I wanted to laugh, but I was able to contain myself. When she settled against me in the silence, my mind began working overtime. Sliding my hand to hers, I held it in mine, trying to figure out how I would help her through this financially tough time without telling her I knew. Talisha and Ali were the least of my worries.

“Dalen Simpson!” a nurse yelled out.

Shavozz and Dalen went to the back and left Trayveon and me in the waiting area again. I glanced over at him and asked, “Do you know where your mom banks?”

“Yes, sir. She banks at Five Point Credit Union.”

“Oh, cool. I have a classmate that works there. Maybe she’ll deposit some money for me. Have y’all eaten yet?”

“No, sir.”

“A’ight. Maybe we can go to a restaurant when we leave here. Y’all like Mexican food?”

“More than anything else,” he said, then chuckled.

“Perfect.”

I slumped in the chair a bit and stretched out my legs as we waited for them to check out Dalen. Trayveon did the same as me. He was just as tall as I was, maybe an inch or two shorter. I was just grateful that the boys were receptive to me. I was willing to bet that their dad had a girlfriend already anyway, since he was a fuckboy in his marriage. That was one less thing I had to worry about or that would work against me. Now that the boys were cool with me, maybe Shavozz could let her guard down a little more and give a nigga a real shot at her heart.

S havozz

“MAMA, HE COOL. WHERE DID Y’ALL MEET?” TRAYVEON asked.

“At a takeout place. He was waiting for his food, and I was there with Talisha. Y’all were with your dad.”

“I like him.”

I gave him a slight smile as I turned into Carlito’s behind DJ. Just as I thought, Dalen’s wrist was sprained. They put a brace on it and prescribed him some pain meds. When we were done, DJ insisted on taking us to dinner. The boys agreed to it before I could decline. I didn’t want DJ feeling obligated to cater to my kids just yet. That was their father’s job, although things were about to get more difficult. He told me a couple of days ago that he lost his job nearly a month ago.

I wasn’t sure why he waited until the last minute to tell me. Tray’s car note would be due in two weeks, and I didn’t know how I was going to pay it. That was an extra four hundred dollars a month that I didn’t have. I supposed he thought he would have another job before he could miss a beat. But fuck! Now I wouldn’t receive child support either. That check was nearly a grand a month. I would most likely have to pick up a part-time job to make sure we could maintain.

After I parked, DJ was standing there to open my door. He was always the gentleman. “DJ, you don’t have to do this.”

“Yeah, I do. One day, y’all gon’ be my family. Only sorry ass niggas don’t take care of their families. Your boys are my boys. You gon’ have to get used to that, baby, ’cause it ain’t gon’ change.”

I swore he made my panties wet with the shit he said. Knowing that he was willing to take care of us should have given me initiative. It should have made me wanna ask him for help. However, the only thing I could see was that he would think I was taking advantage of him. I refused to do that. I would find a way to make it through, even if I had to give up some things, like getting my hair and nails done. I could do my own hair. I just didn’t like to.

I nodded at DJ and allowed him to lead us inside. We picked where we wanted to sit, and a waitress immediately greeted us and took our drink orders. Dalen was still flying high on pain meds. That was another problem. I would have to call off work tomorrow. Although I only had patients until noon, I usually stayed late to prepare for the following week. I didn’t have any more sick or personal days, and it was only September.

When the waitress came back with our drinks, I ordered a margarita. The boys both looked at me. I never drank in front of them, and DJ noticed the looks. He smirked but remained quiet. “Boys, I’m just a little stressed. I need something to calm me down.”

DJ grabbed my hand. “Why you stressed?”

His voice was always so gentle sounding. Most times it calmed me immediately. “I have to miss work tomorrow, and I’ll have to catch up on a lot,” I lied.

He only stared at me, like he knew better. I cleared my throat then took a sip of my water. “Mr. DJ, where you live?” Dalen asked.

“I live close to the hospital we just left.”

“Can we go over there sometimes?”

“Yep. Whenever you want to. You’re always welcome. I mean, unless I’m at work.”

The waitress came back with my margarita, and I didn't miss the glance from DJ. We placed our orders, and I could tell that the pain shot was working on Dalen. His eyes were low. Before I could suggest it, DJ said, "I don't know what I was thinking. We should have gotten this to go. Let me tell the waitress to just make it to-go orders."

I smiled softly at him as I rubbed Dalen's back. He smiled back and made his way toward the kitchen. As soon as he left, Trayveon said, "I think he loves you."

I almost choked. "What makes you think that?"

"You can't see it? I heard what he said to you outside. He said we were his boys simply because we were yours. Ain't no man finna claim kids that ain't his. Come on, Ma. You ain't clueless. You gotta see it if I see it."

I looked back over to where DJ had gone. When he turned to head back in our direction, he smiled. His gaze landed on mine and didn't leave it. "See?" Tray mumbled.

"Come on, baby. Let's get y'all home," DJ said.

Dalen was knocked out on the table. I tried waking him up, but DJ stopped me. "I got him. Don't wake him up."

He picked Dalen up from the seat, then turned to Trayveon. "Can you wait at the counter for our food, Trayveon?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks, man."

We walked out, heading to my car. As we did, DJ said, "You know if you need to work, I can call off and watch Dalen. I ain't doing shit tomorrow at work, but babysitting kids and grown ass people. You know being the supervisor comes with perks."

"No. That's not necessary. I'm gonna call in just a little bit."

"Vozz. I'm a salary employee. It won't make a difference. I got all kinds of movies and shit we can do where he can rest

that wrist. It doesn't make sense for you to miss work if you don't have to. When is their dad getting them?"

"I have to meet him in Lake Charles tomorrow evening at six, but probably earlier since I won't be going to work. I got it, DJ."

"You so stubborn."

I opened the door for him to put Dalen in the back seat as I huffed. He was right. I was stubborn. Plus, I didn't trust that he had the right intentions. What man wanted to take care of someone else's kids the first day after meeting them? Maybe I was fucked up for thinking he was just trying to get me to lower my guard by getting along with my boys. They seemed to like him. Trayveon could usually spot a phony. He seemed to really admire DJ.

Once DJ got Dalen buckled in, he closed the door and pulled me to him. "One day, you gon' let me take care of you. I wanna have faith in that. You make it hard though. I'm tryna prove that you can trust me and that I'm worthy, Vozz, but you ain't making it easy."

He grabbed my hand and lifted it to his lips and kissed it. I lowered my head, feeling his words in my heart. "I'm sorry, DJ. I take care of us. Six months isn't long enough for me to just let my guard down. We've only been exclusive a couple of months or so. Give me time. Okay?"

I brought my hand to his cheek and gently stroked it with my thumb. He looked away from me and licked his lips, then looked back at me. "Okay."

I circled my arms around him and hugged him tightly. I wanted to give in, but I couldn't put myself through no bullshit again. Everything in me believed he was the real deal, but my mind wouldn't allow me to just go with it. I needed to be sure that I wasn't being duped into thinking he was perfect only for him to let me down.

"Got the food."

We turned to see Trayveon heading toward us with a smile on his face. DJ nodded. "I'll follow behind y'all to help you

get Dalen in the house.”

“You don’t have to. Tray can carry him, and I can carry the food inside.”

“Listen, Shavozz. I wasn’t asking for permission. I can see that I’m just gon’ have to do what I want to do. I’m right behind you.”

He walked off with a slight frown on his face. I’d pissed him off. When I got in the car, Trayveon was shaking his head. “What?”

“Nothing, Ma.”

I pressed the button to start the car, and we headed to my house in silence with DJ not far behind us.

WHEN TALISHA GOT OUT OF HER ALTIMA, I NEARLY PASSED out. She looked amazing! Had I not known it was her car, I would have walked right by her without recognizing her. DJ had picked me up after he got off work and showered, then we came straight here to avoid being late. “DJ, look.”

“Who is that?”

“Baby, that’s Talisha!”

“I know you fucking lying. She need to do one of those before and after transition videos on TikTok.”

I lightly bumped him as I headed to her. She smiled so big. My girl was looking good, and I could tell it did a lot for her self-esteem. “Talisha! Girl, you look amazing!”

“Thank you! Ali even bought me something to wear. I’m so nervous to meet his fine ass. He offered to pick me up, but I couldn’t be with him alone just yet. You know how I am.”

“I do. It’s the first date, so I get it. Let’s get inside so you can see your boo.”

She glanced over at DJ and gave him a slight smile. “Hello, DJ.”

“What’s up, Talisha,” he said dryly.

I chuckled. They were worse than Martin and Pam on *Martin*. He had relevant grievances against her, but maybe with Ali in her face, she wouldn’t be as worried about my business. If Ali kept this up, she wouldn’t have time. When we got to the door, the hostess smiled and seemed to know who we were. As I took a look around, I realized we were the only specks of color in the place. *No wonder*. She smiled big and said, “Hello. Your other party guest is already here. Follow me.”

I wanted to believe she was smiling so big because Ali had the same impression on her as he did on us. The man was fine as hell. He had to be a former thug, because he just seemed rough around the edges, no matter how much he smiled or how kind he portrayed himself to be. The tattoos really gave off that vibe. He had one everywhere I could see except his face. He’d worn shorts at Pour 09 and his legs were fully tatted too. If Talisha liked that then I loved it for her.

When he saw us headed his way, he stood from his seat with a smile on his face. Talisha squeezed my hand. I hadn’t even realized she was holding it until then. She was so nervous. We probably looked like we were all involved with one another, because I was holding DJ’s hand with my other hand. “Relax, Talisha. I think he loves what he sees.”

After getting to the table, Ali immediately grabbed her hand and kissed it. “What’s up? You look beautiful.”

His eyes scanned her from head to toe, then he pulled out her chair. He looked up at us and slapped DJ’s hand then nodded politely at me. Once we all sat, I noticed how red Talisha’s face was. I gently nudged her, and she cleared her throat then turned to Ali. “Hey. Thanks, Ali. I’ve never felt so beautiful. I really appreciate everything you’ve done to make this night perfect.”

He smiled at her, and *I* damn near melted. I turned my attention to DJ, and he smiled at me then showed me the remote in his hand. My eyes widened slightly, because he was gonna have me cumming at the damn dinner table. I nearly

lost my breath as he chuckled. I messed up by telling him I always had that thing in my panties. He gently rubbed my leg and said, “I always got’chu, baby.”

“Hmm. That I know,” I mumbled.

DJ always made sure I was satisfied. That was one thing I could never complain about. Really, there was nothing I could complain about. DJ was perfect, but I believed that was the disconnect. He was perfect. Nobody was perfect. I hadn’t met a single flaw in six whole months. Maybe now that our time didn’t have to be limited, I would learn of those flaws that he hid from me on the weekends.

Just as I was about to engage in conversation, DJ hit that damn remote and took my breath away. Talisha frowned at me. “You okay?”

I could only nod as DJ smirked. She looked back and forth between us, trying to figure out what was going on, but I believed Ali knew just by the smirk on his face too. It was going to be a long night. Turning to DJ, I said quietly, “I’m gonna fuck you to death when this is over.”

“Shiiid, I hope so,” he said, then leaned back in his seat.

I could see that his eyes were somewhat low, so I leaned back too. He was ready to get to it. “We have to make it through dinner. Once we do, it’s on.”

He kissed my shoulder since they were bare and put his lips to my ear. “I don’t know why you wore this tube top dress thing. I’mma need a blunt when I finish with you tonight. Dip that shit in you and smoke it.”

I almost came on myself. I loved when he whispered in my ear. “DJ... stop.”

He backed away but held my gaze as he smiled at me. He knew that he had me right where he wanted me. When I turned back to Ali and Talisha, I could see that they were so involved in their own conversation, they weren’t paying us the least bit of attention. They were holding hands, and Ali looked so interested in whatever she had to say. I had never really seen Talisha so lowkey. The effect he had on her had me in awe.

The waitress came and took our drink and appetizer orders and once she walked away, my phone was ringing. When I saw Elvis's number, I said, "Excuse me, y'all. I need to take this."

I showed DJ the number that showed as *Punk ass Elvis* on my phone screen, then stood and walked away from the table. I wasn't sure if something had happened or not, and I wanted to be sure that everything was okay with my boys. "Hello?"

"Hey. Umm... Tray said you have a boyfriend."

"Yeah, I'm actually with him now."

"Can I meet him when we meet in Lake Charles Sunday?"

"I'm sure that can be arranged. He's off on Sundays. Is that all? How are the boys?"

"They're fine, but they can't seem to stop talking about DJ. I felt the need to inquire about who he was."

"Oh. They just met him Thursday. He helped us out at the ER."

"Seems like they've known him longer," he said as he chuckled. "A'ight. Well, I hope to meet him Sunday."

"Okay."

I ended the call feeling confused as to why he had to even call me with that. But I realized that he was jealous. I was moving on, and his boys were excited about it. I smirked as I made my way back to the table. DJ stood and pulled my chair out. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. The boys can't stop talking about you, so he wanted to know if he could meet you Sunday when I get the boys from him."

"Hell yeah. This makes us more official. I've been wanting this."

He smiled as I sat. Once I did, I noticed Talisha and Ali were sitting closer, and she was totally wrapped up in him. She probably didn't even notice I'd left. "They've been like this the whole time?" I asked.

“Yep. I don’t know what they needed us for,” DJ said a little loud where they could hear him.

Ali looked over at him and said, “I didn’t need y’all. That was all so baby girl right here could feel comfortable.”

He turned back to Talisha and kissed her hand. She was blushing so hard. I slowly shook my head as DJ did the same. “Good. After our appetizers, we might take our food to go.”

I chuckled. That shit sounded like a plan to me. It wasn’t like they were engaging in conversation with us anyway. Talisha looked over at me and smiled, letting me know she was good. However, she surprised me by saying, “Thanks, DJ, for being cool with this amazing man. Thank you for treating my girl right too.”

His eyebrows lifted, then he turned and looked behind him, causing me to laugh. Talisha even chuckled. “Yeah, I’m talking to you,” she reiterated.

“A’ight. You’re welcome.”

I could tell he was still in shock. Talisha fell right back in the trance she’d been in with Ali. I just hoped he wasn’t playing any games with my girl. It would hurt her so bad.

D J

“PLEASE TELL ME YOU DIDN’T FUCK HER.”

“Nigga, that ain’t yo’ business. Just know that she enjoyed the rest of her evening. I gotta pick her up from work tomorrow. I’ll keep her busy for a while until you tell me to stop, or I get tired of playing with her, whichever comes first.”

This nigga was ruthless. We were at my parents’ house. It seemed he was trying to become a regular on Sundays now. Shavozz was in the house with the women. I had introduced her to my mama and Pop, along with Ms. Patricia and Ms. Yolanda. I was actually surprised that Yolanda was even here. She normally waited until Sunday evenings after we all left to spend time with Mama. I couldn’t even look at her the same after knowing Jamel had slept with her.

I shook my head slowly at Ali as Chad asked, “Well, is it helping?”

“Yeah, so far. I mean, her name ain’t came up really since they started talking. Shavozz seems a little freer. We gotta meet her ex-husband in a couple of hours to get the boys.”

“Well, that’s all that matters. Let that nigga work his magic,” Chad said as Shy cosigned by nodding.

“I just don’t want nothing to backfire on me.”

“How would them not working out backfire on you?”

“If they start thinking this was a setup, that’s how.”

“Well, the only way they would think that, is if you gave them an indication that it was. I’m going to continue getting to know her and then say we aren’t compatible. She been blowing me up all day on my burner. That’s already a turn off. So I’ll use that to my benefit,” Ali said.

“Whatever. How are things going with everybody?”

“Good,” Dylan and Isaiah answered in unison.

Everyone else just kind of nodded. Surprisingly, we didn’t really have much to talk about today. Everyone was doing great. The only one having some difficulty was Shy. He had the fever, and Brittany hadn’t gotten pregnant yet. Joyy was about to drop triplets at any minute, Lexi was pregnant, and Skyler and Alexz already had babies. Every branch of the Berotte tree had offspring except him. While I wanted to inquire about it, Shy was pretty private about his personal business. We were close, but not as close as Chad and I were. I was pretty close to Isaiah as well.

For him and Ali to be as tight as they were, I was willing to bet that Shy had a lot of knowledge of the things he did, and he had probably done his own share of dirt. That was probably why he didn’t hang with us as much. He was always with Ali or his wife, Brittany. I noticed that he was even spending more time with Seneca and Jericho as well. Maybe it was business. He probably had invested in the PI firm and wanted to be sure things were going the way they should.

I stood from my seat and went inside to use the bathroom and heard the ladies were having a heated conversation. “If a man ain’t showing you the attention you need or require, then his ass ain’t the one! Period!” Alexz yelled.

I didn’t know what I had walked in on, but they all turned to me and smiled. “DJ, you better be giving Shavozz the attention she requires,” Joyy said.

Shiidd. She needs to be telling that to Shavozz. I need more attention. We would see how things would go now since the boys had met me and now her ex-husband was meeting me.

“Sometimes, I probably give her more than she requires,” I said then winked.

She turned slightly red as she smiled. The ladies all giggled as they gave Shavozz the look that said, *Okay, boo*. Their eyebrows were lifted, and their lips were pursed. I slowly shook my head and made my way to the bathroom. I was more than sure that would be a topic of discussion while I was gone.

Before I could even unzip my pants, Jamel was calling me. His ass was gon’ have to wait. Once I relieved myself and had begun washing my hands, he was calling back. I frowned as I dried my hands, trying to figure out what was so important. Grabbing my phone, I answered. “What’s up? A nigga was taking a leak.”

“Man, I went to this strip club last night, and I think I’m in love.”

I rolled my eyes. “Nigga, you called me back-to-back for that?”

“For me to say that shit, you know she had to put some type of hex on me. Mama ain’t answering her phone. She gon’ have to pray this off me. That girl must have put some fucking voodoo on me. I ain’t been able to stop thinking about her. I didn’t even get a damn lap dance. This just from her performance on stage. Them cheeks was clapping in my damn dreams!”

I laughed as I opened the door to leave the bathroom. “Nigga, you stupid. You went by yourself?”

“Yeah. Arrow worked late and wasn’t feeling a turnup, and Seneca was in Beaumont. That’s probably how that happened. I didn’t have nobody to distract me. Now I’m hooked. Her stage name was Obsession, and she wore a mask like we were at a damn masquerade ball. I don’t even know what her face looks like, but I could recognize that ass anywhere.”

I laughed as I glanced at the women and headed outside. They were in a relaxed conversation, and the men were just

the opposite—loud and worked up. “Nigga, I’ll call you later tonight. You know what we do on Sundays.”

“Shit, I forgot it was Sunday. You see how gone she got a nigga? Call me later, but not too late. I gotta get up at three to get to work on time.”

“A’ight. Later.”

I chuckled as I ended the call, but that came to an abrupt halt when I heard Shy say, “I wanna tell Brittany that I’m on the verge of either adopting or finding a surrogate.”

“Nigga, what?” Isaiah said. “Y’all ain’t been married a year yet. Some women just take longer. You probably ain’t catching her when she ovulating.”

“Or you just ain’t hittin’ it right,” Chad added.

