



Force
OF NATURE

MONICA WALTERS

FORCE OF NATURE

A BEROTTE FAMILY BOOK

MONICA WALTERS

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INTRODUCTION

Hello, readers!

Thank you for purchasing and/or downloading this book. This work of art contains explicit language, lewd sex scenes, violence, moments of grief/depression, and topics that may be sensitive to some readers. It also contains urban elements, which is why it is listed as a genre category for this book.

This is book eleven 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 and their friends. So if some things seem incomplete where the sub characters are involved, that was done intentionally. Those issues will be resolved in later books.

This book is about Shyrón's friend, Ali Joseph, an honorary Berotte. You first became more acquainted with him in book four, *I'm The Remedy*. It's 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 and updates ongoing issues that I don't go into great detail about.

Love On Replay

Deeper Than Love

Something You Won't Forget

I'm The Remedy

Love Me Senseless

I Want You Here

Don't Fight The Feeling

When You Dance

I'm All In

Give Me Permission

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.

Ali and Riley's story has a lot of back and forth and plenty of drama. So brace yourselves. Again, 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

P.S.- Riley's last name, Domingue, is pronounced Dō-main (like a website domain).

DEDICATION

Thank you, Ashanté a.k.a. Taby, for allowing me to use your image for Riley Domingue in this book. I can still vividly remember us as kids, and my mama and daddy taking us to visit at y'all's house. I always loved seeing your mom's beautiful smile and happy demeanor. Whenever we came over, she always seemed excited to see us. My mama absolutely loved Charcy. I mean she loves DJ, too, but I can also remember how happy she was to see Charcy.

I loved you and Enricka's hair. I wanted to play in it so bad, but because I was so shy back then, I would have never said so. Y'all were like beautiful dolls to me. LOL! Memories of being there with you, Ricka, Carl, Ursula, and Elvin (I think that was his name. He goes by Joe now, I think. LOL) played vividly in my mind in a certain scene of this book.

Plus, all the times we met up for New Year's Day at your grandparents' house, Cousin Agnes and Cousin Dalton Domingue, were times I'll never forget. The best original Arnold Palmer (lemonade and tea mix) I've ever drank was something I looked forward to, not to mention sharpening my Uno skills.

I've absolutely loved watching your journey to a better you. Watching the weight you've lost has been so inspiring. Your hard work hasn't gone unnoticed. You looked amazing before, but you look even more amazing now, because I can see a light that wasn't there before. Girl, then you started lifting weights and even competed! I'm so proud of you, Taby.

Our daughters stand side by side in the choir stand on second Sundays, and I have to constantly remind Lecee that Alana is her cousin. SMH. We need to get together more often. Again, I appreciate your graciousness, and I hope you enjoy the story.

Love you, cuz.

R.I.H. Charcy Domingue, Ursula Bryant, and Dalton Domingue.



Family Chart

PROLOGUE

ALI

“**T**his yo’ last fucking option. I’m sicka yo’ shit. I’ve been beyond patient because I know I fucked wit’ yo’ feelings and shit, but you fucking wit’ a killer... I will literally blow yo’ fucking brains out all over this wall.”

Talisha was trembling as I held her by her neck with my gun to her head. I didn’t know what the fuck I was thinking when I told DJ I would distract her for him. This bitch was crazy as fuck and on my last fucking nerve. She’d been following me all over Beaumont, but her breaking windows at Watchful Eyes was the final straw.

“Okay. I’ll move. I’m sorry, Ali. You just got me crazy as hell. I ain’t never met a man that treated me like you, no matter how much of an act you say it was. I don’t want to let that go. How could you treat me so good and make that shit feel believable?”

“I didn’t. I just played on your desperation. You didn’t notice the signs, because you liked the attention.”

She started crying, and all I could see was my mother suffering at the hands of my father. I lowered my gun and backed away from her. When I did, she ran to me and wrapped her arms around me. *Yeah, she crazy as fuck.* There was no way she should want to hug me right now. I just had a gun to her damn head. “Man... come on na.”

I pushed her away from me. This chick was as ugly as they came, but now that she was crying, I swore she was even uglier. Despite that shit, her tears still moved me and brought

out my sensitivity. I slowly shook my head and said, “You gotta get outta here... like far away from here.”

“Like where?”

“I’m tempted to move your ass out the fucking country.”

“Damn. I irritate you that much?”

“Hell yeah... more. I’m telling you, one more situation with yo’ ass and I’m gon’ send you straight to hell.”

“Can I move anywhere?”

I rolled my eyes. I wanted nothing more than to be done with her ass, but she wasn’t finna live her best life on my damn dime. “Naw. You going to fucking Colorado or some shit where you can’t get into shit.”

“Colorado!” she yelled. “I don’t know anybody out there!”

“Or maybe hell? Would you like that location better?” I asked as I lifted my gun.

“Fine! I’m sorry. Fine.”

I slowly shook my head, then sent a message to my nigga. *I need you to take a flight to Aspen. I need an apartment set up for a female.*

When?

As soon as you can, before...

I’ll go day after tomorrow. Hit me back with the deets.

There were only a handful of niggas in this world that I trusted, and Shyrón Berotte was one of them. This woman had me looking like a whole pussy in these streets. I’d be damned if I was gonna allow her to ruin my reputation. “Here’s the deal. I’m the only muthafucka that you can contact. And the time limit gon’ run out on that shit too. You better get your ass out there, start over, and make new friends. To everyone out here, you’re dead.”

Her eyes widened slightly. “Ali... please. What about my family?”

“As much as you was on my ass, I didn’t think you had one. Naw. No fucking body. Start packing. Next week this time, you out this bitch. If I were you, I would take time to spend with this so-called family of yours. That’s the last you gon’ see of ’em.”

I walked out of her apartment and slid my gun in my waistband. This muthafucking woman was a thorn in my flesh... just like my mama. I didn’t need two muthafuckas driving me crazy. I surely didn’t have the heart to get rid of my mama, no matter how bad she treated me. The problem was that she knew that. Talisha didn’t.

I’d never killed a woman and had no plans to do so, especially not for no trivial shit like this. Before I could get to the stairs, she yelled, “Ali!”

I rolled my eyes and turned toward her. She gestured for me to come back to her apartment, so I did. I didn’t need her yelling my name like that. “Man, what?”

“I know you’ve been consistently telling me no, but please?”

She bit her bottom lip as she slid her hand up my chest. I swiftly grabbed her wrist and threw her hand away from me. “Man, hell naw. Look at all the shit you doing, and you ain’t even got the dick. I put this shit to you, I’m gon’ have to kill you right after, because you’ll never leave a nigga alone afterward.”

I frowned as I walked away. My dick had only been hard in her presence once, and that was when I’d taken her out and gotten her a whole-ass makeover. His ass quickly deflated when I remembered what she actually looked like underneath all that makeup.

When I got to my car, I slid my hand down my face. I couldn’t deal with this bitch no more, and I was at the end of my rope and hers. One of us had to go, and it sure in the hell wouldn’t be me. I booked a first-class flight for Shy, then screenshot the info to him.

This wasn't the first time I had him do some shit like this for me. There was this other bitch named Dahlia that could have gotten anything she wanted from me. I loved the fuck out of her. We'd moved in together and everything. She was the one that convinced me to grow my hair out. That shit grew fast too. It was down my back, but I kept it braided most times.

One day I came home from hustling and shit to find her fucking a nigga in my bed. I blew that nigga's head off, then almost choked her ass to death. She was bold as fuck to try some shit like that. I supposed since I was so soft with her ass, she thought I wouldn't hurt her. When I finally let her go, she was gasping for nearly ten minutes. Her best bet was to be away from me before I killed her ass.

After watching my dad beat my mama's ass for years, it just wasn't in me to be cruel to women. When I got old enough, I tried a few times to knock that nigga on his ass and had threatened to kill him. By the time I was eleven, I'd successfully accomplished the first part. That was why Jericho and I bonded when we lived in Florida. We were in similar situations. Our mothers were getting abused by the men in their lives.

The difference between his mama and mine was that my mama was a no-good whore. She was fucking with my pop's ego. While she probably deserved everything she got, she was still my mother. The horrible thing was that she guilt-tripped me about that shit every chance she got. She kept asking me when I was gonna man up and stand up for her. I was only eleven when I nearly fucked my dad up. Not long after, we moved to Beaumont before he killed both of us.

Ever since then, women typically got a pass from me. I hated that shit, because I could think of a couple of them that needed to get what was coming to them, especially Dahlia's ass. Until I could get that sensitivity under control, though, this would have to suffice. I pulled out of the apartment complex, hoping that Talisha's ass got the point. If not, I would have to take her ass out for real and worry about my demons later.

CHAPTER 1

ALI

EIGHT MONTHS LATER...

“Nigga always somewhere fucking,” I mumbled as I walked away.

I’d knocked on the door to take a piss, and I could hear Seneca and Kaysyn in there getting it in. We were at *their* fucking house. Out of all the rooms in this bitch, they chose to go in the bathroom where other people could possibly need to go. Thirty more feet and they would have been at the entrance of their bedroom.

I was happy for my boy, nevertheless. He’d finally found love, although he wasn’t looking for it. That was how that shit was gonna have to catch me... all the way off-guard. I’d had my fair share of heartbreak and bullshit. As I made my way to the other bathroom, my phone vibrated with a text message. I had a feeling it was my mama. I was getting sick of her shit.

The past couple of years, I’d seen more drama than I cared to, and quite a bit of the bullshit came from her and, for the last year or so, Talisha. I’d finally gotten Talisha off my dick. The first couple of months she was gone, she called quite a bit. The fellas all thought I was in my feelings about killing her ass, but it wasn’t her. It was Camila Joseph. That woman was on my last fucking nerve. While I had no problem protecting my mama, she seemed to purposely get into bullshit, because she knew I would be there to bail her out.

She was too fucking old for that shit. Camila had breached fifty already and was about to be fifty-one, but every time I looked up, she was letting some weak ass nigga fuck her over. That shit started with my pops before I was even born. She migrated to Florida from Puerto Rico with her parents and ended up running away and hooking up with Troy on the streets of Miami. She was only fifteen. By sixteen, she was pregnant.

When I was born, my pops named me Ali, because he said I had big hands and would be able to fight like Muhammed Ali. However, he swore that my mama had fucked around on him because I looked damn near white. She was Puerto Rican, and he was black, so he figured I should have been darker complexioned. It didn't help that I looked like my mother. After I got older, it seemed his hate for her only became more severe.

I found out why, once we moved to New Orleans for some bullshit he was involved in with some niggas out there. She'd cheated on him a few times. Knowing what I know as a grown ass man, it was a miracle she was still alive to talk about the shit. That year and a half we spent in New Orleans had been the most enlightening. Although I was only nine years old when we moved there, I learned the game quick. We lived in the projects, and word got around fast that my mama was a ho.

I was always fighting to protect her name, until this lil nigga that claimed he was related to Master P took me to his uncle's house and showed me where my mama was. She was on her knees sucking that nigga dick with another muthafucka waiting in the wings. I wanted to bust up in there and put that shit to a stop, but Michael pulled me out of there. I'd never forget what he said. *I know that's yo' mama and it's yo' job to protect her, but I thought you needed to know firsthand what the fuck you were protecting.*

Despite that shit, I still stepped in when my dad would fuck her face up. I didn't understand why he just didn't give her to the streets, since it seemed like that was where she wanted to be, until I got older. He was pimping her out. He'd said if she wanted to fuck other niggas, he might as well get paid for the shit.

By the time I was eleven, I lived up to my name and knocked Troy the fuck out for hitting my mama. We stole his money, and she took me with her to Texas. We ended up in Beaumont and had been here ever since. She never got a job. Just got on the system and fucked around for a few dollars. But I, like a dummy, still took up for her and protected her... 'cause she was my mama.

After I handled my business and had come out of the bathroom, I checked her message. *Hola, hijo. Necesito dinero.*

I rolled my eyes. Whenever she was trying to appeal to my soft side, she spoke Spanish. She was saying she needed money. *What you need money for?*

I paid all her bills and bought food and anything else she needed. Could have sworn that I was her nigga. She was still fucking around on my dime, and I was on the verge of taking a page from my father's book. I hadn't heard from that nigga since we left New Orleans. As far as I knew, he was still out there. I didn't really care to find out otherwise.

When I got to the front room, Seneca and Kaysyn had made their way back to kick it with everybody. Three proposals in one. That shit was whack and cool at the same time. Although I was cool with everybody here, I was still somewhat of a loner. Shy and Jericho were the closest to me, but Shy had his family thing going on, and Jericho was worried about his. Seneca and Chad were the next closest, but they didn't have a clue that Talisha wasn't dead. Only Shy and Jericho knew that.

I didn't let people in, and I knew it was because of all the trauma I suffered through as a kid. My mama wasn't shit. I took care of myself... and her ass. When we got to Beaumont, Shy helped me a lot. The best thing she could have done was enrolled me in the same school he was at. While she didn't know the significance of that and neither did I, it was still something I could attribute to her. It helped me keep from fucking her up some days. She brought me to Beaumont where I met my family.

I made my way outside and pulled a blunt from my pocket and sparked up. By the time I got my first puff, I heard the door open. When I looked over and saw Jericho, I gave him a head nod. "Camila still on that bullshit?"

"As usual. You heard from your sister yet?"

"Yeah."

He didn't say anything else, and I knew exactly what that meant. His brother was fucking with her. "How you gon' get her here?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out. He's gonna eventually kill her if I don't get her away from him."

I passed him the blunt, and he took a puff then passed it back. We'd been cool for a long time. Jericho was the first friend I made in school. He started in the middle of the school year because they'd just moved from Haiti. The teacher sat him right next to me, and we became cool without even talking to each other. It was the strangest bond. Even when we could sit or play anywhere we wanted to, we were always together. A month had passed before we said anything to each other.