Shy shoved him, causing him to spill his drink on himself. The old Chad would have been fighting his ass for that, but he only laughed it off. I took a deep breath, thankful that I didn’t have to try to break shit up. I sat next to Chad as Zay continued. “Don’t do that, Shy. Don’t get caught up in what everyone else got going on. When the time is right, it will happen. Don’t make Brittany feel inadequate, man. That ain’t cool. None of us were trying to make babies. We weren’t concentrating on that. We were just enjoying being with our women. Maybe you should just focus on enjoying your wife instead of making a baby.”

Dylan nodded and said, “I just didn’t wanna pull out.”

It was quiet for a second, then everybody broke out in laughter. Chad slapped his hand and said, “Shiiid, me either.”

Even Zay had to laugh and agree. I couldn’t say that I was fiending for kids, but having one would be nice. However, I was almost sure Shavozz wasn’t trying to go there with me. We needed to talk about the things we wanted and how we wanted our future to look. If there were things we didn’t agree on and couldn’t get past, all this work would be for nothing.

Shy seemed to loosen up, and he chuckled. “Y’all right. The last thing I want to do is hurt Britt and make her feel like she ain’t enough.”

Ali rested his hand on his shoulder. “This is one time that you gon’ have to be patient, man.”

Shy glanced at him, then brushed his hand off his shoulder. “Says the nigga that went for the fast money.”

“That was within my control though. You can’t control when your soldiers gon’ reach one of them eggs. That’s all I’m saying. Either way, you gon’ have to wait, so you might as well be at peace while waiting.”

That was actually great advice. I nodded in agreement as did Zay. We got quiet, and that was when Pop intervened. “Me and Marie practiced for a couple of years before Isaiah came along. We were young and stupid. I rarely ever used a condom, and she wasn’t on birth control. It happened when it was supposed to. Once Isaiah came, I couldn’t stare at her for too long. Her eggs got excited every time I entered her.”

We all laughed. He continued. “She got pregnant and miscarried before Chad and before Dylan. So we would have messed around and had seven kids had those babies made it. It’s gon’ happen when it’s supposed to, Shy. Then every time we look up, she gon’ be pregnant. Watch my words. She gon’ have to be a retired nurse to take care of y’all squad.”

Shy chuckled and rubbed his hand down his beard. I watched the tension leave him. Mr. Sheldon always had that effect on all of us... him and Zay. The two of them could talk a man off the ledge. As everyone relaxed and began their own conversations, Shavozz came out of the house. I smiled at her and stood. “You ready?”

“Yeah. I gotta get my babies.”

I nodded, slapped hands with everyone, then headed inside to tell my mama and sisters bye. When I hugged my mama, she said in my ear, “I really like her, but I can tell she’s somewhat stubborn. Don’t give up though. She has a good heart.”

I kissed her cheek. “Thanks, Mama. See y’all later.”

I wanted to ask how she could tell, but I would save that conversation for another day. I made my way back outside,

and Shavozz was standing near the door waiting for me. I grabbed her hand and led her to my car. Once I helped her in, then walked around and got in, I turned to her. “So, what do you think?”

“Your mother is extremely nice. We exchanged numbers. I have Alexz and Lexi’s numbers too. I’m happy I met everyone.”

“Good. I’m glad, because I see us being together for the long haul. After listening to the guys talk today, I realized that I needed to make you aware of my intentions. I’m not trying to rush you or anything, but I know that we need to talk about where we see our relationship going within the next couple of years.”

I backed out of the driveway as she fidgeted. When she noticed that I had seen her, she sat up straight up and said, “Okay. You go first.”

After I took off and had made my turn out of the neighborhood and headed toward the highway, I enlightened her. “Within the next couple of years, I see you being Mrs. Dexter Dent, Junior. I do want to have at least one child, but I’m not sure how you feel about that, being that you have a son about to graduate high school. I love you, Vozz. I feel like my life ain’t shit without you. I wanted to lay all my cards on the table so there would be no misunderstandings about where I stand when it comes to you.”

It was my first time admitting that I loved her. However, I didn’t expect the reaction I got. She cleared her throat, and her skin looked clammy. I frowned slightly as I asked, “Baby, you good?”

She nodded quickly then turned the A/C vent in her direction. “I just... I don’t see me moving that quickly, DJ. You wanna be married within two years? I don’t even know if I want to get remarried. I surely don’t believe that I want any more kids. Shouldn’t we just go with the flow? We’re making progress. I’ve met your family, and you’ve met my boys, and you’re about to meet my ex-headache. Let’s just take this one day at a time.”

Her response irritated me a bit. I said that I wasn't rushing her. "Vozz, although I said within a couple of years, you don't have to hold us to that. As long as we are making progress in the right direction, I'm good. However, I do know that I want to be married. I don't plan to be a forever boyfriend. I'm not settling for that. The having kids thing, I can go either way, but I can't compromise on marriage and officially making you mine. If you don't want to get married and aren't just speaking out of fear, then this is for nothing. So take some time to think about what you're saying and let me know. I don't like wasting time, and that's what this would be if we don't want the same things."

I focused on my driving and shut my mouth. She remained quiet as well, not even acknowledging that she understood what I was saying. I thought all women wanted to know a man's intentions. Maybe I was jumping the gun, but again, I didn't want to waste my time. I loved her, but now I was regretting that I even told her that shit, because she didn't acknowledge that either.

The rest of the ride to Lake Charles was extremely quiet. I remained in my thoughts the whole time. Maybe we should have discussed where this was going before I introduced her to my family. Then my mama's words played in my head. *Don't give up. She has a good heart.*

I was too easy going, and I was trying to be firmer. I didn't want to settle for anything. I wanted a family, and in my mind, not being married was going in the opposite direction of what I wanted. Being in love with someone that didn't feel as strongly as I did was something I'd felt before. I didn't like the way that felt. Just like she'd had a sour relationship with Elvis, I'd had sour ass girlfriends, a couple of which I'd fallen in love with, only to be burned in the end.

When I parked at Steamboat Bills to wait for Elvis, Shavozz turned to me. I could see the emotion in her eyes. "Maybe this was a mistake. If you aren't good at going my pace, then maybe we should end this now."

"You taking shit out of context, man. I said as long as there's progress in the right direction, I would be good, but if

we don't want the same things in life, then it's a waste of time. If you don't ever want to get married again, then what are we doing? Why did I allow myself to fall in love with a woman that don't feel what I feel? That's what I'm saying, Shavozz. I get you saying you aren't sure if you wanna marry me yet. We haven't been together long. I can persuade you that I'm the man for you. That's what I've been trying to do. But to say you never want to get married again, period... that's a different thing."

She turned in her seat and huffed. Maybe she was right. Until she knew what she wanted, I probably needed to give her some space. When the car drove up next to us, she hopped out of the car like she wanted to get away from me. I huffed, because it felt like this fucking introduction would be for nothing. I got out and walked around the car just as the boys were getting out of their dad's vehicle.

"DJ!" Dalen yelled.

Their dad looked over at me and made his way to me and Shavozz. "What's up, Vozz?"

"Hey," she said dryly.

He didn't pay her any attention as he turned to me. "What's up? I'm Elvis. Everybody calls me El."

"What's up, man? I'm Dexter, but everyone calls me DJ."

"Nice to meet you. The boys had nothing but good things to say about you. So if you good with them, you good with me."

I nodded and smiled a bit. As I glanced at Shavozz, I noticed she'd rolled her eyes. What she said next rendered me speechless though. "It's not that serious, Elvis. We're just friends."

I couldn't hide my disdain with what she said. Elvis smirked a bit and said, "I see I'm not the only one having problems." He slowly shook his head. "Good luck, DJ."

I walked away, clearly heated. Fuck this. I opened the door for Dalen as Trayveon joined us. "What's up, DJ?"

“Hey, Tray.”

He shook my hand and got in the car. I opened the passenger door for Shavozz, but I didn't stand there to wait for her to get in. I walked around the car and got in as she closed her door. I kicked up my music and took the drive home in silence while they talked about their weekend to their mother. The minute they got out of my car, I was burning off.

S havozz

WHEN WE GOT HOME, THE BOYS SHOOK DJ'S HAND AS HE turned to go back to his car. "DJ, wait."

He turned back to me, and I could see the anger and hurt in his eyes. I wasn't ready to commit like that. I hadn't even been divorced for a year yet. Getting married was the last thing on my mind. I didn't want to depend on a man because that got me where I currently was... struggling. I wanted him to understand where I was coming from, but I could see that he didn't. He tripped me out when he said within two years, he saw us being married. After he said that, I barely heard anything else he had to say.

"I think it's best if we slow down some. I need you to understand how I feel, DJ. You said you weren't rushing me, but when you put time on your wants and needs, it makes me feel rushed. It doesn't matter what you said after that. Your initial wants were to be married within two years and to have a baby. I don't feel like that's feasible, DJ. I can't even say what I want, because I'm still not completely healed from the shit I went through with Elvis. Maybe Talisha was right in a sense. We aren't meant to be here right now."

I turned to walk away, but he grabbed my arm, spinning me back around to him. "Vozz, don't do this, baby. Please. I told you when we met that I would give you time. I'm sorry for being pushy and clingy. I just love you, and I'm dying to

make you happy. That's all. I want you to be happy with me. I'm trying to be patient."

"But you can't be patient, DJ. Today proved that." I laid my hand on his chest and bit my bottom lip. I really thought he would be the one. "I can't feel pressured to move quicker than I want to."

He lifted my head by my chin and swallowed hard, then nodded and laid his lips on mine, kissing me like his life depended on it. When he pulled away, he gently took my bottom lip with him part of the way. *Damn*. Now I wanted him so bad. He reached in his pocket and handed me the remote to the stimulator in my panties and walked away.

My heart was in my feet and now that I'd shot him down, I felt like shit. I turned and slowly made my way in the house to find the boys sitting on the couch. "Did you and Mr. DJ break up?" Tray asked.

I nodded then continued to my room. This was hard, but it was proof that I needed to just concentrate on myself and my boys. I wasn't ready for a relationship. Until my brokenness could heal, there was no way I could be whole for anyone else. I was stupid to think that I could have something meaningful with anyone. DJ would be a good match for someone who was as ready as he was, and I hated that I wasn't the one. He was a good man. He had his shit together.

Here I was, not knowing how I would pay bills next week... nowhere near stable. *He could bring the stability you need, Shavozz. You pushed away perfection.* I collapsed in my bed and cried for the first time in a long time. That man begged me to give him another chance to get it right with me, although he didn't do shit wrong. I'd let my fears ruin what could have probably been an amazing future. I wasn't good enough for him. Until I could get myself together, I would be alone, and I could only pray that he was still willing to give me a chance once I had shit together.

“I KNOW WE AIN’T BEEN TALKING LONG, BUT THIS NIGGA won’t give me the dick! I been hitting him up every ten minutes, trying to get him to come over.”

I rolled my eyes at Talisha’s thirsty ass. “It’s been that long since you had a man? You gon’ push him away.”

“Oh, like you did DJ? Although I wasn’t a fan of his, your reasons for pushing him away was all bullshit.”

“Bye, Talisha. I got shit to do.”

I ended the call on her as I sat at my desk eating a sandwich I’d brought from home. I was at the point of going to strip to make a few dollars. All week, I had been applying for a second job, and I hadn’t heard back from anybody. I needed to make up for an extra fifteen hundred dollars a month, and I didn’t see how I would do that. Tray’s car note was due yesterday, and I just couldn’t swing it. All I had was seven hundred dollars in my account. That was for gas and groceries.

My phone chimed, indicating I had a text message. I looked at it to see a message from Talisha. I rolled my eyes as I read, *Don’t be a bitch. You know I’m right. Stop being scared and go get your man back.*

I set the phone on my desk, and it chimed again. I huffed loudly as I looked at it. It was from my bank. I quickly opened it to see an alert that my fucking car insurance had cleared. I forgot all about that. *Fuck!* Now I was down to four hundred dollars. *God help me.* I knew I was going to have to ask for help. The only person I knew I could ask was my brother, Rondo. He was a weird ass and still lived in Lafayette. He stayed on TikTok and Instagram making thirst trap videos and videos of him guzzling alcohol.

However, he was smart as hell and the best physical therapist in the city. He had an eight-year-old daughter who got whatever she wanted. He’d spoiled her rotten. She didn’t live with him, but he saw her as often as he could, which was usually every weekend. Before I lost the nerve, I sent him a text. *Hey, Rondo. If you have time, can you call me?*

Today had been extremely slow. I had a one-on-one appointment with a new patient in an hour, but nothing else was going on. I'd talked to Elvis earlier, and he promised to send money as soon as he could. He'd finally gotten a job that he would be starting on Monday. However, that did nothing to help the predicament I was in now. That car was a blessing to us, and Trayveon would be devastated if it got repossessed.

As I finished off my sandwich, my phone rang. When I saw Rondo's face on the screen, I took a deep breath and answered. "Hey."

"What's up, trout mouth? You good?"

I rolled my eyes. He always made fun of me saying that I had a big mouth like a fish. He loved to fish and hunt, and all his jokes revealed that he was fond of the outdoors. "Rondo, really?"

He chuckled. "What you up to? Y'all good?"

"Not really. Elvis lost his job and can't pay Trayveon's car note or his child support payment. Do you have any money you can front me until he gets his check from the job he's starting on Monday?"

"First of all, I ain't lending no money based on that last bit of information. Elvis is a fucking liar. That muthafucka started his own business two months ago. He does repairs on appliances, A/C units, and heaters. Muthafucka been in high demand too. Take his ass to court. I'll take pictures of his ass too. Keeping shit to yourself until you in a bind ain't healthy, Vozz. We could have been busted his punk ass."

I damn near lost my breath. Elvis lied to me. That was a sorry excuse for a man that didn't want to take care of his kids. "Are you for real, Rondo?"

"Hell yeah. In the meantime, I can front you a few dollars. What'chu need? A couple of hundred?"

I lowered my head. He probably didn't have it. "I need about five hundred to pay Tray's car note and put gas in it."

"Shit. I don't have that much, sis. It would put me in a bind if I gave you that much. Let me get with Mama. Maybe

we can put money together. Don't worry. We got'chu. I'll send you the three hundred I got. Okay?"

"Okay," I said, trying not to let the tears fall.

"Aye, calm down. I'll be out there this weekend to check on y'all. Okay?"

"Okay."

I ended the call as my Cash App chimed, letting me know that he'd sent money. Resting my head in my hand for a moment, I thought about DJ. Even though I was in a bind, at least I would have him to comfort me. While I wasn't a materialistic person, I missed the weekly gift he usually sent. Not talking to him this week had been extremely hard. It had been four days. He'd spoiled me, and like Boyz II Men had said in one of their songs, I'd let my water run dry. There was no coming back from what I did to DJ.

I missed him... everything about him. The vibrator that I thought would be a permanent fixture in my panties was gone. His contagious laugh and even the slight chuckle... him calling Talisha ugly... all of it. I received another text and checked my phone. *Mama don't have it. I'ma check with Julia.*

Julia was my bourgeois ass sister on my dad's side. I texted him back immediately. *No, that's okay. I don't need them all in my business. I appreciate you, brother. I'm gonna send you the money back, because it isn't enough to help. I love you.*

I refunded his transfer and dropped my face back to my hands. There was no way I could handle anything else going wrong. Elvis was gon' hear from me as soon as Rondo sent proof. That nigga was on my shitlist. I knew if I called him now, he would only deny it and try to hide what he was doing. He knew I didn't talk my personal business with my family. As long as he was still getting the boys and taking them to see my family, no one would ask questions.

I stood from my seat and began pacing in my office, doing my best to calm my nerves so I could finish out my day. I should have kept that damn vibrator in my panties and remote

activated it my damn self. That would have calmed me down immediately. I texted Rondo back. *Don't forget to send me pictures of Elvis and his business.*

I ain't gon' forget. I'm sending the money back. Love you.

Sure enough, my phone chimed. I was more than sure I could use it on something else, because those due dates would sneak up on me like a lion on the hunt. Taking a deep breath, I smoothed out my scrubs and spoke to myself. *You got this, Vozz.* However, out of nowhere, my mind said, *You owe DJ an apology. Reach out.*

D J

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU ACTUALLY CAME OUT HERE. YOU AND Shavozz must have broken up.”

“Mel, if I wanted to talk about her, I would have just stayed home and called her.”

He smirked as we walked into the strip club. Nothing but he wanted me to see this Obsession chick. She only worked weekends, and he’d been waiting to get back here. It had been almost a week since I’d talked to Shavozz, and I was fucking miserable. For me to be in a strip club spoke volumes. Now that Chad had Lexi, my go-to hangout partner was occupied. Her having a tough pregnancy didn’t help matters. So I drove my ass to Houston to hang out with my brother. Arrow would be meeting us here in a little bit.

I wanted to go to Shavozz’s house and shake her ass. This shit was crazy as hell. She was being colder than what she really was. I knew that she felt something for me. It may not have been love, but she cared a lot. I hated that I put my feelings out there. As we took our seats, Jamel said, “If this shit don’t take your mind off Shavozz indecisive ass, then something wrong. Then I’ll know that it has to be your ass with the problem.”

I rolled my eyes as this fine ass woman came to the stage and started twerking. The cheers from people in attendance

only egged her on. There were just as many women here as there were men. I leaned back in my chair as Arrow joined us. “Shiiiiid, I’m right on time.”

I chuckled as the woman made her way to the mic, welcoming everybody and letting them know how great of a time would be had by everyone in attendance. I slapped Arrow’s hand, then he and Jamel began talking about what they expected to happen tonight. My mind wandered off to what I would do tomorrow. My mama wanted me to go to church with her. I was thinking about it because it wasn’t like I had shit else to do. Pop was barbequing before the cold weather blew in. Normally, he went to church with her.

As the music started for the first act, my mind went back to Vozz. I would much rather watch her ass bounce over these random ass women in here. “Here you go, sir.”

I looked up at the waitress. She held a drink in her hand. “Naw. I didn’t order anything.”

“Actually, the young lady at the bar wanted to send this to you.”

Without looking back to see who the mystery lady was, I again turned the drink down. I wasn’t tryna entertain anybody but Shavozz. She shrugged her shoulders and walked away. “Nigga, if you ain’t gon’ enjoy yourself, what you drove out here for? You ain’t gotta marry no damn body. Just let loose and have fun,” Jamel said.

I waved him off and ordered my own drink. I didn’t want to accept the drink and give the woman the wrong idea. Wasn’t shit popping off my way. However, as I got comfortable, a woman approached me. I had to sit up in my chair, because she was that damn fine. She smiled at me and turned her back to me. I heard Jamel laughing, but I couldn’t even look his way. Her ass was beautiful. When she sat that shit on me and started grinding against me, I thought I was gon’ fire off in my pants.

She grabbed my hands and rested them at her hips, giving me permission to touch her. Arrow’s eyes widened at her gesture. I had to assume that wasn’t something she normally

did. She took off her bikini top then turned to face me. I licked my lips and readjusted my dick. He was ready for action. Normally, he would have been deep in some shit by now... Shavozz's heated water park. The weekends were our time to shine.

As this woman straddled me, I had no choice but to release all thoughts of Shavozz into the wind. She leaned over and said in my ear, "I would love to make this a private dance, baby. My treat."