It was like we could feel each other's vibes. Our spirits knew one another, and they recognized the sorrow. While his situation wasn't as rough as mine in the beginning, there was still some trauma. When I'd finished off the blunt, I said, "I think I'm about to cut her off."

He turned to me and just stared, waiting for me to say what was up. "It feels like she's holding me hostage."

"I can see that. You're seeming to be slowly becoming that kid I met in kindergarten... withdrawn, quiet, and traumatized."

"I'm not traumatized, but I will be if I don't leave her alone," I said as I glanced at him.

"The guys already think you are because of Talisha. You ever gon' tell them the truth?"

I took a deep breath. "I'on know. Since she's left me alone, I don't think there's a reason to. You checked her out lately?"

"Yep. She got a nigga, but he fucking her and a couple of other desperate broads."

"Mm. Sound like she getting fucked in more ways than one. Long as she occupied, that's all that matters."

Jericho chuckled, and I couldn't help but let one out too. "You checked on Dahlia lately?"

"Nope. It's been a year at least. As long as I don't see her, I don't care what she does. Had she not been trying to be in my face after I nearly choked her ass to death, she would still be here." I glanced at him again as he stared out at the backyard in silence. "What about Whitney? I know ever since you left Florida, you'd been trying to get in contact with her."

He shook his head. Whitney was the love of his life that he had to leave behind. When he got a new phone and thought it was safe to call her, her number was no longer working. I felt like until he found her, his heart would be unsettled. Even once he got his sister here, he still wouldn't be happy without her.

Just as I was about to make my way out, Seneca stepped outside. "What y'all lonely muthafuckas doing out here?"

I chuckled. "Says the nigga that was so fucking pussy whipped he couldn't even fucking function."

He laughed as Jungle came out behind him. "Sandrene was looking for you, Ali," Jungle said as he waved a white envelope.

Payment. I nodded then headed back inside. When I entered the front room, she was sitting on Jamel's lap. She smiled when she saw me and tilted her head toward the kitchen. I smiled back and headed in that direction. When I met her in there, she extended the envelope. "Ali, I appreciate you so much. You and Jungle made sure I was safe at all times... especially you."

I gave her a half smile and grabbed the envelope, only for her to pull me to her for a hug. It was rare that I hugged any of my boys' women. I never wanted to feel uncomfortable. They usually kissed my cheek or whatever. Just because I wasn't having sex didn't mean my shit was broken. My brothers all had some beautiful ass women, but it was harder for me to control myself with Sandrene, because I'd seen her naked.

She kissed my cheek as I subtly inhaled her scent. I backed away from her and asked, “So are you saying you no longer need our services?”

“Well, I think everything might be cool. However, Jungle is in Houston. There’s no reason for you to be out in H-Town when you have a business to run. Plus... I think you need to get some rest. Even when Jungle was supposed to be watching me, I would still see you. I don’t know how you do it, but you need some rest, Ali.”

She smiled as she walked away, and I thanked God my dick had stayed put. I opened the envelope to see a cashier’s check for a whole mil. *Maaaaaan*. This fucking family knew what it meant to be family. I only charged her thirty grand. I slowly shook my head as Jamel joined me in the kitchen. “You good, man?”

“A million?” I asked, holding the envelope in the air.

I swore it was like they knew how much money I was having to trick off to keep Camila safe and out of trouble, not to mention the money I had tricked off to get Talisha out my face. Jamel smiled then put his arm around my shoulder.

“The shit you do for our family can’t be compensated. You’re a vital part of the family, bruh. Real shit. Had it not been for you, Chad would be dead. Alexz would be dead. My baby could have possibly been taken away from us. Dylan could have lost his job and his good sense, fucking around with Luke. This is the least we can do to show our love and appreciation, man. As long as we got money, you gon’ be taken care of. Period.”

I dapped him as I bit my bottom lip and slowly nodded. After taking a deep breath, I folded the envelope and slid it in my pocket. When my phone vibrated in my pocket, I closed my eyes. I could never have a happy moment without some shit accompanying it. It was a voicemail. That was different. I recognized the number as St. Elizabeth Hospital, the event we had to secure was next weekend. Maybe they were just making contact to make sure everything was still good.

Bringing the phone to my ear, I listened. “Hello, Mr. Joseph. My name is Riley Domingue. I’m calling from St. Elizabeth administrative office. I just wanted to make sure we were still clear about what services would be provided next weekend. I’m sorry for calling on what’s probably your day off. I don’t know what it means to rest sometimes. You can call back to confirm tomorrow. Thank you. Oh! I guess you need the phone number.”

She giggled then proceeded to give me her direct line. I didn’t remember speaking to her when they first called me to book our services. This was clearly a sister. I guessed she wanted me to call that direct line to her office, but I was gonna call her from this cell phone number she called me from. As soon as I confirmed shit, I was gon’ have to do some research on her ass, just like I did on the lady that requested our services. I didn’t trust these women these days.

CHAPTER 2

RILEY

“Hello?” I answered, somewhat shocked that he’d called me back.

“Ms. Domingue?”

“Yes.”

“This is Ali Joseph, returning your call.”

I wasn’t expecting him to call back today. *Shit, he sounds sexy.* “Yes, sir. I’m sorry for disturbing your Sunday.”

“It’s cool. I don’t like putting off for tomorrow what I can do today. And since you are working, so am I. Everything is still set up for next weekend. We will arrive at five p.m. as agreed upon. We will all be in black suits as well.”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Joseph. I’m sending your fee to the accounting department tomorrow. Did you want to pick it up before the event?”

“No, ma’am. I’ll get it the night of.”

“Okay. I won’t keep you. Thank you for returning my call.”

“Mommy?” my four-year-old daughter interrupted.

I held my finger up, letting her know I would be with her in a minute. Mr. Joseph was awfully quiet. I thought he ended the call for a moment, until he said, “No problem, Ms. Domingue.”

“Have a good evening, Mr. Joseph.”

I ended the call and stared at my daughter. She smiled at me and asked, “Can we watch a movie before I have to go to bed?”

I gave her the side eye as she giggled. She knew we didn’t usually watch movies on Sundays unless she was out of school on the following Monday. “Aina... you know better.”

“Aww,” she whined.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Come on so you can take a bath.”

I stood from my desk and headed to the bathroom as she went to her room to get her PJs and underwear. It had been just me and her for the past two and a half years. When her father, my fiancé, Gabriel, died, I was devastated. He was living his life recklessly and got caught up. It was something about those bad boys that I loved. However, now that I had a daughter to protect, I would have to be careful about that. Gabriel was Hispanic, so our daughter was a biracial princess.

Gabriel loved her so much. She was his pride and joy. He’d said that he had plans to be more legit to secure her future. I couldn’t wait to see the changes he would make, except he didn’t live to make them. When I saw on the news that a Hispanic male was gunned down at Honey Stop on Magnolia, a chill slithered up my spine. Gabriel was always at that damn convenience store.

While we had moved away from the neighborhood, Gabe was always on that end of town. He kept us tucked away at Marbella Bay Apartments, a few miles away, and handled his business over there. Apparently, he’d pissed somebody off. Not long after I saw it on the news, his mother called me, screaming in Spanish.