I frowned slightly. *Why in the hell would she want to give me a private show?* I supposed she noticed my frown. "My treat if you don't bust a nut. Otherwise, you pay two hundred."

"Naw, I'ma pass on that."

"Suit yourself. Just make sure you hold on for this ride."

She licked my neck as she began winding into me. I had a feeling she was trying to get fucked, and I wasn't the man for that job. I gripped her ass and pulled her to me. Since she wanted to offer deals and shit, I could match it. "If you cum, this lap dance is free."

I smacked her ass as I stared at her. She smirked, and I took that to mean she was taking me up on my deal. I slumped more in my seat and slightly lifted my hips. She slowly shook her head. "Naw. I'm gon' pass on that."

I gave her a smirk. We both knew that we would be cumming and losing those prospective bets. She put her hand behind my neck and came close to me, her nipple nearly grazing my chin. "If we go to the private room, we could make each other cum, no money exchanged."

I slid my hand to her ass again then up her back. I'd already lost everything I had to lose. Temptation was a muthafucka. "Let's get to it then."

She stood from my lap and grabbed my hand. After staring at my erection for a moment, she looked up at me and winked. I glanced over at Jamel to see his eyebrows lifted. I guess I wouldn't be meeting Obsession tonight. I was currently obsessed with someone else.

“I HAD TO GET RID OF THAT BURNER. SHE WAS BLOWING THAT shit up.”

I laughed at Ali as I ordered me some food to go. We ended up at the same place to grab a bite to eat. He was with one of his guys named Jericho, and they were buying food for everyone that worked for him. He was speaking of Talisha. I didn't give a damn about her ass. I'd just left the bank and got my homegirl to deposit a grand into Shavozz's account.

Even after my events this past weekend with Trinidad at the strip club, she was still all I could think about. Plus, I promised Tray that I would help. Regardless that we weren't together anymore, I was a man of my word. Although she wouldn't know it was me, I would know. That was all that mattered. I looked over at Ali as he said something to Jericho. “I guess all that shit was in vain. I'm not with Shavozz.”

“Well, Talisha at least got her nails and hair done a couple of times. Ain't like she didn't benefit a lil bit from our three-week acquaintance.”

“Did you fuck her?” I asked.

“Naw. She was throwing the pussy at me hard though. If I would have fucked her, I would have been pissed.”

“Right. Like I said a minute ago, ain't like I'm with Shavozz, so all that shit would have been in vain.”

“What would have been in vain?”

I turned around to see Shavozz standing right behind me. Ali turned too, and I believed Shavozz put the shit together as soon as she saw him. Her eyes widened as she brought her attention back to me. “Please tell me y'all didn't do that shit to her. DJ... she's been so depressed for the past week.”

“So have I, but I guess that don't matter.”

I turned away from her as she said, “You're heartless. I can't believe I've been contemplating calling you to make

things right. Just like she'd said, you can't be trusted."

"It's a shame that you don't see how her bullshit affected our relationship and tore us apart. I'm willing to bet that it was her that convinced you that you weren't ready. She's been against us since day one. So when Ali offered to help out, I didn't turn him down. I just wanted you to see how much I cared for you without having her ugly ass in your ear all the time. She was miserable and lonely, and you're going to end up the same way."

Before the cashier could get my whole name out, I snatched the food from her and walked out the door. This bullshit was ridiculous. I had no intent of ever telling Shavozz what I'd allowed Ali to do, but since she didn't want to be with me anyway, it didn't even matter. Talking 'bout she was contemplating calling me. She was full of shit, and I was done trying to trudge through it. The smell of it was a turn off in itself.

When I got to the car, I got in and slammed the door. How dare she confront me about anything? Everything I did was to be close to her... to show her how much she meant to me. I was willing to do almost anything to prove my love, and that shit was wrong. She shouldn't have had me feeling like I had to jump through all those fucking hoops to be with her. I set my food in the passenger seat and took deep breaths, trying to calm my ass down. I needed to talk to somebody about this... somebody with sense, because Jamel was a lost cause.

I put my car in gear and took off out of the parking lot like a bat out of hell and headed to Pop's house. If anybody could give me wise counsel, it was him. Chad and Zay had their hands full, and I knew Shy probably wouldn't have the greatest advice. If Pop couldn't, then my mama could. When I turned in their driveway, I noticed Brittany's car was there. That was strange. I never knew her to visit without Shy. I got out and headed to the back door.

I knocked then made my way inside to see Mama and Brittany sitting at the table. "Hey, y'all."

When Brittany looked up at me, the tears were falling from her eyes. She quickly wiped them then stood and hugged me. “Hey, DJ.”

“You good?”

“Yeah.”

I figured she didn’t want to talk to me about whatever was going on. I hugged my mama, then said, “Hey, Ma. Pop around?”

“Hey, baby. Yeah. He’s in there watching TV,” she said, tilting her head in the direction of the family room.

I nodded then made my way to the front room. When he saw me, he smiled and stood. I slapped his hand and gave him a half hug. “What’s up, Pop?”

“Not too much. Watching this sorry ass game. You good? You look pissed about something.”

“I am. Shavozz and I broke up last weekend... or rather she broke up with me.”

He frowned. “Why? Out of the six of y’all men, you and Zay got the most sense.”

I chuckled then slid my hand down my waves. “I made my intentions known... that I planned to marry her within the next couple of years and that I wanted a kid if possible. She said she didn’t wanna get remarried. I told her I wasn’t tryna be a forever boyfriend. The timeline pushed her all the way back. Although I said that was negotiable as long as we’re progressing in our relationship, she wasn’t hearing anything else. She broke up with me when we got back from Lake Charles after I begged her not to do this to us.”

“She’s scared.”

“I gathered as much. I ran into her today though. Ali had been keeping her friend busy so she could stay out of our business and Shavozz’s ear. She walked up on us in K-Asian and overheard us talking about it. Now she claims she’s completely done. I told her that it was a shame that she

couldn't see what Talisha's ugly ass was doing. She was keeping us apart until Ali got involved."

"Hmm."

That was all he said. I looked over at him to see him rubbing his beard. "I don't know what to do. I love her. I told her that I loved her, and she never acknowledged it. Should I just move on?"

"The timeline scared her, but the friend is just an excuse to stay away. She's using that as validation. She felt like she was making the wrong decision, but she's using that to assure herself she made the right decision. Women who have been continuously hurt by men can be hard to love at times. Most men don't have the patience to deal with that. You have to realize that it was possibly someone who looked like you that started off the same way you did—loving her, buying gifts, being romantic, and kind. But then they switched up on her. That's why she's on guard for bullshit all the time. A few months of consistency ain't always enough."

"So I should wait?"

"You said you love her. You waiting on her depends on how deep your love goes, son. There isn't a right or wrong answer. It's what you're willing to help her work through. She wouldn't be fighting so hard against you if she didn't want the same things you do. She just doesn't know how to trust herself. I'm pretty sure she's at war in her head about you. You just have to keep showing her that you love her. That can take time though. If you don't want to wait, nobody is going to fault you for moving on."

I took a deep breath and sat back on the couch with him. "I deposited a thousand dollars into her account to help her with bills. I don't give women cash. I buy flowers or small gifts, but never cash, at least not that much. She didn't ask for it, which was why I felt more compelled to give it. I promised her son that I would help. I could tell he was sincere and really loves his mama. He doesn't want her struggling. I just... I want her to see how much I love her already."

“I get it, son. There’s no easy solution to this. You can’t be too pushy or it will push her further away. Just send her flowers, let her know you’re still there. Apologize for the bullshit with Ali. Regardless of how much that woman was in y’all’s business, she’s a woman with feelings. Was she feeling him?”

“She was. So she’s heartbroken that he’s ghosted her.”

“You owe her an apology too. You have to make that right. Whether it was your idea or not, you had the power to stop it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Once you’ve made things right, it’s on her. Just because she ain’t doing what you feel is right don’t mean you can stoop to other levels. Those levels are beneath you for a reason, son. Desperation can cause you to make crazy decisions. I get it. But try to keep it together. Be open to moving on, too, just in case she never comes around. I know that’s hard when you’re in love, but maybe the time isn’t right.”

I took a deep breath and blew it out slowly, knowing that he was right. I needed to let go. Grabbing my phone, I called the florist before they closed and ordered a huge bouquet of tulips. The note would say, *I’m sorry, baby... for everything. It’s been hell without you, but I understand. I love you, Vozz, and I wish you the best life has to offer.*

It nearly killed my soul to say that to the lady on the phone. Pop laid his hand on my shoulder. “You’re doing the right thing. I just hope she comes around, because I can see how hurt you are. You remind me so much of Isaiah. He craved love, and he wanted the woman that he wanted... nobody else. I just hope it works out for you the way it worked out for him.”

“Thanks, Pop. I appreciate your words of advice.”

Before I could leave, Shy came in and flopped in the chair across from us. I could see that he was upset. “So I’m wrong for saying how much I want a baby?”

Pop slightly rolled his eyes. “It’s not what you say, Shy. It’s how you say it. Plus, if it’s repetitive, it could become a

lot. Is Brittany doing something to prevent it from happening?”

“No.”

“Then why are you pressuring her? It’s not her fault. Have you been to the doctor to see if you’re the problem?”

He frowned hard. I knew that was my cue to leave out. I stood from my seat and shook Pop’s hand. When I held it out to Shy, he never acknowledged it. That was okay. He was in his feelings right now. I walked off and before I could get out of the room, he called out, “DJ.”

I turned to see him walking to me. “I’m sorry, bruh. My mind just fucked up right now.”

“It’s cool. I get it. Mine fucked up too.”

I shook his hand and left them to talk it out. When I got to the kitchen, I overheard my mama say, “You don’t have to feel bad that you haven’t gotten pregnant yet. It happens to women all the time. Just be patient.”

“I just feel like I can’t be everything he needs, and I’m dying inside,” Brittany said with tears falling down her cheeks.

When they looked up and saw me, they stopped talking. Mama stood and hugged me. “You want something to eat?”

“No, ma’am. I have food in my car getting cold.”

When I released her, I went to Brittany. I pulled her in my arms. “Don’t worry. He’s talking to the right person right now. He’ll get it together.”

“Thanks, DJ.”

I released her then headed toward the door until I heard my mama scream. I turned back to see her and Brittany scrambling. “What’s going on?”

“Joyy is in labor!”

I smiled. This should be interesting. I had to go home and shower and eat before I went to the hospital. “St. Elizabeth?”

“Yes.”

“A’ight. I’ll see y’all there in a little while.”

I was sure that news wouldn’t do anything to calm Shyrón down. When I got to my car, I called the florist back and ordered a small bouquet for Talisha. I rolled my eyes when I told her to put on the note, *Sorry things didn’t work out*. I didn’t say anything further because I didn’t know if Shavozz had even told her that it was a setup... a game. I surely didn’t want to spill the tea on that. Now to get ready to go to the hospital and welcome three nieces and/or nephews into the world.

S havozz

WHEN THE DELIVERY GUY WALKED INTO MY OFFICE WITH THE huge bouquet of my favorite flower, it took my breath away. I held my hand to my chest, watching in awe. The parrot tulips were multi-colored. Like one tulip was red and yellow and looked marble like. They were the most beautiful flowers I'd ever seen in my life. I loved tulips and had always wanted to see how a bouquet of parrot tulips looked in person. Now I knew. They could only be from one person, just like the money deposited into my account.

When I got the notification on my phone this morning saying that one thousand dollars had been put in my account, I nearly passed out. I called the bank to make sure it wasn't a mistake, and they said there was indeed a deposit slip with my name on it. After praising and thanking God for touching someone's heart, I paid Tray's car note immediately. Now that these flowers were here, I knew DJ was the one taking care of me.

After the delivery guy had me sign for the flowers, I went to them and pulled the card from the stem. My hands trembled as I opened the envelope. *I'm sorry, baby... for everything. It's been hell without you, but I understand. I love you, Vozz, and I wish you the best life has to offer.*

The tears fell from my eyes. I missed DJ too. It had been over a week, almost two, but I just couldn't feel pressured into

something I didn't even know if I was ready for. I never should have taken his phone number seven months ago. I shouldn't have called him, and I surely shouldn't have fucked him. My pussy was whining for his attention, wishing he would have kept that remote to that vibrator.

As I swiped the tears from my face, my cell phone rang. I pulled it from my pocket to see Talisha's number. She'd been so down about Ali disappearing on her. There was no way I could tell her it was all a game. She'd asked me if DJ had been the one to put them together, and I told her no. Technically, he didn't. It was all me. DJ said he didn't even know Ali like that. Why would Ali want to do that for him if they didn't know each other "like that"?

Taking a deep breath, I answered the phone. "Hello?"

"I got flowers from DJ. Why the hell he sending me flowers? Does he think that I would ever go behind your back and be with him? The audacity of his ass."

I rolled my eyes. "What did the card say, Talisha?"

"That he was sorry things didn't work out. I assume he talking about Ali. So I guess he think he have a chance with me since you dropped him and Ali dropped me. What the hell wrong with men?"

"Talisha, he sent me flowers too."

She was quiet for a few seconds. "What did your card say?"

When I read it to her, she said, "I don't trust his ass. Why did he send me flowers too? He tryna—"

"Talisha, enough! Shit! He's a good man. He sent you the flowers out of genuine concern, because that's just the kind of man he is! He loves me, and I'm so fucked up mentally, I don't know how to accept the love he's been trying to give me."

When I left DJ, she was calling me stupid, but now that he was trying to get me back, she wanted to say she didn't trust him. I was starting not to trust *her* ass. I looked up and saw a nurse staring at me since my door was open. I turned my back

and mumbled, “I have to go. You got me acting a whole nigga at work.”

I ended the call and turned back to her. “I’m sorry, Shavozz. Are you okay?”

“Not really, but I will be. What’s up?”

“I have a new patient file for you. Here’s the paperwork. Most of it is on the comp— Oh my goodness. These are gorgeous,” she said as her attention went to my flowers.

“Thanks.”

“These have to be from the man that loves you. Sorry. I was standing at the door when you said it.”

I nodded and walked around my desk to look at the patient file. “When is their appointment?”

“I think the day after tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

“Umm... I know we don’t know one another well, but I hear that we’re similar.”

I frowned slightly. What in the hell did I have in common with this white woman? She smiled slightly and said, “My husband chased me for two years. I was a single mom of three, reeling after a nasty divorce. I had no help from him afterward because he ended up getting arrested in a domestic violence situation with a woman. Aaron came along about three months after my divorce, trying to be everything I needed, but I didn’t know how to bounce back. Matt had ruined me for anyone else. My heart was broken, and I felt like it was in no shape to love anyone else.”

I guess we are similar. I lowered my head as she continued. “Don’t let your past define your future. I don’t even know the guy that bought these amazing flowers, but if he’s as good of a man as you said he is, you shouldn’t let him get away.”

She gently rubbed my shoulder as I looked up at her. “Thank you.”

She gave me a tight smile, then left me here in my thoughts. She was only reiterating what Rondo had said this weekend. He'd spent two nights at my house, forgoing spending time with his daughter. I felt bad that he'd pushed her to the back burner for us and told him as much. Her mother wouldn't allow him to bring her with him to Texas. I didn't understand why. She lived in Alabama, where Rondo had lived for almost eight years before he moved back to Lafayette. He drove four hours every weekend to Mobile, Alabama, to get his baby and drove right back since he got off at noon on Fridays.

I didn't see what the big deal was if he brought her a couple of hours further to Beaumont, but that wasn't my business. Nevertheless, we enjoyed his company. He played football with Tray and helped Dalen exercise his wrist. Then he drank a bottle of Fireball by him damn self and passed out. Before he passed out though, we talked about Elvis and DJ. He advised me to get a lawyer, but I didn't know how I was supposed to do that without income.

He gave me his input on DJ and read me like an open book as well. What stuck with me was this: *It wasn't like you grew up with a father that knew how to treat a woman. That muthafucka was fucking everything. That's why I got a ghetto twin. Me and Casey tell people we twins all the time since we look like that nigga. You chasing love, but the only example you got is a fraud. So now that you have a real love, it looks unfamiliar, and you question it because it's unlike anything you've ever known.*

I would have never expected to receive good advice from Rondo. We enjoyed his company, and I promised him that I would somehow visit soon. He told me whenever I wanted to make a trip that he had my gas covered. When Sunday came, I didn't want him to leave. I missed him already, and it was only Tuesday.

Instead of looking over the patient information, I sat here staring at the flowers. He was letting me go, and that hurt more than I could have ever imagined. Grabbing my phone, I sent him a text. *Thank you, DJ. I wish you the best also.*

My heart was screaming as I hit the send button, but I knew I needed to get this situation with Elvis squared away before I could try to pursue anything with DJ. It wouldn't be fair to drag him through this shit. I just hoped he was still single and checking for me by then.

HEY, I'M NOT GOING TO BE ABLE TO GET THE BOYS NEXT weekend. Can I get them this weekend instead?

I rolled my eyes at Elvis's text message. I wanted to tell him so bad that I knew he was a world class fuck up. Instead of searching for an attorney, I just reported him to the attorney general's office. They could conduct their own investigation. I was sick of his bullshit. He still hadn't sent a dime for them, and I was beyond fed up. This shit was so hard, and I didn't know what to do to get through it.

As I got in my car to leave the office, I sent him a response. *Yeah, but I'm going to Lafayette so you can just get them from my mama's house.*

I'd called Rondo Tuesday evening and let him know I would be traveling there this weekend and that I didn't need gas money. *Thanks to DJ.* He had never responded to my message. I'd made up my mind that if he did respond, I would ask about the money. I didn't want it to seem like I was chasing him down, but I supposed since I was the one who'd messed up, it didn't matter. I just didn't know what to say. Pretending that nothing happened between us would be the wrong move.

I made my way home, grateful that tomorrow was Friday. We would head to Lafayette when the kids got out of school tomorrow. Hopefully, Elvis would be put on notice soon. When I showed the lady at the attorney general's office those pictures Rondo had taken, she was pissed. Elvis had a work truck and covered trailer and everything. The nigga was fancy with it. There was no telling how much money he'd been making.

Leaving me to struggle with our children was a ho move, and I couldn't wait to see his ass in court. Most likely, the judge wouldn't have mercy on him either. Most of the judges couldn't stand a man that didn't want to take care of his kids. I wished I had known then what I knew now about Elvis. Although, I wouldn't trade my boys for the world, I would have left his ass right where he was.

When I got home, Tray and Dalen were outside throwing the football. Dalen's wrist had been doing well, and I was grateful it wasn't worse. Once they saw me, they ran to the car to help me out. "Hey, Mama!" Dalen said excitedly.

"Hey, y'all. How was your day?"

Tray kissed my cheek. "It was good. What about yours?"

"It was okay. It was kind of slow today. Seems like when that happens, I'm more tired than when it's busy."

He chuckled. As I walked toward the house, I said, "Your dad wants to get y'all this weekend instead of next weekend."

"Aww. I wanted to stay at Grandma's house with you," Dalen whined.

"I was kind of looking forward to hanging out with Uncle Rondo," Tray added.

"No one is saying that you have to go. For whatever reason, he said he wouldn't be able to get you guys next weekend."

"He's going out of town with some woman. I overheard him on the phone."

My face heated up as Trayveon spilled the tea on Elvis's intentions. He didn't have money, but he could afford to go out of town with his floozy of the week. "Mm. Y'all can stay with me."

That was all I could say. I did my best not to bad mouth their father in their presence, but my mind was calling him all types of muthafuckas. He was the epitome of trifling. When I walked in the house, there was a bouquet of flowers on the countertop... more tulips. They were like the ones at the

office, except they were purple and pink, even more breathtaking. “These are so beautiful.”

“The delivery guy pulled in the driveway right behind us. Who are they from?” Tray asked.

I lowered my head and pulled the card from the stem. I already knew who they were from. He still wanted me. There was no way he would send me two bouquets if he didn’t. The card read: *I knew you would leave the other bouquet at work. So I bought this one so you would have something beautiful to look at while you’re at home. It’s not like you can stand in the mirror all day. DJ*

I couldn’t stop the smile that graced my lips. “They’re from DJ, huh?”

“They are.”

“I knew it. He misses you. When are you gonna call him?”

“Umm... I think I’m just gonna text him.”

“What are you scared of, Mama?”

“Falling for another man like your father,” I said softly.

Trayveon pulled me into his arms and hugged me tightly. He towered over me and was nearly six feet. I wasn’t sure where he got his height from, because his father was one of the fucking Lollipop Kids from the *Wizard of Oz*. “I don’t think DJ is like him, and deep down, I don’t think you do either.”

My son was wise beyond his years, and I could only thank God that he didn’t give me a child that would raise hell. I pulled away from him as I nodded my head. Grabbing my phone, I took a chance and called him. When he didn’t answer, I ended the call and texted. *I just wanted to say thank you for the flowers. You’re right. I left the other ones at work. I want to believe you had something to do with the money in my account as well. Thank you.*

I set the phone on the countertop then smelled the flowers as Dalen went to the refrigerator. “Mama, can I have an apple?”

“Yeah, baby.”

I grabbed the vase of flowers and set them on the table then sat in a chair and stared at them. Tray sat next to me and said, “You really like tulips, huh?”

“Absolutely.”

“If he calls back, make sure you answer the phone. I want to see you happy, Mama. When he was around, you were happy. I could see that in one day.”

“I will. Thanks, son.”

He smiled slightly then stood from the table, leaving me there to stare at the beauty DJ had afforded me.

D J

“DON’T LISTEN TO YOUR UNCLE CHAD. HE’S FULL OF SHIT, baby girl.”

He laughed and was about to shove me, forgetting that I was holding Zay and Joyy’s baby girl just that quickly. Sunday dinner was at their house so they didn’t have to get out with the babies. They were only a week old. They’d had one girl and two boys. Little Miss Tatum had stolen my heart. Joyy had a pretty pink head wrap on her and a gold bracelet. I felt sorry for Zay already, because bruh was gon’ stay broke.

Before Chad could respond to what I’d said, Mariena came walking into the room, barking. I chuckled because that shit irritated Dylan. He frowned and rolled his eyes as I said, “Man, just accept it. Baby girl gon’ be a Delta.”

“Whatever,” Dylan said as I laughed.

Joyy came over and grabbed baby girl from me to feed her. She looked drained. She had already fed the boys, and she looked to be dragging. “Sis, when you’re done, you can bring her back. You look worn out.”

“Thanks, DJ. I am. I’m exhausted.”

“Do you have any milk pumped? I’ll feed her.”

She looked at me like she wanted to kiss me. Isaiah had one of the boys, and Mama had the other one. Pop was

cleaning the kitchen. She needed the break. I could only imagine what it was like trying to take care of three babies at once. “DJ, you are amazing. Please? I need a nap.”

I smiled and lifted my hands for Tatum. She eased her back into my arms. When I looked down at her, she was killing her thumb. At least she wasn't crying. When Joyy came back with the bottle, she handed it to me with a smile, along with a burp cloth and said, “Thank you so much, DJ.”

“Of course.”

I felt eyes on me and looked up to see Alexz staring at me. She smiled slightly as she fed her baby girl. All these babies had me feeling like Shy up in here. That nigga had been outside most of the time we'd been here. He kept his mind busy by talking to Ali, Seneca, and a couple of other guys that were now working for Ali. I could see just how uncomfortable Brittany was, but she held on to Mariena and rocked her to sleep, kissing her head repeatedly.

She wanted a baby just as badly as he did, but I could see that it was bothering the hell out of her that she hadn't been able to get pregnant yet. Shy didn't make it any easier on her. I felt for her and just hoped that she would get pregnant soon. I felt like if she didn't, their marriage wasn't going to make it. As I stared down at Tatum, I noticed her big beautiful eyes were on me. She had claimed my heart already and made me think of the possibilities Shavozz and I could have had.

Chad had called me stupid for doing so, but I blocked her number. Although I would love to have her back, I needed her to be sure of what she wanted before she could contact me. If she wanted me bad enough, she would pop up on my ass. She knew where I lived and where Chad and my parents lived. While I knew I was being pushy, she was looking for excuses to validate her indecisiveness. Besides, I couldn't be with a woman that didn't want to get married.

I didn't know if that was something she'd said because she was afraid or if that was how she really felt, but I didn't need to hang around to find out. “What you thinking about?”

I turned to see Jamel had sat next to me. “Nothing.”

“Quit lying. You staring at this beautiful princess like she’s yours. Everybody ’round here got the fever, but yours is different. You talk to Shavozz?”

“Naw. I don’t think I will. I’m just trying to force myself to give up, man. I don’t expect you to understand. I love that woman, and knowing that I can’t have her is eating me alive. It’s not because I haven’t shown her that I wanted her. I just don’t feel like she wants me as badly as I want her.”

“I know how that feels, bruh. That stripper got me in a chokehold.”

I rolled my eyes. “You can’t be comparing your obsession with my love for Shavozz.”

“Listen. Although I don’t know who she is, all I can think about is her. She doesn’t do lap dances, so I can’t even get close to her to find out if I’m tripping. I ain’t had sex in a month, man. That’s unusual for me, because a nigga always got somebody waiting in the wings. Just... none of ’em look appealing anymore. If they ain’t Obsession, I don’t even wanna see their asses. For real.”

I rolled my eyes again. This nigga was setting himself up for failure. Jamel was somewhat possessive. Wasn’t no way he would be good with dating a stripper. That nigga wouldn’t be able to handle a bunch of men ogling his woman. Surely, he didn’t think he was the only one going there just to see her.

“Mel, you tripping.”

“Naw. She stares at me a lot too. I think she feel something between us just like I do, but whether it’s just lust or not has yet to be determined.”

“If you say so. Can you even be faithful to one woman?”

He shrugged. “Hell if I know. Only one way to find out.”

“I know you ain’t still talking about Obsession,” Arrow said as he sat on the other side of me.

“Hell yeah, he is. She got that nigga sprung and shit.”

“He ain’t even spoke to her, let alone sampled the goods,” Arrow said as he glanced at Lexi.

She rolled her eyes then went back to her conversation with Skyler. She wasn't the least bit worried about Arrow and Jamel and their exploits. That was nearly their entire conversation, which was why I knew she didn't give a shit about what we were over here talking about. No one cared. Arrow was a little more respectful than Jamel though. He filtered himself if he knew someone other than the fellas could hear him. I knew he definitely wanted to say sampled the pussy.

"Y'all two niggas can think I'm crazy or whatever, but y'all gon' see. When you get through burping my niece, I need my turn. She so damn cute."

"That she is," Chad said as he made his way back over to where we were.

"How are things going with those muthafuckas from your job?" Arrow asked him.

"Shy done uncovered all kinds of bullshit. It goes all the way back to the governor and state representative. Can you believe that shit? They were committing fraud and false imprisonments all the time. They were afraid of me finding out because I was so cool with Charles. That was why they were trying to ship me off to Pollock. Once they bought Charles off, they didn't give a fuck after that. They just fired me without cause, knowing they didn't provide me the protection I needed."

"Leave it to Shy to handle shit. That nigga could take down the president. They need to have his ass on this Trump shit. It would have been over already. Ali be done went to Trump house and got everything they need to make the case," Jamel said.

We all laughed at his ass as I lifted Tatum to my shoulder to burp her. Her head wrap fell off, revealing her beautiful hair. I heard women got indigestion or heartburn when their babies had a lot of hair. Joyy must've had that shit every day. Lil mama was only a week old and had a head full. When she burped, Jamel scooped the sanitizer from the table and rubbed

some on his hands and arms, then grabbed her blanket from my lap.

I passed her to him then stood and made my way outside. Shy, Ali, and the rest of them niggas were closer to the driveway. That was perfect, because I needed time to talk myself out of unblocking Shavozz and calling her. Maybe I was going a little too far by blocking her. She may never try to find me if she couldn't reach me by phone. Just as I was about to unblock her, my phone rang. I huffed loudly. It was my job, and I started not to answer it, but I knew that it could be something serious.

“Hello?”

“Dent, I know it's your off day, but we need you, man. Justin and Hosea started fighting, and Hosea died.”

“Shit. Let me go change, and I'll be up there.”

“Thanks.”

I slid my hand down my face. Those two were always fighting, and it started over some bullshit about some girl who didn't give a shit about either of their asses. I made my way back inside to tell everyone bye and as I headed out, Alexz said, “Hold on, DJ.”

I waited for her at the back door. When she joined me, she continued outside. Once we got out there, she said, “Shavozz called me. She was going to come by here today.”

I huffed slightly. Knowing that she was going to make an effort to make this right softened my heart. “A'ight. I'll call her when I get in the car.”

“Do you have her blocked?”

“Yeah. She's really indecisive. I figured if she actually hunted me down, then she was finally serious about making things right between us and giving us another shot. I can't take all that back and forth shit. Zay asked me if I could handle it, and I told him I could. I realized that was wishful thinking. I tried being patient, but she was on my last nerve.”

“Well, call her. She was going to be heading here in an hour. She sounded as depressed as you look.”

I gave her a half smile then kissed her cheek and made my way to my car. As soon as I backed out of the driveway, I unblocked her number then called. She answered on the first ring. “DJ...”

She breathed out a sigh of relief. I assumed she was happy that I called her. Surely, she knew I was good and wasn't worried about me. “What's up, Vozz? I'm about to head to work, so you won't be able to pop up on me. You good?”

“No. I'm not. I'm a fool, and I miss you. I'm so sorry for all the bullshit I put you through.”

I could hear road noise in the background, so instead of responding to what she said, I asked, “Where are you?”

“We're just crossing the state line, heading home. I stayed in Lafayette this weekend with my brother Rondo,” she responded softly. “Did you have me blocked?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“I didn't want to just talk to you on the phone when you were feeling me then you ghost me when you weren't. I figured if you hunted me down, then you were ready. I was ready day one. I knew you weren't at the time, but I was willing to wait until you were. However, it's like you're trying to find every excuse to sabotage what we have, baby. My heart can't take that. I would rather be without you, as painful as that is. I miss you too.”

She remained quiet for a moment, and I could hear someone in the background. I was sure it was Trayveon if she was on her way back from Louisiana. “You have to wait for me. You leavin', I'm coming too. I heard those lyrics in a song by Tink last night, and it struck a nerve. DJ, I cried for hours. I'm in love with you too. I love you, DJ. I need you in my life. The boys need you too. Please, give me another chance to get this right. Please,” she pleaded.

Her voice cracked, and I knew she was crying. That broke me. She was sincere this time. Before I could reply, she continued. “I even put Talisha in her place about you. I’m so scared, but I can’t let my fear cause me to lose the only man that has shown me what real love is. I can’t miss out on something I’ve craved my entire life. Please, DJ. Don’t leave me, baby. Please.”

Her cries were audible and filled with grief. I heard Tray tell her to pull over so he could drive. I couldn’t believe that she’d finally defended me to Talisha, especially after what she knew I allowed Ali to do. I had to assume that she hadn’t told Talisha what she knew. As I turned in my driveway, I listened to them switch places. When both doors closed, she asked, “DJ, you there?”

“I’m here, baby. Please, stop crying. I got’chu and the boys. Don’t ever think that I don’t love y’all. I ain’t going nowhere, Vozz. You got me, baby. I was just trying to protect my heart.”

I got out of the car to head inside as she said, “I’m going to do my absolute best not to let you down again. I’m going to enroll in counseling and everything. Whatever I have to do to be better for you, I will.”

“My brother Zay is a really good counselor. I’m more than sure he wouldn’t mind.”

“Can I see you today when you get off?”

“I don’t know what time I will get off. There was a murder today. That’s why I got called in. The boys respect me and will listen to my words of caution. I gotta go, but I’ll come see you as soon as I can. Don’t worry. You haven’t lost me. I love you, Vozz.”

“I love you too.

I ended the call and made my way inside to put on my uniform and head to work.

“C.O. DENT, IT ALL STARTED OVER A LETTER SOME GIRL SENT Justin. Hosea somehow found out who the letter was from. Justin was minding his business when Hosea attacked him.”

The kids had bombarded me as soon as I walked through the door. My main agenda was finding the C.O.s that were on duty when this happened. Somebody wasn't on their damn job if they had time to fight until somebody was dead. I was on a mission, and I couldn't stop until I got to the office. “Hol' on, y'all. I need to go to the office first. I'll come back and talk to y'all in a lil bit.”

They backed off and allowed me to make my way to the office. The warden was chewing people out, wondering how this happened on our watch. When he turned to me, he nodded. “Dent, apparently, these boys started fighting and was able to fight for almost five minutes before Justin slammed Hosea's head into the concrete barrier, instantly breaking his neck and killing him. C.O. Mays and C.O. Johnson were on duty, but apparently, Mays was too caught up watching porn to even realize anything was going on. He's in the holding cell over there.”

I was fuming. I didn't control who got hired or who got fired, but when I was here, I was in charge of my particular shift. This shit was unacceptable. Now his ass was about to do time for watching fucking porn on the job. I'd heard enough. I stormed out of the room and sat in the commons. I didn't know where Justin was, but I was more than sure he was in solitary some damn where. I was surprised they didn't have all the boys in cells.

I sat on the bench at the front of the common area, and said, “Let me holla at y'all.”

When they were gathered and quiet, I lowered my head for a moment. This shit was hard. I tried to have a relationship with all of them and deter them from doing the shit that got them here. I wanted them all to be successful, working men when they left here and got themselves reacclimated in the world. I knew it was overzealous to think that all of them would do what was right, but I wanted to believe in them, even when they didn't believe in themselves.

“It almost doesn’t matter what led to this. The problem is that someone is dead. Y’all are supposed to be suffering the consequences of previous mistakes, but most importantly, learning from them, not making new ones. I want y’all to go a different route when you leave here. Now, Hosea is dead, and Justin will probably be moved to the adult facilities up the road. Over a girl? What y’all think she doing right now?”

“Living her fucking life,” somebody said.

“Exactly! She out there doing what she wants to do, and y’all in here under lock and key. They fighting over somebody that neither of them truly have access to. That’s stupid as fuck! You supposed to be in here bettering yourself, taking advantage of all the programs we have in place so you can leave here a better person. This shit has me sick inside, and I know some of you are grieving Hosea’s death as well.”

I looked around the room and noticed a few of them had wiped their faces. Most of their heads were lowered. I knew I had to get somebody in here to talk to them, whether it was Zay or a preacher. Someone that was licensed to deal with them and their sometimes volatile personalities. “We gon’ get through this together, guys. Was that shit worth it though? Hosea was willing to die for her. I don’t know the situation or who she was even attracted to, but in my opinion, she didn’t give a damn about either of them if she was playing back and forth between the two of them.”

“She was playing. Hosea got a letter from her last week. He got a letter from her every week. That bitch was foul, man. Both my boys gon’ be gone,” Chance said.

“Yeah. Did you try to talk to either of them before this? Did y’all try to persuade them to do something different? To squash this bullshit?”

They all lowered their heads again. “Y’all are part of the problem. When you see your friend going the wrong way, you supposed to at least try to get them turned in the right direction. I’m not saying that they’ll listen, but it’s your job as a friend to tell them what’s right. We gotta do better, y’all. I

don't wanna see nothing like this happen again. We can't lose any more of y'all. Y'all hear me?"

"Yes, sir," they said in unison.

I stood from my seat and left them sitting there, needing a minute to myself. Knowing that it was basically the state's fault that Hosea was dead left a bad taste in my mouth. His parents could sue the piss out of the state. I was more than sure they would find out that Mays was being charged. There was plenty of paperwork that would have to be done, and I had a feeling I was called in to make sure it got done. I'd be here all night.

S havozz

“SO WHAT DID HE SAY?” RONDO ASKED.

“He said that he still loved me and that I hadn’t lost him. Thanks for encouraging me to get to him by all means necessary. I didn’t go to Sunday dinner. He got called into work, but his sister told him that I was coming over, so he called me.”

“Sister? She single?”

“No. Just married not even a year ago and has a newborn,” I responded as I rolled my eyes. “Focus, Rondo. I was telling you thank you.”

“You’re welcome. What am I here for if I can’t offer you words of encouragement and comfort? I just hate that Elvis hadn’t been put on notice yet.”

“Hell yeah, but I’m sure the minute he is, he’ll be calling me.”

“Shiiiiid, let me know when he does. If he have the slightest attitude, I’m gon’ put my fist down his throat and pull that attitude right out of him.”

I chuckled. “Well, Rondo, I have to go. Someone is knocking at my office door.”

“A’ight. Take it easy.”

I ended the call and stood from my desk to open the door. I was on my lunch break, but I didn't leave to get anything to eat. Although I was still high because of DJ's words yesterday evening, I hadn't spoken to him since. I knew he was probably at work all night, but he hadn't reached out to say anything yet. Despite him assuring me of where he stood, I was still nervous that things wouldn't go back to how they were.

When I opened the door and saw him standing there with food and flowers, the tears sprang from my eyes. I invited him in as I smiled. Once he set everything on my desk, he turned back to me. "Hey, Vozz."

"Hey," I barely got out as I made my way to him.

I quickly threw my arms around him, grateful that he was still in my life after my bullshit. He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me closer, molding my body against his. "Look at me."

I lifted my head and stared up at him as he lowered his head and kissed me tenderly. When he pulled away, he took something from his pocket and handed it to me. It was wrapped in tissue paper, the kind to wrap gifts in. When I opened it and saw another vibrator, I laughed so loudly. I looked up at him, and he smiled big, showing his bottom grill that he wore at times. I grabbed his hand and led him to my desk to be seated. He'd brought seafood, my favorite. When I pulled the containers out of the Boil City bag, I closed my eyes and inhaled. "You really love me."

He chuckled then grabbed my hand and blessed our food. When I opened the container and saw the boiled shrimp, sausage, potato, corn, boiled egg, and fried rice, I was in heaven. There was no way I would be able to eat all of this and still function. After taking a bite of my sausage, I said, "Thank you, DJ."

"Mm hmm," he responded.

His mouth was full of food. I knew there was something else I needed to ask him about though. My financial stress was eased because of what he did... or at least I thought for sure

that he did, since he never responded to my text confirming anything. “DJ?”