Aina and I had a hard time adjusting without him. She cried constantly and held tight to his Dallas Cowboys blanket for months. Now that she was four, she barely remembered him. I did my best to talk about him often and remind her how much he loved us. My ring stayed on the dresser just so I could look at it every day. I only stopped wearing it at the beginning of the year, almost nine months ago.

It was time for me to let Gabriel go, even with as painful as that was. I grieved him for nearly two years, losing a ton of weight. I was depressed as hell. This year, I chose myself and my daughter. I had to get healthier for the both of us. The weight loss looked good on me, but I started going to the gym to tone it up and started eating better. I deserved to be happy again and so did my baby. She seemed to have gone through depression with me.

When she came to the bathroom with me and saw the bubbles in the tub, she smiled big and clapped. I smiled back at her and helped her undress. As soon as she got in the warm water, she looked up at me, and I already knew what she was about to ask. “Mommy, can you tell me about my daddy?”

I smiled and reflected for a moment as I always did. “He was so handsome. I met him in the tenth grade. He was a nut... always making me laugh. I thought he was just a cool person, and we became best friends. After I graduated and went to college, we lost touch. I went to school in Louisiana, about three hours from here. When I moved back, I saw him at the convenience store. He took my breath away,” I said, bringing my hand to my chest and allowing my eyes to roll.

She giggled as always. “Aina, he was so cute! He’d started working out, and he had his hair braided. When he saw me, he yelled and ran to me. He hugged me, then picked me up and swung me around. Girl! I was heavy, and he picked me up!”

“He was strong!” she said as she lifted her arms to flex her muscles.

I chuckled. “Yeah. He was very strong. He wasn’t scrawny anymore like he was in school. We traded phone numbers, since his had changed, and we talked every day. We went out together, and we would have so much fun together.”

“He liked to skate!”

“Yeeees. He had to teach me because I was always falling.”

She giggled and began spreading suds all over her body. Truth was, every day I saw her, I saw Gabriel. She laughed

like him, and her smile was definitely his. While I knew what Gabe did was illegal, he was a good man to me and his daughter. We were supposed to get married this year. Taking a deep breath, I watched her play in the tub with her toys.

I was getting lonely. While I had my daughter, she was *all* I had. My dad died to the streets when I was little... probably around eight or so. My mother passed away five years ago from a massive heart attack. She was always there for me. She was so happy when I told her I was pregnant. However, she didn't make it to see Aina come into this world.

I had a brother from my dad, but I had never met him. I didn't even know his name. My mother had told me he existed, but that was about it. She said my dad had fucked around on her and created him, so he was younger than me. She said they lived out here but had moved to Houston. To say she pretended to not want anything to do with him, she sure knew a lot about his whereabouts. I was willing to bet she knew more than what she told me.

I soaped Aina's loofah and began bathing her, as my mind drifted off to Ali Joseph. I was secretly hoping that he would want to come get his payment early so I could get a glimpse of what he looked like. He seemed to have a slight accent. He almost sounded Hispanic, but he sounded black as well. His voice was a medium timbre, not deep, but not high pitched either. It was something about it that attracted me.

I didn't have a certain type when it came to a man's physical attributes. While Gabe was Hispanic, I had nothing against men of other races. He was just who I fell in love with. I had no prejudices or qualms with anyone. "Mommy!" Aina yelled.

I'd zoned completely out. I'd gotten soap in her hair. I closed my eyes for a moment and chuckled. "Sorry, baby. Let me wash that out of your hair."

I was beyond grateful that she had hair like her father. Washing her curls was easy. Had that been my hair, it would have been a lot more tedious. People irritated me at times when they questioned if I was her mother. I supposed they

thought I was her nanny or some shit. Some opinions were best kept to yourself.

Once I finished washing her hair, I helped her out of the tub and detangled it. As I finished up, I checked the time to see it was only six. My days off were just the opposite of everyone else's. They literally dragged by, especially Sundays. We went to church this morning, but that was about it. I liked to relax on Sundays, but I always ended up doing some work.

This benefit for diabetes research was on my last nerve. I hated procrastinating, but the speakers were destined to make me look bad. I only had one person who confirmed early. The other just confirmed Friday, and I had one pull out by text message Friday evening. Tomorrow, I would have to try to find another doctor to speak and offer his or her expertise on the subject. If not, then we would just have to make do with two speakers.

I was able to obtain Alex Isley to perform, and if nothing else, I was beyond excited about that. If nothing else went right, I was confident that her soothing voice would calm my nerves. The caterers were set and so was the band. After taking a deep breath, I tried to calm down. I was getting all worked up for nothing. *One speaker, Riley... just one speaker.*

After moisturizing my baby's skin and helping her get her nightgown on, I said, "Come on. Let's go watch *Encanto*."

CHAPTER 3

ALI

“So now he wants to put himself on child support and do what’s right. He wants to be back in the children’s lives. Ell is refusing to have anything to do with him. I don’t know if the courts can make Kay Baby do otherwise, but she doesn’t want to have to make him spend time with Luckey.”

Seneca was pacing back and forth as I slid on my suit jacket. We were getting ready for the benefit and had all met at the office. I rented a couple of blacked-out Lincolns so we could look official. There were eight of us that would be securing their event. “What did baby girl say?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure how she feels about it. She hasn’t said a word. I know she loves Luckey, but I think she feels like she will offend me if she wants to see him. He was the only dad she knew before me, so I don’t have a problem with that.”

“Make sure you let her know that.”

I checked myself in the mirror, and a nigga looked fly. I was wearing all black without a tie. My hair was braided, although I was tempted to wear it loose. After sliding on my black shades, Chad said, “I see you, nigga. Looking like a runway model and shit.”

He laughed and Seneca joined him. I slowly shook my head. Those niggas were always on me when I dressed up. Despite my occupation and some of the illegal shit I did, I liked to look nice. Being able to dress up for this benefit was right up my alley. “Shut the fuck up, Chad.”

I slapped his hand and shook it. When I saw Shy show up, I was shocked. I wasn't expecting him to be joining us tonight. "You said all hands on deck, nigga, so I'm here. I would like to think I'm part of Watchful Eyes and shit."

"You are. You know that."

I shook his hand and gave him a one-armed hug. "Plus, I need to holla at you on the way there."

I should have known it was something. Ever since those little girls were born, he hadn't wanted to be away from them. It had to be important as hell to pull him away from them. Once we got in the car, he turned to me and asked, "You remember Brittany's ex, Lamar?"

"Yeah."

"He's been contacting her."

I frowned. "And you good with that?"

"Naw. She hasn't answered the calls, but I know that it's him. I traced the number. The muthafucka is her brother. So it's like, on one hand, I'm like get the fuck outta here, and on the other hand, I'm like, it's not their fault they didn't know they were family."

"Nigga, I'm surprised I'm having this conversation with you. Those lil girls done made yo' ass soft. Ain't no way this the same nigga that had me get Luke hooked on powder. Can't be."