He looked up at me with a smile on his face. “What’s up?”

“Did you deposit money into my account?”

He licked his lips then bit the bottom one, silently answering my question. I lowered my head for a moment until he said, “Yeah. I know you’re stressed, trying to take care of things.”

“Even after I walked away from you, you still cared?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t turn it off, although I tried. Something in me hoped that you would come around. I have a question though. Is your views on marriage still the same?”

I looked away for a moment. “I’m afraid of being married again, but I won’t say that I’ll never get married again. I’m open to it, just not soon.”

“That’s all I need, Vozz. It’s my job to convince you that I’m worth it. I plan to do that.”

I nodded and swallowed the lump in my throat. “I know you’re worth it, DJ,” I practically whispered. “The flowers are gorgeous,” I said, trying to steer the conversation in a different direction.

He gave me a one-cheeked smile, letting me know that he peeped game. Instead of calling me out on it, he entertained me. “Yeah. When I saw them, they screamed your name. So how did Talisha take the news about Ali?”

“I never told her. After she pissed me off, accusing you of flirting with her, I decided that she would never know if I had to be the one to tell her. She’s a lil salty with me right now.”

DJ frowned, and I held my hand up. “I put her in her place. I wanted to tell her that you think she’s ugly, but I didn’t go that far. I didn’t want to hurt her, but I did want her to shut up about you. You are the best man I’ve ever been involved with. I recognized it all along, but I allowed her to feed my fears.”

“I’m grateful you’re trying to overcome those fears. I want to love you beyond anything you’ve ever known, but I can’t

do that if you keep shooting me down. Talisha can talk about our love all she wants. It's mainly because she's jealous that you've finally found someone that will treat you the way you deserve to be treated... the way you've been longing to be treated. I want to spoil you completely. The boys too. That's my bruhs. I'm gon' make some Q-Dawgs out of them if it kills me."

I chuckled. "I don't know about all that. I won't ever look at Q's the same if my sons are dawgs. That'll ruin it for me."

He scooted closer to me and said in my ear, "Mm. Well in that case, I'll send them to Shy, Dylan, or Zay. They'll be happy to take them in. I can't be tarnishing the feelings you get when I do my neck roll in that pussy."

When his lips and the tip of his nose grazed my earlobe, I gushed on myself. If I could fuck him on this desk without anyone knowing, I surely would. As if he could sense my intense desire, he said, "If you weren't scared about losing your job, I'd fuck the shit out of you on this desk."

I giggled nervously. "I shouldn't be scared?"

"Naw. Not when you got a nigga like me willing to take care of everything. I'd move you and the boys in with me tomorrow. Just say the word."

This fool literally had me thinking about risking my livelihood. I wanted him so bad. A slight moan left my lips as my eyes closed and he slid his hand between my legs. These scrubs were thin as hell. He wasn't about to have me all soaked down there. "DJ... fuck. I need you, but I cannot lose my job, baby."

He slowly pulled away from me. "I know. It was just wishful thinking. A nigga in here pressed for some of that good shit between your legs."

"The feeling is mutual, baby. Do you have to work tonight? What time did you get off?"

"I didn't get off until a couple of hours ago. I went home, took a shower, and came to you. I'll get a good night's rest tonight and go in tomorrow morning."

“Lots of paperwork, I bet.”

“Yeah. The boys were taking things hard. The good thing was that nobody was taking sides. They hated what went down and felt like they lost two friends instead of one. The one that committed the murder was transferred to the state prison this morning. He’s going to be tried as an adult. All of this over a girl. I honestly wish they would investigate her to see if she was egging this shit on.”

I could see that this was hard on him too. He was probably close to both boys. I could imagine so since he spent a lot of time with them. “Is this the first time something like this has happened there?”

“Since *I’ve* been there, I’ve never witnessed it. I couldn’t imagine being there when it happened. However, had I been there, it probably wouldn’t have happened. One of the guards wasn’t on his job. He in a lot of shit, as he should be.”

“Damn,” I mumbled.

I couldn’t imagine knowing my lack of responsibility led to someone being killed... a kid at that. “How old was the kid that died?”

“Sixteen. Both of them are sixteen.”

“That’s so sad.”

“Yep. But back to you. When you get off, I need to taste you. It won’t take long. I know you need to get to the boys, but I know that shit marinating right now, so I can imagine how it’s gon’ taste when you get off.”

My eyebrows lifted slightly as I squirmed in my seat. DJ stood from his seat and walked over to the sink and washed his hands. When he finished, he came back to me and said, “Spread them thick ass thighs, baby.”

I didn’t ask any questions. I just did as I was told. He untied my drawstring and slid his hand in my scrubs and underwear. The minute his fingers slid inside of me, my eyes closed, and I subtly grinded on his digits. A soft moan left my lips. “Mm... DJ. You gon’ make me ruin my panties.”

“You’ll have to take that shit off then. I can’t leave you in heat like this, being the dawg that I am, without taking care of it. Cum for me, Vozz.”

The way he was rubbing circles on my G-spot had my eyes rolling to the back of my head like I was seizing. *Jesus*. When his teeth grabbed ahold of my earlobe, I busted all over his fingers. It took everything I had in me not to scream. It had been over two weeks since I’d felt this intense pleasure, and I missed it. He slowly slid his fingers from me, and I opened my eyes just in time to see him put his fingers in his mouth.

He sucked them clean and said, “Shit. As soon as you get off, Vozz. Not a minute later. I’m a be in my bed, naked, waiting on you to come sit on my face. I need to be able to get at you right, baby. Shit.”

He put his fingers back in his mouth, then went back to the sink to wash his hands. Checking the time, I realized I only had fifteen minutes until my lunch break was over. I stood from my seat and immediately felt the gushiness. I rolled my eyes as he chuckled, seemingly knowing what my issue was. “Go take them drawz off, girl. Give me a kiss.”

I made my way to him and kissed his lips, tasting my flavor. Before I could pull away, he kissed me again. “I’m gon’ let you get some more food in you and clean up. I’ll be waiting. The key will be under the mat.”

“You don’t have to leave. My next appointment is at one forty-five. I need to talk to you about what’s going on with me financially.”

“A’ight.”

“Be right back.”

I headed to the bathroom, trying to figure out how I would word things. Somehow, he knew that I was in a bind, and I was willing to bet Trayveon had something to do with that. He’d been begging me to let him get a job, but I’d adamantly refused. I’d never mentioned anything about my financial status to DJ. My independence meant a lot to me, but I knew I

needed to explain because I didn't have a clue what Tray had said to him.

After quickly washing up with wet paper towels, I stuffed my underwear in my pocket and made my way back to my office. DJ was sitting there eating his food. The minute I walked inside, he stood from his seat and helped me to mine.

“Give 'em to me.”

Strangely, I knew exactly what he was talking about. I reached into my pocket and pulled my panties out and handed them to him. He dragged his tongue over the crotch of them, then moaned and shoved them in his pocket. “You so nasty, DJ.”

“Mm hmm. You like that shit though.”

“Yep.”

“So what's up? What'chu need to talk to me about?”

“How did you know that I needed help?”

“I plead the fifth,” he said and went back to his food.

I nodded repeatedly. “I already know, but that's cool that y'all have a bond like that already. He didn't tell me, but I know he's the only one that could have told you just how bad it was getting. Elvis told me he lost his job and wasn't paying child support. The truth is that he quit his job to start his own business. That left me having to pay all the bills alone, including Tray's car note. I was in the hole nearly sixteen hundred dollars. So that thousand you deposited got Tray's car paid for. I appreciate that so much.”

I took a deep breath because that was so hard for me to disclose to him. Before he could respond, I said, “I'm not telling you this to ask for more help. You've done more than enough. My brother gave me five hundred while I was in Louisiana.”

“What about next month?” he asked.

“Elvis is working again,” I said, using air quotes. “I filed with the attorney general's office. He just hasn't been notified yet. He's not going to think he just got out of not taking care of

his responsibilities for an entire month. That wasn't fair to me or the boys. I just wanted you to understand why I was in a bind. It wasn't because I can't manage my money."

He brought his hand to mine. "Eat yo' food. Quit tripping. I've gotten to know you well over the past seven or eight months. I know you're independent, and you want me to believe that you have it all together all the time. That shit ain't true for anybody. We all get in situations that aren't so easy to get out of sometimes. Honestly, my dad helped me to see that. My biological dad was a crackhead, but he wasn't always one. Life chewed his ass up and spit him out."

I lowered my head and ate some of my rice. DJ didn't talk about his biological father often, but when he did, I knew that he was serious and feeling somewhat sensitive at the same time. Despite how his dad died and all the shit he did to his mom, he still had a soft spot for him. I didn't respond to him, so he continued.

"I love you, Vozz. Whatever you need, I got'chu. Whatever I got, you got. I don't care how independent you are. Ain't nothing wrong with needing someone. I just want you to know that that someone might as well be me. I need you for sure. That's why I'm here. The parts of you that you try to hide are the most attractive. I love the way you even push your glasses up on your nose."

He tapped the tip of my nose with his finger, causing me to giggle. This man had me feeling all warm inside. "I love you too, DJ. I'm gonna try to remember everything you said."

"Naw. Don't try. Remember. Struggling... DJ. Low on gas... DJ. The light bill is expensive this month... DJ. When I say I got'chu, I mean that shit. Just like it may come natural to stress about situations, I want it to come natural for you to call me. I would much rather that than you being stressed the hell out."

He slid his hand down his beard and took a deep breath. "I'm not hurting for money, Vozz. I ain't told nobody, but Jamel and I had an insurance policy on my dad. We got to split nearly six hundred grand when he died. I can't speak for him,

but I don't trick off my money. Plus, I work. I don't make chump change. So when I say I can take care of y'all, I'm not just saying that. I mean it."

I was in awe that he was willing to spend his money to take care of me and kids that weren't his, when their punk ass daddy didn't wanna do shit and it was *his* responsibility. While in my mind, I wanted to fight against him, I knew that it was one of my toxic traits. It was my fear ruling my sense. Every good man took care of what belonged to him. He also took care of his significant other's belongings. DJ was that man.

After taking a slow, deep breath, I leaned into him and put my lips to his. "I got it, baby. I honestly got it. I never wanted to be considered a user because that's not who I am. However, if we are going to be together, I know that I need to let go and let you do what you need to do as the man in my life. I love you so much, DJ. I'm not used to a man telling me that they got it. It was always a you-got-yo'-half-of-the-bills type of thing."

"That wasn't a real man then. That was a fucking imposter. I'm all man in every category. Don't forget that."

I gave him a soft smile as my phone vibrated. Seeing it was Elvis put me on high alert. He was already kind of salty that the boys didn't really want to spend time with him this past weekend. They'd gone to dinner with him Saturday night and that was it. I glanced at DJ, then picked it up from my desk.

You filed a complaint with the attorney general's office? Are you serious? You know I wasn't working.

I rolled my eyes and locked my phone screen. I didn't have to entertain his lies. He had to know that those people had taken my investigative documents and had done their own investigation as well. "You good, baby?"

"Yeah. It's just Elvis tryna raise my blood pressure."

"Don't let him. You don't even have to talk to him if it isn't concerning the boys. Tell his ass to contact the attorney

general's office before you file harassment charges. Better yet, you can give him my number."

"I know you have my back. If he gets out of pocket, I'll let you know. He's playing the innocent role right now. He's just upset that the boys didn't want to spend time with him this past weekend. They wanted to hang with Rondo. Tray isn't stupid. He sees what his dad is doing. Dalen follows his brother's lead. If Tray don't wanna go, then he won't go either."

"He's a good kid. That speaks to the type of mother you are."

I kissed his lips, knowing that I could be secure in him. Letting my guard down had been hard, but this was where I was meant to be without a shadow of a doubt.

D J

“MAN, LISTEN. SHE WALKED UP ON ME AT THIS FOOD TRUCK and was like, where the fuck you been?”

My eyebrows lifted and my eyes widened. Seneca’s mouth opened in shock. “What the fuck did you say?” Seneca asked Ali.

“I grabbed her by the arm and pulled her away from everybody. I told her if she ever stepped to me like that again, I would break her fucking neck and to have a nice day with a big ass smile on my face.”

I lowered my head and shook it slowly. If Talisha didn’t watch herself, Ali was gonna kill her ass. I was just grateful that Shavozz had seen the light and put her in her place. “I hope ain’t nobody heard yo’ ass,” Chad added.

“Man, what’s my name?”

Chad chuckled as Shy came outside with us. We were at our usual spot for drinks, Pour 09, and all the women were at Zay’s house with the kids. Even Pop had come out here with us. This past week, being in Shavozz and the boys’ life again, had been everything I’d been hoping for. Since I was off Thursday, I picked Dalen up from school to give Tray a break. There was something going on after school for the seniors that he wanted to participate in but didn’t know how he would. He was beyond happy when I told him that I would get Dalen.

Apparently, Elvis's plans had fallen through, because he wanted the boys this weekend. We'd planned to turn up. We'd already established that we would get haircuts while Shavozz got her nails and feet done, go skating, and eat pizza. The rest of the weekend, we would play by ear. Shavozz had gone to meet him in Lake Charles this evening. She didn't too much like talking to me about him, but I could see she was somewhat bothered when she got back. While I wanted to question her about it, I tried to trust that if she needed me, she would say so.

"So, we figured out that it wasn't me. Brittany is having some issues conceiving. She has what they call PCOS. We're gonna try the fertility pills first. Hopefully that stimulates some action. I had to apologize to her for being so impatient. Everybody around me having babies, and I just got overly excited and anxious. Thanks, Dad, for the talk," Shy said, enlightening us all.

I was shocked that he said that in front of everyone. He never usually blasted his personal business that way, but I supposed since everyone had witnessed his attitude at some point, he felt he should clue everybody in as to what was going on. As we all patted his back and let him know he should probably get ready for multiples as well, Jamel and Arrow joined us.

I stood and greeted my brother, but I could clearly see that something was bothering him. After I dapped him up and hugged him, I stared at him with a slight frown. "What's up, bruh?"

"Ain't shit wrong with that nigga. He in love with a damn stripper. He gon' miss her this weekend 'cause we in Beaumont," Arrow said, informing me.

"Nigga, fuck you. I hate I'ma miss her show this weekend, but a muthafucka ain't in love with no stripper. I might be slightly addicted though. Her skills mesmerize my ass every time," Jamel said.

I chuckled and slowly shook my head. "Is that it? You look a lil flustered," I asked as Arrow spoke to everyone else.

“Yeah, I’m good, bruh. Let me holla at everybody else.”

I wasn’t sure what was going on with him, but I would let him work through it. This wasn’t the best place to talk about things anyway. I made my way back to my seat, but when I noticed Jericho walking up the stairs, I went and sat next to Chad. Although they were cool, I knew Chad could operate on a short fuse at times. Him being here could make his ass detonate. Before he could ask me what was up, his eyes went over to Jericho as he reached the landing.

He gave him a head nod, and Jericho did the same, then went straight to Ali. It seemed that he wasn’t here to chill with us, thank God. He was here for Ali. Shortly after they talked, Ali and Seneca both walked down the stairs with him. “I wonder what’s up with them,” Shy said, voicing our sentiments.

I just knew he was going to go downstairs to see, but he remained seated. Pop stood in front of all of us and rubbed his hands together. Dylan chuckled and said, “Here we go. He finna have all of us in our feelings.”

Axton chuckled and said, “Don’t mind him, Pop. What’s on your mind?”

He slowly shook his head. “Dylan was somewhat right. In a short amount of time, I’ve watched all of you mature as men. You’ve married, started families, and are giving me grandbabies. I have five grandchildren already, thanks to Zay.”

He chuckled as did everyone else. “I’m just proud of y’all and the men you’ve become and are becoming. DJ and Jamel, although y’all aren’t my biological sons and I haven’t known you as long, I can see the growth. DJ, I’m proud of you for not giving up. Now look at where you are. Jamel, I don’t know what it is, but I can see a change happening in you. I don’t know what type of change it is, but I’m looking forward to finding out.”

Mel turned red as hell. His ass was gon’ have to tell me what was up as soon as we left from here. He and Arrow were staying at my house, so I needed to know what was going on before I left to go meet my baby. If Pop saw something in him,

then it was definitely something there. He never spoke out the side of his neck, saying shit just to be saying it. Pop wasn't a man of many words unless he saw something that needed to be spoken on.

“Shy, I'm proud of you for acknowledging your faults and making things right with Brittany, reassuring her that she is still the woman you love. Sometimes we hurt our women without even realizing it. She probably already felt a way that she didn't get pregnant as quickly as everyone around her, which could have made her feel inadequate. We have to be careful how we address our concerns and be sure to do it in a loving way. Just like we internalize a lot, some women do as well. I truly believe Brittany and Lexi are two of those women. They keep their true feelings hidden a lot, because verbalizing them makes it real.”

I lowered my head as I thought about Shavozz. She was definitely that way also. Just his words made me realize that I probably needed to try to make her say what was bothering her and assure her that she could trust me not to fly off the handle. I knew it had something to do with her ex-husband. I couldn't understand how niggas got an attitude over being forced to take care of their kids. How in the hell did that even make sense?

No one should have to force a man into taking care of kids he helped create. Excuses were bullshit, and they all stank. It didn't matter what the woman did. He could still take care of his kids. There was no logical excuse to be a financial deadbeat. Shavozz was a good woman. She wasn't tricking off money or neglecting her boys. She was everything to them.

When I looked back up at Pop, he was staring right at me. I wasn't sure what else he'd said, but Axton stood and hugged him. Everyone followed suit except Jamel. He accepted Pop into his life, but he was close to our dad, whereas I was a mama's boy. I supposed because I was older, I just wanted to make sure she was good. I saw all the hurt Dad put her through, and it made me cling to her even more.

Jamel took our dad in, trying to help him get clean. There was no way in hell I would have taken him in. A snowball in

hell had a better chance than he did with me. I loved him, but I loved him from a distance... like from here to Antarctica. Whenever Mama and I went to visit Jamel in Houston, he sent Dad to one of his friends' houses. Being around him often made my skin crawl, even after he'd gotten clean. I couldn't lose the images of him when he was high or fiending for his next hit.

I stood from my seat and dapped and hugged him. "You need to talk to me?" Pop asked.

"I need to talk to Shavozz. What you said made me realize that she internalizes a lot too. I could tell she was bothered this evening when she got back from Lake Charles. So I kind of zoned out for a bit while you were talking."

"Oh, okay. Just make sure you handle her gently. If she doesn't want to talk, don't try to force her to. She'll come around in her time."

"Thanks, Pop."

I made my way back to my seat and ordered a drink to get the sensitivity off me. As I sat, Ali and Seneca made their way back up... both with frowns on their faces. Shyrón stood and immediately went to them before they could get to us. "I wonder what's up with them?" Chad voiced, then got up and went over to them.

I knew he was still paranoid about all that bullshit going on with him. They'd filed a lawsuit against the FBI. Who in the fuck did that and got away with it? Plus, Lexi was due to deliver in a couple of months. His plate was full. He was working with Ali occasionally, so it was just as much his business as it was theirs. When I noticed Jamel at the bar, I went to him and said, "Was Pop right?"

He turned to me with a smirk on his lips and shrugged. I gave him a one-cheeked smile. If Pop wasn't right, he would have said so. Silence was always a confirmation in my book. "So Arrow was right then. Why don't you just go back home?"

“I already missed her performance. She’ll perform again tomorrow night.”

“Does she even know?”

“I haven’t said two words to her. We seem to make eye contact, because I’m always front and center when she dances. Last weekend, she danced to ‘Shake’ by Trina. I almost blasted off in my fucking drawz. You know how some of them strippers look like they just get up there and twerk and shit? Not her. She has a routine every time. Her routine to that shit was so damn fire. She doesn’t do lap dances, and she doesn’t come off the stage. I don’t know how I’m gon’ talk to her without feeling and looking like a fucking stalker.”

“I mean... you wanna talk to her or not?” I asked with a shrug.

“I’ll just fiend from the audience. If she’s interested, she’ll come to me. She knows access to her is practically nonexistent. I’m almost sure she has a security guard to walk her out at night. She makes a grip, and my ass get all possessive and shit when I hear other niggas talking about how fine she is. This shit finna drive me insane, bruh. I swore I was about to hem some nigga up when he was talking about how fat her pussy looked.”

“Maybe you should stop going, bruh. If you aren’t going to approach her, you spinning your wheels. Why don’t you find out if she does private parties or anything like that? Maybe somebody can give you her number or something.”

“That’s a good idea. I’ma try that.”

He took a sip of the drink the bartender set in front of him, and before I could leave to go back to my seat, my phone had chimed. Pulling it from my pocket, I saw a message from Shavozz. *Can you stay with me tonight?*

That goes without saying, baby. You good?

Yes.

She was bothered. I knew that much. We’d discussed me coming over after I left the fellas, but not me staying

overnight. After I fell off in her pussy, I wouldn't be fit to go anywhere else anyway... not even home.

WHEN SHE OPENED THE DOOR, I COULD SEE THE SLIGHT puffiness in her eyes. She'd been crying. That brought my anger as well as my sensitivity to the forefront. "Hey, baby," she whispered as I walked inside.

As soon as she closed the door behind me, I pulled her in my arms. "What's going on? I can see you've been crying."

"Elvis is just such a jackass. Tray didn't want to go, and he threatened to call the courts saying I was filling his kids' minds with bullshit about him, filing a countersuit. I've never talked bad about him in front of them. They aren't blind. Tray knows what's going on. He's seventeen years old. What the fuck?"

"Don't pay that nigga any mind. If anything, he's going to incriminate himself. He has no proof of that. Ain't no judge gon' wanna hear that shit. You just keep being the great mother you are and watch him put the nail in his own coffin."

That weak muthafucka got on my damn nerves. I wanted to just fuck him up one good time. That was who I should've let Ali handle for me. Seeing Shavozz like this hurt my soul. I kissed her head, and she tilted her head back and gave me her lips. "Thank you, DJ. I hate I let him get me all riled up like this. I just want him to do right by our kids. That's all. Is that too much to ask for?"

"Naw, it ain't. It shouldn't be something you have to ask for. What can I do to make you feel better, baby? To put your mind at ease," I asked softly as I slid my fingertips over her cheek.

When her hand gently gripped my dick through my sweats, I knew we were on the same page. I wanted to fill her with so much dick until she lost all train of thought. I stooped and picked her up, going to her bedroom to give her everything she desired. Once I walked inside, I set her on her feet. She went

to take off her glasses, but I stopped her. “Leave them on. Just like you have a fetish with my bottom grill, I have a fetish with them glasses on yo’ sexy ass.”

She shivered, and that shit was so sexy too. Seeing the effect I had on her always turned me on even more. “Take them clothes off, Vozz. When I get to you, I don’t want nothing hindering me from getting to that juicy ass pussy.”

“Damn, baby. Say less,” she said through labored breathing.

She stripped her clothes off, wasting no time to position herself in the middle of the bed. I bit my bottom lip as I took off my clothes, then approached the bed and said, “Let me get right there. You know how I like to eat that shit when we in the bed.”

She went to her knees with an evil grin on her face. I lay in the bed, and she didn’t show an ounce of hesitancy when she straddled me and slid that pussy to my lips. “DJ, with the way I’m feeling, I might drown yo’ ass tonight.”

“Mm. Then I’ll die happy. Tell my mama I love her.”

I could tell she wanted to laugh, but she was too turned on to do so. She lowered that fat shit to my lips, and I gripped her ass, forcefully grinding her pussy all over my face. Her taste was something I craved on a daily basis. Since I couldn’t get it every day, I tried to eat her out of a house and home when I did. Her moaning my name always provided the motivation I needed to suck her clit until it caved a dent in her forehead. I aimed to please, and I would stop at nothing to make sure she was totally satisfied.

“Deee Jaaaaaay! Fuck!”

Her thighs were trembling on my ears as her creamy goodness invaded my mouth, satisfying my taste buds. To show her just how satisfied I was, I began my neck roll, slowly at first. She really began grinding on my face as I slapped her ass, encouraging her to ride my shit into the sunset. When I quickened my pace, she began squirting all over me. I loved when she did that. She fell off me, totally spent already.

“Naw, Vozz. You ain’t came enough yet.”

I went to my knees and rolled her to her back, spreading her legs. Descending to her fountain once again, I inserted my middle finger in her ass. It was nice and lubed up for me too. I lowered my head as I pulled my finger out and slowly tongue kissed her ass. Every inch of her was mine to devour, and I had no plans of stopping until I was full. She brought her hand to her pussy and began flicking her clit back and forth until I moved her hand.

“This my show. You just lay there and enjoy it,” I said, coming up for air.

My beard was still dripping with her goodness, but I wanted that shit so wet until I had to wring her juices out of it. I went to her bud and sucked it between my lips, giving it the attention she needed, showing her why I was a nasty ass Q by flicking my tongue over it. I could feel the tremble in her legs and knew she was about to cum again. I stopped and went to her nipples, sucking them one at a time, teasing her until she was begging me to give her the dick.

“DJ... pleeeeeease, baby.”

“Please what?”

“Fuck me.”

I sat up and thrust my dick inside of her, causing her to cum immediately. My upward curve was perfect for her G-spot. The head of my dick touched it in every stroke. Satisfaction guaranteed was my motto, and I was sure to make sure she knew that every chance I got. Hovering over her, I kissed her nastily as she gripped my beard, keeping me close. I lowered my head to her neck as I kissed, licked, sucked, and gently bit her flesh.

She wrapped her thick ass legs around my waist and threw the pussy back at me as I began gutting out her insides. Her screams were music to my ears, and her scratches were pleasing to my ego. “DJ! Oh my God!”

Shortly after her calling on the Lord, she came violently. She had to have drawn blood. That only propelled me forward,

pushing her knees to her head and fucking her cervix up. She said she didn't want any more kids, so I might as well take that shit out. "Ahh, fuck!" I voiced as I watched her opening spasm around me.

"Let me have all that shit, Vozz. I got plenty of energy left in me, so you might as well get as many nuts as you can."

I slowed my stroke, watching the cream that coated my shaft and moaned at just how good that shit looked. Withdrawing my dick from her depths, I eased it to her asshole. We'd tried this before, and I knew the only time I could really get the reaction I wanted from her was when she was horny as fuck and on the verge of passing out.

Before I could push it inside, she said, "Wait! Let me suck it first."

That halted me quick as hell, because I loved seeing her thick lips gliding over me. I could usually hold my nut off for a while, but not when she gave me head. I had no damn restraint when her tongue slid against it. None. When I went to my knees, she laid in front of me and slurped my dick into her mouth like she had a vitamin D deficiency. Allowing my head to drop back, I released a satisfying groan, then grabbed ahold of her auburn-colored hair.

The sexiest part was that she still had her glasses on. They'd slid to the tip of her nose. She stared up at me as I breached her throat canal repeatedly. I swore I wanted to cum all over her beautiful face. "Shavozz, let me cum on your face."

She didn't verbally respond, so I didn't know what she would do. I had made my desires known though. I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to let this moment last as long as possible, but again, there was nothing I could do to prolong my nut with this type of behavior. She was sucking the skin off my shit, and my body had begun trembling. The moment she released my dick and rolled to her back, I unloaded all over her... from her face to her titties, and to her stomach.

When I felt her slide closer to me and put her mouth on my balls, that caused even more to shoot out of me. "Vozz, fuck!"

Once my body was done excreting its flavors, I went to the bathroom and got a wet towel to clean her up. Upon my return, I watched her lick the cum from her lips and rub what was on her breasts into her skin. *Jesus*. She was such a freak. Slowly taking off her glasses, she licked the lenses. “You just gon’ stand there and watch, DJ, or are you going to come give me some more?”

“Mm. You know I’m always down for a do over. I told you, I got plenty of energy. I just like watching you be nasty.”

I started some music on my phone, playing “Hoodie” by Ari Lennox, because I knew she loved that song. I think she loved it mainly because I often wore hoodies. When it first came out, she used to say all the time, *Can I be in that hoodie? I’m tryna play in that hoodie*. The moment it started, she said, “Bring yo’ ass on, DJ. Let me cum on that big ass dick again.”

I smiled slightly, because she knew that kind of talk would have me in savage mode in seconds. I put my phone back on the dresser. “Keep on, and I’m gon’ be fucking you and letting cum get in your eyes. Last time your vision was cloudy for two days. This time it’s gon’ be a week.”

I wiped her face and took her glasses from her, setting them on her nightstand. When I went back to her, she immediately grabbed me by the dick. “How dare he lay here like he tired.”

I licked my lips as she pulled him into her mouth. She knew it didn’t take long for him to be ready for action. All she had to do was spread her legs. “Mm hmm. You know how he roll. Just say you wanted to suck the excellence out of him again.”

Pulling it from her mouth, I flipped her over and slid right into home plate. Watching her cream on me that quickly activated beast mode. I straddled her legs and fucked her until the sweat was dripping down my face and chest. Amidst her screams of passion, I thought about our future. I knew I could one day have this with her for the rest of my life, making her my wife.

This woman just did it for me. There was nothing her nasty ass wouldn't do for me and that was something I didn't have a problem reciprocating. I would move Earth to make sure she was happy, which was why I would be taking a trip to Lake Charles with her to pick up the boys. Elvis wouldn't get away with fucking up her mental ever again... not on my watch.

S havozz

AFTER I'D SOAKED FOR AN HOUR OR SO, I'D GOTTEN DRESSED, and DJ and I headed to Louisiana to get the boys. That man had worn me the hell out Friday night and last night. Although he had to work yesterday, the minute he got off, he came right back to me. We took a shower together, and he killed me within its confines. Every hole in me needed a fucking break. I literally wanted to root him on like I was Lil Wayne. *Go DJ! 'Cause that's my DJ.*

He was always top tier in his performance, but this weekend was one for the record books. Just when I thought he couldn't get any nastier, he surprised me. The way he slurped up my fountain when I squirted only made the stream last longer with even more pressure behind it. That neck roll nearly took me out a couple of times this weekend. I still couldn't focus long enough to hold a conversation with him.

He only smirked when I would zone out or fall asleep on him. Lake Charles wasn't but an hour away, and I couldn't even stay awake long enough to make it there. However, when we got to our meeting spot at Steamboat Bill's, I noticed Elvis hadn't arrived yet. Usually, he beat me here, so that put me on high alert. I called Tray's phone, and it went straight to voicemail. That was even more unusual. He always answered his phone.

I began shaking my leg as I waited for a little bit before calling back. I could feel DJ's gaze on me, but he didn't say anything. Glancing down at my phone when it chimed, I saw a text from Talisha. I huffed because I thought it was Tray. I tried calling again only to suffer the same fate. The last person I wanted to call was Elvis, but I didn't have a choice. Dalen had forgotten his phone at home. I called him, and his phone rang then eventually went to voicemail.

"Where the fuck are they?" I said under my breath.

"You good, baby?"

I shook my head rapidly. Turning to him, I said, "I'm trying not to panic. They are normally here before I get here. Tray's phone is going straight to voicemail like either the battery is dead, or he powered it down. Elvis isn't answering his phone."

He slid his hand to my thigh and stroked it slowly. "Let's give them a little more time before you go into panic mode. Okay?"

I nodded, doing my best to do as he suggested, but my gut was telling me that something was all the way fucked up. I didn't tell DJ, but Elvis even had some stupid shit to say about him. He was begging me to go back to him, saying that DJ couldn't love me like he did. He was really on bullshit with that one and I let him know that shit when I cursed his ass out. He was talking about how he wanted us to be a family again. *Tuh! Nigga Please.* DJ couldn't love me like he did, because his way of showing love was skewed as hell. My man was so above that. DJ was the damn prototype for how a man was supposed to love a woman.

If anything had happened to my kids, I was gonna hang Elvis by his stumpy ass dick for all of Lafayette to see. While I didn't think he would physically hurt them, I didn't want them to be traumatized emotionally by whatever it was he was attempting to do. I wanted to call Rondo, but I didn't want to put him on a rampage just yet. DJ continued rubbing my thigh, trying to ease the tension that was building.

After ten more minutes of me sitting here panicking, I called Elvis again, and he clearly sent me to voicemail. The phone only rang twice. “If this muthafucka is trying to keep my boys from me, it’s gon’ be hell to pay. DJ, why this nigga doing this to me?”

“Because he’s just that... a sorry ass nigga. You wanna drive to Lafayette?”

“Let me call my brother first.”

He nodded as I clicked on Rondo’s number. “What’s up, Vozz? You picking up the boys?”

“He hasn’t shown up. He’s nearly thirty minutes late, and he’s not answering his phone. Tray’s phone is going straight to voicemail.”

“Do you have your custody agreement with you?”

“Always. I keep it in my glovebox.”

“Good. I’m finna go by his house to see if they are still there. In the meantime, make your way here.”

“I am. He done fucked with me for the last time. I know Tray and Dalen are about to have a fit.”

“Hell yeah. We ride for our niggas, and I’ll go to war for those boys.”

“Don’t do anything that’s gonna land you in jail, baby. We’ll be there in an hour or less.”

“A’ight.”

I ended the call and realized DJ was already getting on the highway, heading east. “I’m so sorry, baby. I know you had to get back. I just can’t let that muthafucka take my boys. I can’t live without them.”

The tears had started to fall as he slid his hand to mine. “Those boys are special to me too. You have no reason to apologize. Like Rondo said, I’ll go to war for them too.”

I nodded and swallowed hard then looked at Talisha’s message. It simply read, *I’m sorry and you’re right. I miss you.*

I couldn't text her right now. I had a more pressing issue. My mind was in disbelief that he would do something like this. It didn't even make sense. He didn't want to pay child support, but he wanted to keep them? He was getting off easy by paying child support. *Stupid*. How could I be such a fool to choose a nigga like him? I was stubborn and naïve, a horrible combination. *Everybody* tried to warn me, but I wouldn't listen. I was grown and knew what the fuck I was doing. He was Tray's father and the man I loved.

I didn't regret my children, not one bit, but I regretted that he was their father. He had no excuse to be this trifling. As far as I knew, Elvis had a great childhood. He came from a two-parent household, and there was never any gossip floating around about his parents. They did their best by him and his sister. However, he decided to grow up and become a fuck boy. I supposed that was the only thing he was good at. Shiiiiid, he wasn't that great at *that* if I were honest with myself. Love had me settling for mediocre dick. He was my first, and I didn't know any better. By the time I had experienced greater, I was in love with his pathetic ass.

“DJ, I'm scared.”

“I know, baby. But rest assured, we gon' get them back. I'm not gonna tell you not to worry, because I know that's almost an impossible feat for a mother. My mama always worried about us, even when things were going well. I will say that everything will be fine. Just know that I'm here to comfort and console you and be there every step of the way.”

I lifted his hand to my lips and kissed it. He had to be pushing ninety miles per hour, because we were zooming past everyone. Just as I thought about Rondo, he called back. “Hello?”

“They weren't at his house. Once you get here, we can call the police. I'm gon' kill his ass.”

“Not if I get to him first. DJ and I are about thirty minutes away.”

“Oh, I finally get to meet him. A'ight. See y'all when you get here. Be careful.”

“Okay.”

I ended the call, and DJ gave me a reassuring smile. “Rondo was the one who told me I needed to do what I could to get you back. I felt the same way, but after you blocked me, I was about to give up. He wouldn’t let me. He said that if I was as depressed as I was about losing you, then I shouldn’t let you go so easily. He was right.”

“Wise man. Can’t wait to meet him.”

I sat back in my seat, and my mind went right back to my babies. I was more than sure that they were physically fine, but I wouldn’t rest until I could lay my eyes on them to confirm that.

“DJ, THIS IS MY BROTHER RONDO. RONDO, THIS IS DJ,” I said, introducing them.

They slapped hands like they’d known one another forever. I hadn’t even mentioned their shared interests, because I knew I would be completely forgotten once they met. We were waiting on the police to arrive. We’d just gotten to my mother’s house and had yet to go inside. I called the police as soon as we got here. Rondo was outside when we got here.

“Yo, you frat?” DJ asked.

I knew it would only be a matter of time before he saw the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity brand on Rondo’s back window. I made my way to the porch as Rondo started barking. *Here we go.* When I walked up the steps, I heard Rondo say, “You wrong as two left shoes, Vozz! You knew all this time and didn’t say nothing!”

I chuckled for a second as I walked in the house. “Mama!”

“I’m in the kitchen, baby.”

When I walked in, I saw her at the stove, doing one of the things she did best: cooking. I sniffed the aroma and

immediately knew she was making gumbo. “Hey, Mama. It smells good.”

She turned to me and gave me a soft smile. “Have you heard anything yet?”

I shook my head as she made her way to me and hugged me tightly. “I would have never guessed that Elvis would do something like this.”

“Me either. I talked to Tray this morning, and he said they were having a good time, but that he couldn’t wait to see me and DJ. There was no indication that something was wrong. My babies have to know that they are supposed to be home with me. They would have never left with Elvis freely, not like this.”

“I know, baby. Have you tried calling him again?”

“About fifteen minutes ago. Still no answer. Tray’s phone is still going straight to voicemail.”

“Vozz! The police are here!” Rondo yelled.

Mama lowered the fire on the gumbo and followed me to the porch. I rolled my eyes when I saw the two white police officers. I would be better off going to look for my own babies. These white Louisiana cops were the worst. Hopefully, I was simply stereotyping them and wouldn’t have to worry about them brushing off my claims like they weren’t serious. They looked fairly young, so maybe I lucked up with cops that actually gave a damn.

“Hello, Ms. Simpson. We understand you want to file charges or make a complaint.”

“Yes, sir. My ex-husband gets our kids every other weekend. On the Sunday of his weekend, we meet in Lake Charles for me to get the kids. He was a no-show. He won’t answer my calls, and my son’s phone is going straight to voicemail. We also went by his house, and they weren’t there.”

“Okay. Do you have a copy of the custody agreement?”

“Yes, sir.”