I glanced at him to see he was rubbing his chin hair, so I continued. "They already know each other. What is he calling for? If he looking for a brother/sister relationship with a woman he used to be in a relationship with, he's fucking delusional. Not with Shyrón Berotte's wife. What the fuck you on, man?"

"Shit, I don't know. You right. I just didn't know how Brittany would feel about it. I'm tryna be more considerate of her feelings. The way I broke her emotionally before she got pregnant stays with me."

“Yeah, but that shit was about something beyond her control. I could understand why she was broken. This? This is different. Fuck that nigga.”

I frowned hard. This nigga was tripping. I glanced at Seneca and Chad in the back seat, and they were in their phones. *All these lovesick muthafuckas*. Jericho was probably looking the same way in the other car. The only nigga I had around me that was on the same shit I was on, regarding relationships, was Jungle.

Since he was in Houston, I didn't get to hang with him as often. That was probably best. That nigga would have me caught up in all kinds of bullshit. Sometimes I missed the street life. It was all I knew for a long time. It took Shy showing me that I could make good money doing legal shit. With all the money they'd blessed me with, I'd be crazy to get involved in petty shit that could destroy everything I'd built in the last few years.

Watchful Eyes had been on my mind for years. The crazy part was that Shy knew before I could even tell him. He was using the skills I'd taught him on my ass. He knew how to read me. Besides Jericho, he was the only one that knew how to do that, especially since he knew a lot of my business. Seneca was beginning to figure me out too.

The more we hung around each other, the more he was realizing. However, his reckless ass mouth was why I kept my distance at first. I didn't want to have to fuck him up for something he said. He'd matured in a short amount of time, though, and just from paying attention to me, he knew when and when not to push. Most times, it was in his best interest not to push. Shy and Jericho were the only ones that had the authority to do that shit, and they rarely used it.

“You right. I don't even think she would want to be bothered with him anyway. I'm tripping,” Shy said, finally breaking his silence.

I slowly shook my head, and he pushed my arm. “Fuck you, Li. I just want my shit with Brittany to last, and I'm overthinking it. She submissive as hell, but everybody has a

breaking point. I don't ever want to push her to hers. Now that I have her, I know for a fact that I can't go through life without her. Period."

"I can respect that, man."

When we turned into the parking lot at Eleganté Hotel where the benefit was being held, I took a deep breath and prepared to address my guys. I got out of the car and could see people moving things around, preparing for the festivities. I knew we would have to work with Alex Isley's security team at some point, so I had to prepare them for that as well. They only usually took orders from me. However, when it came to protecting her, we would have to do things the way they wanted us to. That way if something happened, it would be on them.

After everyone joined up, I filled them in on all the last-minute details they needed, and everyone inserted their earpieces. I was slightly nervous, although I always did my best to play it cool. I'd never had a job of this magnitude. I knew that our performance tonight could be the defining moment for my company. While Shyrón had a lot of pull, a lot of people weren't as risky when it came to their security.

He'd gotten us this job, and I refused to let him down or make him look bad. When I headed inside, everyone followed behind me, showing that we were all on one accord. We needed to appear to be a cohesive unit that wouldn't take shit off anyone. Out of everyone on my team, Chad and I smiled the most, so I wasn't worried about anyone looking too friendly.

A guy stopped us at the door of the ballroom, so I said, "I need to check in with Riley Domingue. We're your security team for the night."

He glanced over at the clock and smiled slightly. We were ten minutes earlier than what they'd requested. Time was extremely important. It was just as important as the job itself, and I prided myself on making sure my team was in place early.

"Someone looking for me?"

I turned to see the most beautiful woman I'd ever laid eyes on. *Fuck!* She smiled, and I couldn't help but reciprocate that shit. From the sight of her blonde and black curls, nose ring, braces, and thick ass frame, I was entranced. The things I could do with those thick ass lips of hers. I cleared my throat and said, "I'm Ali Joseph from Watchful Eyes. My team and I are here to provide the service you requested of us."

I could feel Shy's stare and caught sight of the stupid ass grin on his face. As soon as this was over, I was gon' gut check his ass. "So nice to meet you, Mr. Joseph... and team."

She smiled again as she looked at the guys. We all looked fly as hell. I had to admit that. Everyone wore all black, not a drop of white in sight. When her eyes met mine again, her smile faded somewhat, but her eyes were showing her attraction to me. She was gon' make me lose a year of celibacy. "Follow me."

Hell yeah. When she spun around, I glanced at her ass and almost got caught up. Her waistline was small, but I could see how thick her thighs were. When I researched her, I saw pictures where she was a lot thicker. I also saw workout videos where she was on her journey to be a better her. She'd probably lost a good hundred pounds or more in her journey. Pictures and shit didn't do her justice.

As we followed behind her, she said, "I'm going to give you your payment and show you the areas we need secure, then I have to get dressed. I don't think they'll be accepting of me wearing leggings to this formal affair."

Oh, but I'm accepting of that shit. I gave her a slight smile, but I didn't say a word. She probably wasn't single anyway. I was tripping and needed to focus on the job at hand. When we got to a room adjacent to the ballroom, she went to a folder and handed me the check for ten grand. I nodded at her and said, "Thank you."

"Thank *you*. So, of course, we will need a couple of members of your team outside of the ballroom, at least two near the stage, and maybe three or four throughout the ballroom."

As she spoke, I lifted my finger and swirled it in a circular motion, and the guys stepped away, finding their places. We'd already discussed who would be where. Riley had only reiterated what we already knew. She looked impressed. "Oh... umm, okay. So, I need to introduce you to Alex Isley's team."

"Yes, ma'am."

She glanced at me, then headed to another room. After knocking on the door, a guy about my size opened it, and his eyes went right to mine. "Hello. This is the head of the security team we hired for tonight's event, Mr. Joseph," she said to him.

He gave me a head nod and extended his hand for a handshake. I accepted it as he said, "I'm Derrick."

"Ali."

"Okay. I'll leave the two of you to handle business. It was nice meeting you, Mr. Joseph," Riley said.

I licked my lips as I stared at her, and I could see her shiver. "Likewise, Ms. Domingue."

As she walked away, I could see Derrick about to rest his hand on my shoulder. I quickly caught it by his wrist without looking at him. I didn't like random people touching me like that. A handshake was more than enough. "Impressive," he said as I turned to him, releasing his arm.

I supposed he thought I was caught up in Riley's fine ass and wouldn't notice what was going on around me. Nothing would keep me from doing my job tonight. Nothing ever kept me from doing my job... not even Camila's ass. After I gave her a thousand dollars the other day, she was in the wind. I hadn't heard two fucking words from her ass. She barely said thank you. She had to know that I was getting sick of that bullshit though. I'd practically thrown the money at her.

Derrick took me over to meet Ms. Isley, and she expressed her gratitude for us providing her the protection she needed, then he told me what he expected out of us. They had enough guys to cover the stage area and part of the ballroom. They

only needed us to secure the other half and outside while she was performing.

This was the easiest ten grand I'd ever made.