I walked over to my car and got them out of the glovebox. I was grateful that we'd driven my car instead of coming out here in DJ's car as he originally suggested. He'd wanted to fill my car up with gas so I would be ready for the week and park it. I convinced him that we could just fill up when we got back. I grabbed the agreement and made my way back to the officers and gave it to them. As they perused the documents, DJ put his arm around me, pulling me close.

I could feel the tremble go through me as fear went through my entire being. What if there was nothing they could do? What if Elvis had skipped town with my babies? I buried my face into DJ and cried my eyes out. I couldn't lose my boys. Elvis was a pitiful excuse for a man to put me through this. I was a good mother. I tried my hardest to take care of my boys. For the past month, it had been without his help, financially. How could he do this to me?

"Ma'am, according to these documents, you were awarded custody of the children, so you can file charges against him for parental kidnapping. However, we can't file those charges until tomorrow. As long as you have the kids back today, he wouldn't have violated any laws, because it's his weekend. The time restraints are those that the two of you verbally agreed to."

"So basically, there's nothing I can do today?"

"No, ma'am. I apologize. I'm aware this is probably devastating to you. Let us get some information about him and the children from you."

I allowed the tears to escape me as I walked closer to their squad cars to give them the information they needed, with DJ by my side. While talking, my phone chimed with a text message. I quickly grabbed it just in case it was Elvis or Tray, only to see it was Talisha again. I wanted to roll my eyes, but I didn't. She'd been a good friend to me. I'd respond to her whenever I got done.

DJ gently rubbed my back as I told the officers everything I knew about Elvis and my kids that would be pertinent to them finding them. I was only hoping that Elvis came to his

senses and came back with my boys today. Otherwise, his ass would be locked up for sure, because I would want him punished to the full extent of the law.

D J

“I’M IN LAFAYETTE WITH SHAVOZZ, MAMA. HER EX TOOK HER boys.”

“Oh my God! How is she holding up?”

“The same way you would be if Dexter had taken us. She reminds me so much of you with the way she takes care of them. It’s one of the things I admire most about her.”

“God, it would have killed me.”

“We’ve gone driving around town, hoping to stumble on them. They can’t legally file charges until tomorrow. So I called my job and put in for a few vacation days. Her brother is about to take me to the store to get a couple of changes of clothes.”

“Okay, baby. Let Shavozz know that she’s in my thoughts and prayers, along with the boys.”

“I will, Ma. Love you.”

“Love you more.”

I ended the call and thought to myself about if that had happened to us when we were young. I would’ve beaten the shit out of Dexter until he took me back to my mama. I was more than sure Tray was feeling the same way. I almost hoped that he would safely take matters into his own hands.

I set my empty bowl on the countertop and said, “Ms. Cheryl, I can’t wait to get a second bowl when I come back. That was so good.”

“Thank you. Your bowl will be there waiting on you, sha.”

Her thick Louisiana accent made me smile. She was warm and welcoming, just like my mama had been to Shavozz. Because of my family roots, I knew the word sha was a term of endearment, kind of like calling someone baby. My dad’s mother was from southwest Louisiana. When I walked in the front room where Rondo and Shavozz were talking, he stood. “You ready, frat?”

“Yeah. That way I can get back to my baby.”

He turned his lip up as Shavozz pushed him. I laughed at their interaction. Although she said she had another brother and two sisters, I could clearly tell that Rondo was the one closest to her. I kissed her lips then followed him outside. He said he would take me to Burlington’s to find some clothes that wouldn’t break the bank. I only chuckled at him but appreciated him at the same time. Once we were in his ride, which had our fraternity brand on the back window, he sat quietly for a moment. I was surprised Shavozz had never mentioned to either of us that we were frat.

Suddenly, he hit the steering wheel with so much force, I thought he’d broken his hand. I frowned slightly as he turned to me and said, “I didn’t want to lose it in front of my sister, but if I didn’t have a daughter to look after and be here for, I would risk it all and go find that muthafucka. I stay strapped, and I been needing a reason to use that shit.”

I nodded, glad that I wasn’t the only one pretending to keep it together. “I thought I was the only one trying to stay in pocket. Niggas like him are a disgrace. How you give the mother of your children a hard time about pulling your own weight? Vozz is a good mother. If she were trifling, I wouldn’t even be with her.”

“You know how he do that? Because he don’t value his fucking life. He’s an ignant muthafucka that his parents *got* to be ashamed of. His sister is doing her thing as an occupational

therapist, and he just been a bum ass nigga from day one. I would never make Voxx feel guilty about her life choices, but she could've done way better than his ass."

I nodded again, in total agreement with what he said. He continued. "And that ho, Talisha? That's another bitch she need to let go. Her ass was out here a couple of days ago, and I saw her with Elvis. Oh shit! I bet her ass know something!"

My mouth damn near hit the floor. "Hol' on! What the fuck you say?"

"Yeah, you fucking heard me right. I planned to tell Voxx the other day, but my job had a nigga with his balls to the wall. I tried calling her this weekend, but I assume somebody had her busy. Ugh! After what happened today, it slipped my mind."

I chuckled at his theatrics, but my insides were boiling. "That scandalous bitch. She did everything in her power to break me and Shavozz up. You think she fucking him?"

"Naw. You seen that bitch? She might be sucking his dick though. I think it's something more cynical and diabolical going on."

"Well turn this shit around and get back to Voxx. I can go to Walmart if need be. She needs to know this right now."

He whipped his car around so fast, the nigga nearly gave me whiplash. Knowing that bitch may have had something to do with this made me glad about what I did. I wished I would have let Ali go further and pull out all the fucking stops. Before we could get back, Shavozz was calling. "Hello?"

"Y'all ain't gon' believe this shit!"

"Save it for when I get in there. We about to turn in the driveway because Rondo got some shit to tell you too."

"Fuck! It must be the same fucking thing."

She ended the call before I could respond, so I turned to him and said, "I think she knows."

He slowly shook his head as he turned in the driveway. Shavozz and her mother were on the porch, and her mother

looked as angry as she did. I hopped out of his car and made my way to her, pulling her in my arms. “That stupid bitch!” she screamed.

Rondo came to the porch and said, “I’m sorry I didn’t think about that shit while the police were here, but I saw her out here a couple of days ago. I tried to call and tell you this weekend, but you didn’t call me back. I surely didn’t wanna leave that kind of shit on your voicemail.”

She cut her eyes at him as she pulled away from me, but she didn’t seem to be angry about his explanation. She was pissed about the situation and how Talisha had betrayed her and the boys. “She said they were going to fucking Mississippi. He planned to head to Georgia in the morning. That fucking lunatic! Why in the fuck did either of them think they would get away with this?”

“Did you call the police, baby?”

“Yes. When I read her text message, I wanted to go through the phone and strangle her ass. She said that she knew where Elvis was, and I called her immediately. That stupid ho!”

“Did she give you an explanation?” Rondo asked.

“This bitch had the audacity to say that Elvis had changed his ways and he was trying to get my attention, but I was so wrapped up in DJ, I wouldn’t give him a second thought. She said he wasn’t supposed to take it this far. Friday morning he clued her in as to what he was planning to do and she tried talking him out of it. After all the shit he put me through, there is no way I would give his ass so much as a casual conversation. I’m willing to bet that they’ve slept together, because why would she keep that kind of information from me?”

“Did you ask her that?” I inquired.

“Yes. She had the nerve to say that I wouldn’t believe her if she would’ve said something. She full of shit. I hope they can file charges against her ass as well. When he crossed state lines, he escalated the shit. He’s facing a fucking felony now.”

We were all on edge but fell silent as we waited for the police to update Shavozz. They were communicating with the Mississippi State Department to get his ass in custody and return the kids to Shavozz. We were about to head inside when Shavozz's phone rang. She quickly answered on speakerphone. "Hello?"

"Mama! He took us to Mississippi! I called the police."

"How did you get his phone?"

"I hit him in the head with a lamp and knocked him out."

Ooooh shit! "Oh God, baby. Is he still alive?"

"Yes. He's breathing. The police are on their way, so hopefully, we'll be back soon."

"Tray, stay on the phone until the police get there, baby. I need to make sure you stay safe in case he wakes up before they get there."

"Don't worry, Mama. Dalen and I are heading to the lobby with our things."

"Okay. Hurry, baby, but don't hang up."

She released a huge sigh of relief. So did I. I was glad to hear from him. I was hoping he took things into his own hands. He proved that I hadn't misjudged him. He reminded me so much of myself when I was younger. I would do anything for my mama... to protect her and assure her that everything was going to be okay. Because of his actions, this would wrap up a lot sooner than I thought. Rondo gave me a nod, then slapped my hand. It was a silent acknowledgement of what we were both probably thinking.

Trayveon is going to be a good man, one that's going to protect his woman just like he looks out for his mom, even if it means sacrificing himself.

"He's coming!"

I heard Dalen yell through the phone. Shavozz was pacing back and forth as she yelled, "Get to the elevator, boys! Please!"

“Don’t worry, Mama. The doors just closed. We gon’ run straight to the desk where there’s a camera to record everything. We’re gonna be fine. Okay?”

“Okay, baby. I trust you, Tray.”

Just his words had calmed Shavozz. I listened to him soothe Dalen’s worries as well. But what made me smirk a bit was him saying to Dalen that he didn’t have a problem squaring up with Elvis to protect him. This boy had my heart so swole, but at the same time, I hated that he was even in this position to have to go against his father. Technically, he was no longer a boy. He’d become a man right before our eyes.

“The police are here, Mama.”

“Where’s Elvis?”

“Getting off the elevator.” There was some yelling in the background as we all gathered closer to Shavozz to listen. Then Tray said, “He took us from our mom. Police in Louisiana are looking for us.”

There was more talking in the background, then Tray said, “Mama, we’re safe. Dad is being cuffed. I’ll call you back as soon as I can. We love you.”

“I love you too, baby. We all love you. DJ, Uncle Rondo, and Grandma are waiting for your safe arrival. Kiss Dalen for me.”

“Okay. See y’all soon.”

When the call ended, Shavozz fell against me. She was totally spent, and I could imagine so. Her adrenaline was slowing down, and I knew she was gonna crash soon, or at least when she knew the boys were en route. I was just grateful that this didn’t have a different ending. I was willing to bet that Elvis wasn’t sleeping with Talisha. He was paying her, which was why he couldn’t pay his child support.

I would have never guessed that he would do something like this. However, it made sense why he was so amused when Shavozz and I weren’t getting along when I met him. He was orchestrating it all through Talisha, trying to get Shavozz back. It made me wonder if there were any conversations between

the two of them while we were apart for him to think there was even a chance that she would go back to him.

None of that justified his behavior though. He had to be a dumb muthafucka if he thought this was the answer. If he thought Shavozz would go running to him because he'd taken the boys, then he didn't know the woman he was once married to. She was stubborn, hardheaded at times, but she typically learned from her mistakes and bad decisions. He was a horrible decision in her life, and she'd gotten that lesson loud and clear. That was why she gave me such a hard time for trying to be with her. Talisha being in her ear didn't help.

All I knew was that I was prepared to take care of them for the rest of my life. Elvis was going to prison over some bullshit, and Shavozz would lose the financial assistance from him that she desperately needed. She would just have to rely on a new source. I would be moving them in with me... no question.

S havozz

THE WAY I HUGGED MY BOYS WHEN THEY GOT TO MY MAMA'S house was one of relief, love, and fear. Wondering if I'd ever see them again had me a nervous wreck. It took the authorities two days to get them to me. I was pissed, because I expected to see them in six hours tops. They were in Jackson, which was less than four hours away. I wanted to drive to them, but they told me to stay put, because they would be transporting them. *Lying asses.*

However, when they got there and I'd loved on them, we ate leftover gumbo then headed back to Beaumont. They'd missed two days of school, and I didn't want them to fall any further behind than they already had. The rest of the week was filled with calls from the authorities in Louisiana as well as counselors for the boys.

Dalen seemed to be unfazed until Tray took matters into his own hands. He was a little traumatized by that. He thought Tray had killed their dad. Once Tray explained to him what had happened and why, he was able to grasp and understand the situation. However, he couldn't seem to get the mental pictures of his dad bleeding out of his head. I knew they loved their dad, but at that moment, Tray had to choose. I didn't want him to make a difference between me and his dad, so I hoped he'd chosen right over wrong versus me over Elvis.

I didn't work at all this week, and we'd stayed with DJ at his place. He vowed to all of us that he would be there for us. Once the boys had gotten situated in a bedroom of their choosing, DJ privately asked me to move in with him. I was grateful he didn't ask in front of the boys, because they would have been all for it, right away, without thought. He knew how my mind worked, and I appreciated him for respecting that.

I didn't need to think about it though. He'd proven time and time again that he could be trusted with my heart. He wasn't Elvis or anything like him. Even though I still had work to do on myself, God had chosen to bless me in spite of. DJ, Dexter Dent Junior, was everything I needed and longed for. That was why we spent all day yesterday moving into his home... what he now called *our* home. The boys were beyond excited, especially Tray. He loved DJ.

It was Sunday, and we were now headed to the Berotte's house for Sunday dinner. I had already established a relationship with everyone, especially the women, but it would be the boys first time meeting them. At first, I was nervous, but I quickly calmed that down. Everyone would be accepting of them just like they were of me. Just knowing that I had all their prayers when Elvis took the boys was comforting and made me feel loved and accepted as family.

When DJ turned in the driveway, Dalen got excited. Although it was a little cool, there was smoke coming from the backyard, and I could see a football being thrown. Tray's eyes had brightened as well. DJ quickly exited the vehicle and walked around to open my door. When he did, Dalen held out his hand to help me from my seat. The boys were doing everything DJ did. I was grateful that he was a great example for them to follow. There wasn't a time that I opened a door when either of them were around.

We led them to the backyard where Chad, Dylan, Isaiah, and Axton were in a game of two on two. Shy was refereeing, I suppose. I slowly shook my head because it seemed like they were doing more noise talking than actual playing. "Oh! Another bruh is here! We gon' take y'all *easy*!" Chad yelled.

I slowly shook my head as I noticed the smile on Tray's face. I introduced them to Shy as their uncle and that only produced more smiles. The minute Mr. Sheldon came outside, he smiled and immediately introduced himself to the boys. "What's up, boys? I'm PaPa. At least that's what my grandbaby Mariena tries to call me. My name is Sheldon."

"I like PaPa. We don't have one. We have a grandpa though," Dalen said.

Mr. Sheldon shook his hand, then slapped Tray's hand. Tray looked shocked that he was as cool as he was. "If PaPa is this cool, then I know I'm gon' love this family."

Everyone laughed as he told Mr. Sheldon his name. Once we went inside, we introduced them to the ladies and babies, but DJ saved his mama for last. "Guys, this is my mama, Anissa, or you can call her whatever you want."

"You're beautiful," Tray said, surprising me and DJ.

I giggled when I saw her blushing. It was cute. "Aww, thank you. You must be Trayveon."

"Yes, ma'am. Everyone calls me Tray."

She hugged him, and I swore his cheeks reddened too. He had a thing for older women? I was gon' have to find out. This boy couldn't be crushing on the woman that would be his grandma. I wasn't at all comfortable with him liking older women. Most older women only wanted younger men for one reason and one reason only. After Mrs. Anissa introduced herself to Dalen, she hugged him and said to us, "The food will be ready in just a minute. Well, maybe more like fifteen minutes."

"Okay," I responded.

I hugged her and kissed her cheek as Ms. Yolanda walked in the kitchen to help her. Before DJ and the boys went back outside, DJ said, "Oh! I forgot to tell you that Jamel won't be here today. He took a job out of town tomorrow, so he's heading to Shreveport this evening."

"Aww, okay. Hopefully I'll talk to him later then."

Once they headed outside, I went to the front room to play with the babies. Lexi looked to be in so much pain though. “Lexi! You okay?”

She shook her head rapidly as everyone crowded around her. Within a minute or so, her facial expression eased and she released air like she was holding her breath.

“I think it’s Braxton Hicks, but we’re gonna wait and see if it happens again and how far apart the contractions are. How far along are you again?” Alexz asked.

“Thirty-two weeks,” Lexi said breathlessly. “It happened once last week too. Chad was ready to go to the hospital. I nearly fell to the floor when it happened. My doctor wants me to make it to thirty-eight weeks.”

“Are you dilated any yet?”

“Yes. They may put me on bedrest. I have an appointment tomorrow. I was only one centimeter, but if I get to two, he’s going to sit me down for a while. Honestly, I’ll be happy about it. My feet are swollen and hurt most days, and I always have indigestion, not to mention all this weight I’ve gained. This lil boy is gonna be a handful, just like his father.”

As if he could hear her, Chad started barking loudly, and shortly after, it got louder because Axton and DJ had joined him. We all burst into laughter as Lexi rubbed her belly and shook her head. It didn’t help when Mariena started barking right along with them. “I don’t know how you deal with his loud ass,” Alexz said and rolled her eyes.

“He’s only like that around y’all. With me, he’s sweet and soft like a teddy bear. He cracks jokes a lot, but he isn’t nearly this loud.”

“Well, shock my drawz. I’m about to go out there and fix his ass.”

We all chuckled as we watched Alexz stomp to the back door. Chad was only going to pick her up and run around with her. She loved that as much as he did. That was why she gave him such a hard time. He wasn’t nearly the man I met months

ago when he'd gotten shot. There was a light inside of him that showed through his eyes. He seemed so dark back then.

After I heard her yelling at him, then scream, I knew he'd grabbed her. Those two stayed arguing about something, but from what I heard, it used to be ten times worse. All these babies had softened everyone up. Skyler was holding her daughter Mariena, who I believed was a little over a year old, and Brittany had Alexz's baby, Ariana. The triplets were napping, and I was sure that Joyy was grateful for the reprieve.

When Alexz returned breathing hard, we all chuckled. Before anyone could mention it, Brittany said, "I need all of you to pray, wish me good luck, good vibes, whatever. I start taking my Clomid tomorrow. It's a low dose, but hopefully it does the trick. I want one of these to share with Shy. He deserves to be a father."

She ran her fingers over Ariana's hair as she stared at her longingly. "I don't know about all that, but you deserve to be a mother," Alexz said jokingly as Brittany gave her the side-eye. "Don't worry, sis. It's gonna happen. You and Shy gon' end up with more babies than you can handle. If you need a stronger prescription, then so be it, but it will happen. Okay?"

Brittany nodded as Mrs. Anissa joined us. She had all of us stand and surround Brittany. She said a prayer that had all the hair on my arms standing at attention. I felt every powerful word of it. I was grateful that it seemed DJ's mother possessed a direct line to the King, because I was more than sure that I would need it soon as well.

I KNOCKED ON HER DOOR HARD AS HELL AND COVERED THE peephole. "Who is it?"

I refused to answer, because I knew her ass wouldn't open the door. She flung the door open with all the attitude in the world, and I punched her right in her shit and pushed my way inside. "Who the fuck do you take me for, bitch?"

I swung again, knocking her to the floor. “Shavozz! Stop! He promised me the boys wouldn’t be involved!”

I straddled her and punched her in her head a couple of times, choosing not to even respond to her last statement. Hurting me was hurting them. “If you thought I wasn’t coming for yo’ ass after what you did, then you a stupid ass broad. You was already a dumb bitch to be in cahoots with Elvis. How much he pay you? Did you fuck him?”