CHAPTER 4

RILEY

When I laid eyes on that gorgeous ass man, he took my damn breath away. Either I was lonely and desperate as hell, or he was a god. I could barely function in his presence. I knew he noticed how I was ogling him, and that shit was so unprofessional. When I got to my suite, I had to stop and meditate for fifteen minutes. Everything had to be seamless, and it wouldn't be if all my attention was on that vanilla latte, Ali Joseph.

God bless it! I hadn't seen a man that fine since Gabriel was alive. While they didn't resemble each other, they were equally fine. The only similarity was their hair and possibly their heritage. Ali looked to be of Hispanic ethnicity. I swallowed hard as I checked out my appearance in the mirror. I looked great in my red, floor-length, off-the-shoulder gown. It clung to my curves in ways I would have been self-conscious about a couple of years ago.

After slipping on my heels, I grabbed my clutch and headed out of the door. When I got to the elevator, I took a deep breath and vowed that I would enjoy the night. If any situations arose, I would just deal with them as they occurred. "You look beautiful."

I turned to the man on the elevator with me and gave him a tight smile. "Thank you."

He was in a tuxedo and looked to be going to the same place I was going. I could see his eyes scan me from my peripheral, and he licked his lips. He was making me extremely uncomfortable. "Are you going to the benefit solo?"

“Yes. I’m one of the organizers, so it’s work for me.”

“Ahh. I understand. Surely that would have to be the only reason you are alone. I’m sorry. My name is Terry Griffin.”

He extended his hand, and I hesitantly shook it as the elevator came to a stop. As I pulled away, he gripped it. “I hope I can get to know you in the future, Miss...?”

“Are you okay, Ms. Domingue?”

I looked away from him to see Mr. Joseph standing there at the opening of the elevator with a slight frown on his face. I quickly pulled my hand away from Terry’s as I nodded at Mr. Joseph. He held out his arm, and I looped mine around his. “Thank you. That was extremely awkward.”

“I got that vibe. Enjoy your night.”

He released me at the entrance, and I watched him give Terry Griffin a death stare. While I knew he was security and this was his job, it seemed a little more involved than that. I headed to where I needed to be, with the ladies from HR and other administrative offices. I’d been employed at St. Elizabeth Hospital for eight years as a health services administrator, and I knew it wouldn’t be long before I could name my price at a larger network of hospitals, most likely in Houston. I was up for the challenge. It wasn’t like I had a reason to stay here, other than for Aina to be close to Gabriel’s family.

After this event, we could get back to the real work of coordinating services, implementing programs, and making sure things ran smoothly. I couldn’t wait. It was what I loved and had gone to school all that time for. Not only did I have a BA, but I also had a master’s degree in health services administration and in public administration. The job was demanding, but it was so worth it. We were the group that kept the hospital running efficiently, and I took that job seriously, not only for the patients in our care, but for the medical staff we employed.

As I glanced around the room, I could see Mr. Joseph walking around. He must’ve been the floater for the event. He

seemed to be extremely efficient. There was something dark about him, though, and it only attracted me more. His eyes met mine, and I hurriedly looked away. Glancing at the time, I could see we only had five minutes before the program would begin. I was never nervous about speaking at these types of events, but Ali Joseph had me at the point of perspiring.

It seemed that every time I glanced his way, he was staring at me. The vibrations in my clutch brought my attention to it. I quickly pulled my phone from it to see a picture message from my baby. Her smile was so infectious. Her grandmother must have helped her type a message. *Have fun, Mommy!*

I quickly took a selfie and sent it to her. *I miss you already!* She would be spending the night there at Ms. Maria's house, and I would be staying here at the hotel. She often had to stay with her grandmother whenever I had benefits of this magnitude. Every now and then, they would accompany me and just stay in the hotel room, especially when there was a conference of some sort. Although Ms. Maria and I got along, I wouldn't say we were that close. She loved her granddaughter though.

As I approached the platform, it seemed Mr. Joseph appeared out of nowhere to help me up the couple of stairs. I gave him a slight smile as I said, "Thank you."

He nodded then took a step back and watched me as I walked to the podium. Doing my best to push him to the back of my mind, I pulled the mic down and greeted everyone, welcoming them to our benefit. After I paused for applause, my eyes met Terry Griffin's. He winked at me, and I couldn't help but glance in Mr. Joseph's direction. His eyes were on me, but he wore a frown.

I wasn't sure why I was looking for him to protect me from this man's harmless flirting, but it was like I wanted him to rescue me. I continued with what I was saying and introduced the master of ceremony for the night. Thankfully, I was proactive and got someone to do this instead of me having to be at the mic all night. He was a local comedian and should garner some laughs.

Once I was exiting the stage, Mr. Joseph approached the stairs and waited for me so he could help me down. I turned to him and said, “Thank you.”

He nodded without a word, then disappeared into the background. *God, what is he doing to me?* I walked to my seat and sat, immediately picking up a napkin and patting my face. A couple of the ladies at the table glanced at me, but no one said a word. Suddenly, I just wanted this night to be over, although I was really looking forward to seeing Alex Isley perform.

The first speaker had been introduced, and as he was making his way to the podium, I took the opportunity to scan the room. Mr. Joseph’s guys were on it. They were extremely attentive and moved in different locations when someone was walking. I was impressed. One guy that worked for him looked familiar to me though. I wasn’t sure where I’d seen him before, but it surely seemed as if I’d seen him before.

The speaker had been at the podium for at least ten minutes, and I hadn’t heard a word he said. I really wanted to take out my phone and text my baby, but I would be reprimanded for sure. Within another five minutes, he was done speaking, and the emcee got up and introduced the band. I was ready to dance a bit and have a drink to calm my nerves. Before I could fully leave the table, Terry Griffin was standing there.

I wanted to roll my eyes. “Ms. Domingue, would you like to dance?”

“No, thank you.”

“Well, can I escort you to get a drink?”

“No, sir. Thank you though.”

This man had to be able to take a hint. I didn’t know who he was, but he had to realize I wasn’t interested. He looked old enough to be my father... maybe sixty-five or so. While I thought some older men looked distinguished, this man looked like he would give me worms. His beard was extremely

unkempt, but it seemed that was on purpose. I swore he looked like Don King with a bad beard.

As I made my way to the bar, I noticed he was still behind me. While I wanted to be ugly and just turn around and tell him to get the fuck away from me, that wasn't my style. I tried to be kind to people, even when they didn't deserve it. He stepped beside me and asked, "Can I make a suggestion?"

I wanted to roll my eyes, but I restrained myself. "Sure."

"The Château D'Yquem."

I frowned slightly. I had never heard of it. "I don't know about that."

"Just try it."

I nodded at the bartender, and he poured a glass for me as Terry placed money in the tip jar. I took it from him and brought the glass to my lips. *Hmm*. It was actually better than I thought it would be. I nodded repeatedly. "This is good. Thanks."

He brought his hand to my elbow and tried to steer me to his table. "Mr. Griffin, I would prefer to be alone."

"Call me Terry. Please join me. I would love to have company while listening to Alex Isley. I listened to some of her music when I found out she would be the entertainment, and I must say, I love her voice."

"Terry, while you're probably a nice man, I would prefer to be at the table with my colleagues."

I turned to walk away, and he, again, gripped my elbow. He was about to catch this wine in his face. Just as I was about to turn around again, Mr. Joseph approached us. "Would you like me to escort you to your table, Ms. Domingue?"

"Yes, please. Mr. Griffin, enjoy the rest of your night, sir."

I quickly walked away. "You should probably tell him to fuck off. He'll understand that shit better."

I stared up at Mr. Joseph to meet his gaze. "Thank you once again, Mr. Joseph."

He nodded and made his way back to Mr. Griffin. It felt like I came in my panties. I could hear the thug in his tone. It was far from the professional tone he'd used just a little while ago. "Who is he, Riley?"

I cleared my throat and sat in my chair, realizing that I was still standing there staring at the man's back. "He's Ali Joseph, the owner of Watchful Eyes P.I. Firm."

"He has watchful eyes alright. They've been watching you."

I turned to see the smirk on Alicia's face. I rolled my eyes and turned my attention to the people dancing to the oldies the band was playing. Everyone looked to be having an amazing time, and I couldn't be happier. As I nursed my drink, I scanned the crowd again and caught a glimpse of Ali Joseph. I was truly intrigued by just who I *thought* he might be. Simply the appearance of him had me in awe, but if he was a bad boy, then I was already hooked.

CHAPTER 5

ALI

“**W**hy don’t you stay and try to talk to her? She seems like she’s feeling you,” Jericho said.

I glanced at him as everybody headed to their cars. I hadn’t been able to keep my eyes off Riley Domingue all night. When she got up to dance with her coworkers, I bricked up something fierce. The fact that she seemed to be looking for me only made things worse. I’d done some digging into her background. She was as hood as they came. She was raised in Beaumont’s north end, between Magnolia and Pine Street, near the old fair grounds. That was one of the areas in Beaumont that just represented struggle to me.

It was why they moved the state fair to Ford Park. Had to be. The white people were probably scared to be in the area at night. While Riley was educated, she knew what it was like to be in the trenches. This nice woman front she was putting up for the white people was cool though. It showed me she could adapt in any environment. I was pretty sure that I reminded her of her past too. Her boyfriend was Hispanic. While I didn’t totally identify with that culture, it was definitely in my DNA makeup. I only knew the language.

Most people assumed I was Hispanic before I opened my mouth. I looked like my mother and took most of her physical attributes. My inner workings were definitely that of my father though. I took a deep breath as I thought about what Jericho had said. He wasn’t looking at me, but I knew he was waiting on an answer. “I think I *will* stay. I may not talk to her, but you know how I do.”

He slowly shook his head. “Stop letting Camila run your life. All women aren’t like her, man.”

“I know.”

With that, he walked away, and we got on our jobs, making sure the parking lot was secure as people ended their nights. The benefit had gone smoothly, and Alex Isley had done a really good set. She even threw in a couple of Isley Brothers classics to get the older people grooving. My phone had been buzzing in my pocket all night, threatening to distract me from the job at hand. I knew it was Camila. Anyone else that could possibly be calling was here tonight... except for Jungle’s uncivilized ass.

I refused to check my phone, though, until my job was done, and I was just about to be done. The last of the guests were getting in their cars. I made my way back inside the hotel to see if anyone remained in the ballroom and didn’t see a soul. *I guess she left, and I missed her.* Taking a deep breath, I made my way back outside to dismiss the guys from duty.

I went to Shy and Seneca and said, “I believe we’re done for the night. Thanks, y’all. We were on our shit tonight. I mean, we always are, but they shouldn’t have any complaints. When I cash this check, I’ll pay y’all. Should be Monday evening.”

“You talking to us like you not coming back to the office. What’s up?” Seneca asked.

“Just something I need to look into. I’ll holla at y’all niggas later.”

Seneca was frowning, and I knew he wanted more answers than what I gave, but I was sure he would put two and two together before they left the premises. After talking to the other group of fellas and relieving them of their duty, I headed back inside. Riley Domingue was still here, because I noticed her car in the parking lot. She had a blacked-out Benz.

Although I’d researched her to the T, there were some things that research wouldn’t tell me. I wanted to know her. That alone was unusual for a nigga like me. I’d shunned love

since Dahlia. I'd promised myself that I would never be so trusting of women ever again. While I was somewhat sensitive concerning them, I didn't ever want to risk getting hurt again. That shit made me feel weak and like a sucker.

I'd fucked around plenty. I honestly thought I was gonna fuck Talisha until I saw her in person without the makeup. That night after we left the restaurant, I wanted to give it to her. Something told me not to do it though. Had I fucked that girl, I would've really had to kill her. This dick I was packing around wasn't for the faint at heart. That muthafucka would grab a bitch by the throat and turn her ass inside out.

I sat at the far end of the bar so I could see the area. I didn't like sitting with my back to the room. Because of my past, I always expected shit to go sour. Whenever we were having a good time as a family, my mama fucked shit up with her bullshit. I pulled my phone from my pocket and looked to see she had called seven times and left three text messages.

Text 1: *Hijo call me.*

Text 2: *I need your help. I spent all the money you gave me and Frost's money on some clothes.*

Text 3: *Ali... please? He's gonna kill me when he finds out.*

I closed my eyes, wanting to not care about shit she had going on. My heart wouldn't let me do it for some reason. Just as I was about to stand, Riley Domingue sat at the bar. She'd taken off her formal gown and was back in the leggings she had on earlier. I stared at her for the longest while she ordered a drink and played on her phone.

She seemed to like the peace of being alone. I took a sip of my Crown and studied her features a little more. She had a slight smile on her face as she typed on her phone. I knew she had a daughter, so that was probably who she was messaging. As far as I could tell, she hadn't been in any relationships since her boyfriend was killed over two years ago.

She obviously didn't pay attention to her surroundings. I'd been watching her for ten minutes, and she hadn't bothered to look around the bar at all. I stood from my seat and grabbed

my glass, making my way to her. She finally looked up when I was nearly sitting on the stool next to her. “Mr. Joseph, hi.”

“What’s up, Ms. Domingue? Call me Ali.”

She nodded nervously. “Call me Riley.”

I nodded in return as she asked, “Are you staying here at the hotel?”

“Naw. I was waiting to see you.”

I turned to her and stared into her eyes. She was nervous as hell, and her cheeks were turning pink. “See me? Umm... why?”

I frowned slightly. “I figured you would prefer my company over Terry Griffin’s,” I said as I tilted my head in his direction.

He was walking toward the entrance but had caught a glimpse of her. He was about to head in her direction until he saw me sit next to her. That nigga had been trolling the whole fucking hotel trying to see who he could see. Riley turned her head to see him. She turned back to me and smiled. “Yeah. I always have old men flirting with me. Ugh!”

I bit my bottom lip, debating within myself on whether I would be straightforward with her or not, but then I decided to just go for it. If she didn’t bite, then I wouldn’t be like Terry Griffin. I would take a step back. “I’m not that old. Just thirty-four.”

She stared over at me. “Huh?”