She turned her head and spit out her tooth as she heaved. “Fifteen hundred. I didn’t sleep with him.”

That was the same amount he gave me every month for child support and Tray’s car note. “So my happiness and peace of mind is only worth fifteen hundred dollars to you? Bitch, I ought to kill yo’ ass!”

I grabbed her neck and started choking her ass while she tried to peel my fingers from around her neck. She’d fucked with the wrong one. When it came to my kids, I didn’t fucking play, and she knew that. I was passive as hell sometimes, but never with them. All this time, she’d pretended to be there for me, faking her loyalty, and she was helping Elvis. Everything I said about Elvis had probably gotten back to him. That was why he called me when DJ and I weren’t together, sounding all sympathetic and shit, asking if I was okay.

Her eyes were big and had begun watering, and my grip only tightened as I thought about all the shit that could have happened to my babies. When I felt an arm wrap around my waist and yank me from her, I was about to swing. I turned, fully expecting to see a stranger or even DJ, but I was surprised to see Ali.

I’d left Sunday dinner to “run an errand,” and he and Seneca had gotten there moments before that. When checking my text messages to answer Rondo, I saw Talisha’s thread, and I started reading that shit. It pissed me off all over again. When I left the Berotte’s, I’d kicked up plenty of dust as I sped away to get here. That was probably what had prompted Ali to follow me.

“Her ugly ass ain’t worth it,” he said in a low voice.

That shit sounded way more dangerous than when he sat at the table with us pretending to want someone to love. He carried me right out of her house and took me to DJ's car. "She trifling as fuck. Let a professional handle her ass."

"What are you doing here?"

"I followed you. You left like you were about to snap on somebody. I know the look. With all the shit that just went down, the last place you need to be is jail. Get out of here, and I'll make sure she keep this shit to herself. You and DJ gon' owe me big time before it's all said and done."

I took a deep breath and stared at my hands. They were bloody, so I would have to explain what happened. *Fuck!* I left in a blind rage and didn't think about how I would explain my actions if anyone found out. "Go to a convenience store and wash your hands in their bathroom. I'm sure most of that blood is hers. If you didn't have a job, I'd have to hire you to be on my team, girl."

I rolled my eyes and got in the car and headed to the nearest station. I wondered what Ali was about to do to her ass, but at the same time, I didn't care. My rage had overtaken me, and had he not shown up, I probably would have killed that bitch. Had Elvis so much as gotten in a wreck on the way to Jackson and my babies had gotten hurt, that shit would have been on her. Then Ali would have been playing cleanup, or Shy would have been defending me on murder charges, because she wouldn't have escaped what I had for her ass.

D J

“I’M ABOUT READY TO SCRATCH THE SKIN OFF MY HEAD, BRUH! I ain’t got no hair to pull out,” Chad said. “Lexi is on my last fucking nerve, but I’m doing my best to be understanding.”

“Well, you the one wanted to shoot the club up, so deal with it.”

He shot me the finger while we waited on our drinks. For once, I’d actually taken a lunch break. Everyone had looked at me like I was crazy when I said I was going to lunch. I needed it. Whenever I came to work, I could feel the depression like a cloud. All the boys were in counseling to help handle their grief. If I wasn’t careful, they’d suck me right into their state of depression. I couldn’t afford that.

I had a family to take care of now, and I took that role seriously. Things had been going well since they’d moved in. I was surprised when she agreed to move in as quickly as she did. I literally had to ask her to repeat herself. However, I’d met a new side of her Sunday. She told me she needed to go to the store for some feminine products while she was thinking about it. I had no reason to question her, so I gave her the keys.

Had I known she was going to two-piece Talisha, I would have gone along for the damn ride. She probably did everything I’d imagined myself doing to her ass. Ali told me

she knocked out two of her teeth. She came back with her hands all swollen and shit. I noticed that shit immediately, and Ali hadn't even called me yet. I frowned and pulled her to the side to ask her about it. When she told me what she'd done, my eyes widened in shock.

After she told me Ali had stopped her, I took her outside to talk to Shy. His eyebrows had risen in amusement. He assured us that if she pressed charges, he would handle it. I was almost sure that she wouldn't though, because Ali had stayed behind. I supposed it was a good thing that she still didn't know that Ali was fucking with her. She was more apt to listen to him since she liked him so much.

When the waitress brought out my grilled chicken salad, Chad frowned. Before he could even say anything, I said, "I actually have to go back to work, and I can't afford to be falling asleep because I done ate a damn steak. Must be nice to work when you feel like it."

"Nigga, quit tripping. I work a lot. It's just not strenuous. Quit hating," he said as he cut into his steak.

"So how's everything going with the case against the FBI?"

"Shy is still researching and getting ready for it. We have a couple of months before our preliminary court date. I just pray that the backlash isn't as serious as he's saying it could be. I have way more to lose now. You realize I'm finna be a dad?"

"Yeah. That shit is unbelievable. Are you going to propose to Lexi any time soon?"

He sighed. "Most likely. She's the one. I've known it for a while, even though I was trying to fight it. What about you? Shavozz and the boys have moved in, so you have to be a step closer to that, right?"

"I don't know. I wanna take things one step at a time. I don't wanna overwhelm her. I'd marry her tomorrow. However, I know my woman needs to adjust to her new normal first, although it feels like she's adjusting well."

"So what's the word on her ex?"

“He bonded out Monday. So he’s been out and about for two days. Rondo been itching to get at him.”

“You said he’s a bruh, right?”

“Yeah. He’s supposed to be coming to visit this weekend to hang out with us at Pour 09. We still on, right?”

“Yep. As far as I know. He sound like cool people.”

“He is.”

We continued catching up and talking about our women, then promised to holla at each other later. As I headed back to work, I called to check on Jamel. He was still in Shreveport on a job. I couldn’t help but notice Yolanda’s facial expression when I told Mama that he wouldn’t be there Sunday. I didn’t know if her ass was still reminiscing or if shit had popped off again recently, but I was about to find out.

“What’s up, nigga?” he said when he answered.

“What’s up? You on lunch?”

“Naw. Waiting on orders. Just sitting here listening to music.”

“I got a question for you. You fucked Yolanda again? She looked disappointed when I told Mama you weren’t coming.”

He took a deep breath, and I knew the bullshit was coming. “Not recently, but it did happen more than once. Maybe close to eight months ago. I didn’t wanna hear your mouth, so that was why I lied about it the first time. We ran into one another in a club in Houston, and we danced together. One thing led to another, and we ended up in my apartment with her ass climbing my walls while I was beating down *her* walls.”

“Mel, I didn’t need details. That was a yes or no question. I mean, what though? She fiending for your ass now?”

“Shit, I don’t know. I haven’t really talked to her, other than speaking whenever we cross paths when I come home. She hasn’t called me or anything.”

“You need to be as far away from her as possible at all times. If Mama suspects something, she gon’ end up finding

out.”

“Yeah, ’cause the mama’s boy gon’ probably fold and tell her.”

“Nigga, I’ll be a mama’s boy all day. That ain’t an insult. But I wouldn’t tell her. She gon’ see that shit all over Yolanda whenever you’re around, just like I saw the shit just at the mention of your name. I wouldn’t tell her because I know she’s gonna be hurt and angry.”

“Yeah, you right. I don’t wanna see her that way either. While I’m not a mama’s boy, I hate to see her hurt or upset. And lawd, don’t let a tear drop.”

“A’ight then. What’s up with ol’ girl from the club? You got a chance to see if she does private dances?”

“Naw. Ain’t nobody wanna talk to me about her. Everybody all tight lipped when it comes to her. I guess she wants to protect her real identity or something.”

“Yeah. Maybe her career depends on it. Her nine to five could depend on her staying anonymous. What if she a teacher or some shit? Parents and older kids would give her an extremely hard time.”

“I can see that. I guess I’ll just have to admire her from a distance and hope that maybe one day she’ll allow me to admire her up close and personal.”

“Well, good luck on that. Let me holla at Shavozz before I get back to work. Hit me when you get off.”

“A’ight, bruh.”

I ended the call and called Vozz, only for my call to go to voicemail. I didn’t leave a message. Instead, I pulled the remote from my pocket and hit it. I was more than sure she would be calling me soon. If not, then I would surely talk to her as soon as I left work. Just as I parked, a text came through from her.

You are so wrong for that shit. LOL! I almost bust my ass while I was talking to this old man. I’m gon’ have you screaming like a bitch tonight.

I laughed out loud after I read it then responded. *I ain't scared. Shit, I can't wait. Love you, baby. See you later.*

Love you too.

This was what I had been waiting for. I was happy, she was happy, the boys were happy, and life was good. I couldn't wait to eventually show her my undying love by making it official. Until then, I'd bide my time until the time was right.

“YOU TRYNA BREAK MY SHIT OFF, VOZZ? FUCK!”

“Shut up, DJ, before I put this pussy on your lips.”

“You act like that's a fucking punishment.”

She smiled for a split second until I lifted my hips and started giving her some swift jabs to her sweet spot. She was riding the fuck out of my dick, and if I didn't slow her down, I was gon' nut before I got a chance to taste her. When I got home, the boys were gone. My mama had come and picked them up for dinner and to spend time with her and Pop. She ordered me to the shower and was waiting on my ass when I got out.

I barely had a chance to dry off good before she was pushing me to the bed and tying my fucking wrists up to the railing. This shit was torture. Watching her titties bounce in my face and not be able to touch them was driving me insane. I wanted to smack her ass so bad too. She knew this shit was torture for her too, but I let her think she had the upper hand. I could get out of this shit if I really wanted to. “Bring that pussy to my face before I fire off in your shit.”

She slowly slid from my dick, causing me to shiver. It felt like the head of it was about to explode. When she got to my face, she slowly lowered her pussy to my lips while staring at me. “All this for me hitting the remote?”

“DJ, you hit it two more times after the initial one!”

I chuckled, and she dropped her shit right on me. That was okay though. I was ready. My phone was ringing, and I wanted to answer the shit and say, *I can't talk. Don't call me. Let me call you. I always got Shavozz pussy on my face.* She would die if she heard me say that shit to somebody. Nothing took precedence over what was happening at this very moment.

When she began grinding on my face, I knew I could just abandon any technique, because I couldn't even move to readjust myself to get at her right. As long as she was enjoying it, that was all that mattered. Her clit was rubbing my fucking nose at one point. "DJ! Shit! I'm about to cum!"

She leaned over and untied one of my hands, and I immediately popped her on the ass and pulled her closer to me. I liked to be at the point of death when I was eating her shit. I always wanted this to mimic how I felt in life. I'd die for her. So that meant I had to be all in or nothing at all with everything I did... including eating this fat pussy. I guess that shit started feeling better, because she untied my other hand, and I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her even closer and practically suffocating myself.

"DJ! It's coming! Fuck!"

I almost wanted to bust with her. That was just how turned on I was when my tongue made love to her most intimate parts. Before she could let loose, she pulled away from my face and slid down my dick, letting her warmth engulf me once again. I sat up and again wrapped my arms around her as I assisted her rise and fall. She wrapped her legs around me, completely falling on my dick. "Oh fuck!" I yelled.

Feeling her this way was always my favorite. Being balls deep in her was something I didn't take for granted. I loved the way she took everything I had to offer. As I bounced her on it, she came and nearly fell off it. She'd fallen backwards, doing a backbend while I continued to fuck the shit out of her pussy until I coated her cervix with love. Staring at those titties pointing to the ceiling only had me ready to go all over again. "I love you, Shavozz."

"Prove it."

I frowned slightly. *What the fuck she mean by that?* I thought I was already proving that shit. She sat up and stared at me, and I could see the undying love in her gaze. The words spilled from my lips without a second thought. “Marry me. That’s the only thing that I can do to prove to you just how much I love you. I think I’ve done everything else.”

“Yes. Now make love to me, DJ.”

My eyebrows had risen. She was ready to be my wife. I slid her next to me and rolled her to her back then hovered over her and pushed inside once again. “You telling me you ready for that?”

“I am. I love you. We live with you. What are we waiting for? Whenever you’re ready, so am I.”

I lowered my face to hers and kissed her with everything I had. This shit was so unexpected, but I couldn’t get any happier. When I pulled away from her, I said, “As soon as I get a ring, we’ll make it official, but I need to ask the boys for their permission.”

“That will be special.”

“*You’re* special, and I have no choice but to treat you as such. I can’t wait for you to be Mrs. Dexter Dent, Junior.”

“I can’t wait either.”

I continued making love to my baby, totally in awe of her bravery. She’d put her fear to the side and had fallen completely, opening herself up to me in ways I doubted were possible. I’d make sure she never regretted it.

EPILOGUE

S havozz

Four months later...

“RONDO, YO’ ASS CRAZY, AND I REFUSE TO TAKE YOUR WORD for anything!” I yelled at my brother.

We were at the Berotte’s house for Sunday dinner. Afterward, he would be heading back to Lafayette. He’d fitted right in with the family, especially Chad, Axton, and Arrow. He’d swore that he fucked Elvis up and that was why he looked like that in court. He had a black eye and a few cuts and bruises in his face. It had taken what seemed like forever at the time to get a court date. They charged his ass with two counts of parental kidnapping, and he got a year in prison and a thousand dollar fine.

I wanted his ass to get more than that, especially when the muthafucka tried to file assault charges on my son. Shyrón was itching to eat his ass up, and that was when Rondo had said not to worry about it because he’d fucked him up already. He was still on that same kick today. The nigga had everyone laughing at how he claimed Elvis was begging him for his life.

I noticed Mama Nissa’s friend Yolanda staring at him extra hard though. Rondo had clearly noticed too, because once he was done clowning, he made his way to her. I rolled my eyes at his shenanigans as DJ put his arm around me. “Your brother is a nut.”

“Who you telling?”

He chuckled then kissed the side of my head. He’d bought my ring a couple of months ago, not long after Chad’s court date with the FBI. They’d ruled Shy’s findings worth arguing. They were just waiting on a court date. He and Lexi’s son was now nearly two months old, and he was a replica of Chad.

DJ and I planned to get married next month at the courthouse, and my family promised to come down and turn up. My mama had already come down to visit a couple of times with Rondo. She and the other ladies got along well. She fit in like they’d known her for years. The boys were doing well also. Dalen had even started calling DJ Dad. I thought that was the sweetest thing. They’d bonded and were completely happy that DJ wanted to marry me.

Tray had taken a liking to Dylan. Since he was a PE coach, he was always playing ball with Tray. They hung together quite often on the weekends, along with DJ and Dalen, of course. My weekends were filled with me time, and I often found myself with Mrs. Anissa or Lexi. DJ and I were the godparents of their son, Foster.

“Yo, everybody! Let me have y’all’s attention right quick.”

We all looked up to see Shy standing in the middle of the floor. Everyone that was in the kitchen joined us in the family room, waiting to see what he would say. There was no telling what that could be. I’d learned to always expect the unexpected with him. “I just wanted to let y’all know that Brittany and I—”

Before he could get the words out, Alexz started screaming. He frowned at her, and she covered her mouth. We were all anticipating it now, waiting to explode like she had. He rolled his eyes and continued. “Brittany and I will be expecting a bundle of joy in about seven months.”

The room erupted, and Brittany laughed and blushed as everyone celebrated. “I’m so happy for y’all!” Mama Nissa said as she hugged Brittany.

Just from what Brittany had shared with us months ago, I could assume it had taken a while for her to get to this point. It had taken two more tries with the Clomid, finally increasing to the highest strength. However, I could see just how happy she truly was. After everyone had congratulated her and Shy, the fellas were about to head outside until Chad said, “I have something to say too.”

Everyone knew what this had to be. Lexi was already blushing. He didn’t try to warm up to it or anything. He went to his knee in front of her, and Alexz said, “It’s about damn time.”

Chad cut his eyes at her, then brought his attention back to Lexi. “It’s been a difficult journey, thanks to me. But I hope I’ve proved just how much you mean to me. I want you to be my wife, Lexi. I hope that’s something you want too. I love you, and I know that there’s no me without you. Will you be my wife, baby?”

“Yes. I love you too, Chad.”

He slid that ring on her finger quick as hell, then stood and lifted her in his arms. “We gon’ have to get another house before long to accommodate our growing family,” Mr. Sheldon said. “Congratulations, everybody. I’m extremely proud of y’all.”

He hugged Shy, then Chad, and went to Mrs. Anissa’s side and kissed her cheek. This had been the family dynamic I’d been craving. Apparently, Rondo too, because he’d been here every other weekend. His woman was still tripping about him taking his daughter to Texas, so he only came when he didn’t have her.

As I watched Chad and Alexz argue, I shook my head. Leaning over to DJ, I said, “Thank you, baby.”

“For what?”

“For loving me enough to wait for me to realize it. For bringing me and my kids into such an amazing family. For loving me unconditionally. Need I go on?”

“You don’t have to thank me for loving you. Thank you for loving me in return.”

“I was fighting how I really felt, but once I truly gave in, I didn’t regret a moment of it. I’m in awe at just how great you are.”

“Mm. Make sure you show me just how in awe you are.”

Right after he said that, he hit that damn remote, and I nearly jumped out of my skin as I gushed in my panties. “Shavozz, you good?” Lexi asked.

“Yeah,” I said as I side-eyed DJ.

He chuckled and said, “Dick-breaking ride at seven p.m. I’ll be waiting.”

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...

I truly thought Shavozz was gonna work my nerves for the entire book. LOL! Thankfully, sis got it together before things got too far gone. DJ was so perfect. In that regard, he was a lot like Isaiah. However, his nastiness was what captured my soul. The man was gifted. My imagination was running wild whenever he and Shavozz were horny around one another.

This situation Jamel done put himself in though is something else. He's falling for a stripper and his mother's best friend is sprung off his young ding-a-ling! LOL! Whew, chile! His story will be coming next, and I can't wait to see how it all unfolds.

The biggest surprise for me in this book was Ali. I wasn't expecting him to step up to the plate so soon to be a part of a story. I truly believe when I get to his story, it's going to be one for the books. Arrow even had more to say in this book as well. I'm pretty sure he will be even more vocal in Jamel's book.

Elvis's punk ass should have been thrown under the damn jail. Him and Talisha! I was surprised that they actually thought they were going to get Shavozz to do what Elvis wanted her to do. Talisha lost out on a great friend. However, you haven't seen the last of her.

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.

Please subscribe to my webpage for updates and sneak peeks of upcoming releases! <https://authormonicawalters.com>.

For live discussions, giveaways, and inside information on upcoming releases, join my Facebook group, Monica's Romantic Sweet Spot at <https://bit.ly/2P2106X>.



ALSO BY MONICA WALTERS

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Only If You Let Me (a spin-off of Say He's the One)

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Any and Everything for Love

Savage Heart (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with Shawty You for Me by T. Key)

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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 (a spin-off of Marry Me Twice)

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 (a spin-off of Who Can I Run To)

Stuck On You (available for preorder)

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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 Rebirth of Noah

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?

The Hendersons: The Next Generation

Someone Like You

The Berotte Family Series

Love On Replay

Deeper Than Love

Something You Won't Forget

I'm The Remedy

Love Me Senseless

I Want You Here