“You said old men are always flirting with you. I’m not old, baby. I’m trying to get to know you.”

She fidgeted nervously. I glanced down at her leg to see it bouncing. “Mm. I didn’t realize you were flirting, Mr. Joseph.”

“Ali,” I said as I slid my fingertip down her arm.

The goosebumps invaded her flesh. I stared back up at her and continued. “I don’t show attention to women I’m not interested in. The flirting was subtle and just seemed like I was

being nice and doing my job. I'm not a nice person, Riley, but I can surely be nice to you."

Her body shuddered, and she looked extremely uncomfortable. I backed away and took another sip of my drink while I waited on her response. She downed her glass of wine and asked for another as I appeared to be staring at my drink. My peripheral was a beast. I could scope out the entire bar without directly looking at anyone.

"I'm attracted to you too, Ali."

I turned to her and bit my bottom lip, then smiled at her. When I grabbed her hand, she smiled. "Why do I have a feeling you know more about me than I do about you?" she asked.

"Because I do. I don't step into any meeting or interaction blindly. I'm a private investigator. If possible, I check out anybody I'm meeting beforehand."

She leaned into me slightly and stared up at me. "So what did you find out?" she asked softly.

My dick sprang up like she'd put her thick ass lips on him. She glanced down at him but didn't seem the least bit surprised. She knew she was sexy and that she had that sex appeal to cause that reaction in men. I leaned in closer to her, too, showing her that I could be a tease as well.

"You're thirty-five, have a four-year-old daughter. You ain't as cultured and refined as you portray. You just as hood as me. You like bad boys, and I'm turning you the fuck on. If you staying here tonight, let me take care of that fire you feeling on the inside. Although, if I have you, you gon' definitely want me again. I have the feeling that being with you once will be impossible too."

I slid my hand up her thigh as her lips brushed against mine. It took a lot to not grip the back of her neck and kiss her. She slid her fingertips over my neck, studying my tattoos. My entire body was covered, except my face and feet. My hand made its way up her thigh as her fingers went on a journey of their own.

She'd gotten to the front of my neck and had slid them to my beard. My dick was begging to be put out of his misery. It had been a while since he'd been within anyone's walls. She licked her lips and said, "It's been a while since I've felt this way about anybody. Something about you draws me to you. There's a darkness with you, and it only makes me wanna know more, but something tells me that you won't be forthcoming with anything about you."

"That's those street smarts coming through. What's up though? You gon' let me come to your room, baby?"

I kissed her neck then gently bit her earlobe. Something was telling me she would handle my dick like it had never been handled, and I was all for that shit. "I don't know you, Ali. I'm not a fast mover like that. I need to know more about you," she said then let out a slight moan.

"I'll tell you whatever you wanna know while I'm stroking your pussy. Give it to me, Riley."

She shivered against me and squeezed her thick thighs together. I stood from my stool and wrapped my arm around her waist. Her legs spread for me to step in between them, and her arms slid around my waist. "Ali, this isn't me."

"Oh, but it is. My presence is going to help you know parts of yourself you've never met. Let me introduce you to one of those many parts."

I slid her off her stool and reached in my pocket and dropped a bill on the bar top. She licked her lips then grabbed my hand and led me to the elevator. My phone buzzed in my pocket, and just the thought of who it was made my dick deflate a lil bit. The elevator doors opened as soon as she pushed the button. I could see the rise and fall of her chest as she hit the six for the sixth floor.

I leaned against the wall and pulled her to me. She molded her body into mine then slid her fingers over my bottom lip, revealing my grill covering my bottom teeth. "Mm," she said through an exhale.

Not being able to restrain myself any longer, I lowered my lips to hers and kissed her passionately. I could feel my body heating up as she slid her tongue to mine. This probably wasn't a good thing, but I didn't want to stop. When the doors opened, she pulled away from me and grabbed my suit jacket, pulling me with her.

My dick was at the point of painful, and he was gon' get his release with or without her. When we got to her room, I pushed her against the door, grinding my erection into her as she fumbled with the key card. "Open the door, Riley. Fuck!"

"I'm trying... oooh, I'm trying," she said breathlessly.

I slid my hand to her main attraction and gripped that shit through her leggings. "I need to get at this shit. If you don't want to have an audience, I suggest you get this door open ASAP, lil mama."

When she finally opened it, we nearly fell through it. I pulled off my jacket and yanked the dress shirt loose, buttons flying everywhere, then pulled her to me and spun her around, putting her ass against me.

I slid my hands under her shirt, lifted her bra over her titties, and pinched her nipples. Slowly, I descended to her waistband and slid my hands in them. Riley pulled away from me and took off her shirt and bra, then turned to me and began unfastening my belt and pants. Sliding my hand in my pocket, I pulled out my wallet and got a condom from it.

I immediately tore it open and pulled my dick from my drawers as my pants and gun fell to the floor. "I suggest you take this shit off before I tear it off."

She released the waistband of my drawers and turned her back to me to pull off her leggings and underwear. Riley was teasing me. When she bent over to pull that shit off her ankles, I slid balls deep in her pussy. "Oh my God!" she yelled.

I held my position as my eyes rolled to the back of my head. After biting my bottom lip, I gripped her waist tighter and said, "Don't fucking play with me, Riley. I'm gon' always win."

CHAPTER 6

RILEY

The way his dick masterfully massaged my insides had me crying out in pleasure. When he first pushed inside of me, I thought he'd split my shit open. The way he remained still, allowing me time to adjust to him was what I needed. I hadn't had sex since Gabriel died. Even though he was balls deep inside of me, I was starting to regret everything about what I was doing. The drinks had to be the reason I was feeling so loose. *Blame it on the alcohol.*

Ali pulled out of me and turned me over. When I got a look at his gorgeous ass body, I froze. *Damn.* He was covered with tats, but his dick was the fucking showstopper. Coming to me, he slid over me and gripped my neck as he hooked his arm under my leg, pulling it to my shoulder. When his dick breached my opening, I gasped.

He was staring at me the whole time, and that shit was making me nervous. I didn't know this man. *What in the fuck was I doing?* I closed my eyes and tried to enjoy what I was feeling, but my conscience was wearing me the hell out. He hadn't said a word since he first entered me, and that only had me even more nervous.

"Riley, just enjoy the shit I'm doing to you. Quit thinking so much. I know you enjoying this dick, because your pussy spitting that lube like crazy."

I opened my eyes just as he gave me more force and knocked the wind out of me. When I felt his mouth on my nipple, I relaxed and focused on what he was doing, as he said for me to do. "Oh shit!" I voiced.

I was feeling so lightheaded and dizzy. I didn't know why until my orgasm flooded the area. There was something exciting about this. Just the fact that I didn't know him turned me on more. I was literally having sex with a stranger. "Ali..."

"Mm hmm."

"Where you from?"

He lifted his head and fucked me deep for a couple of strokes, causing my legs to tremble once again. "Originally, Miami. Lived in New Orleans for almost two years, then moved here."

He said that like he wasn't tearing me apart, piece by piece. My back arched, and I released again as he went up on his knees and applied pressure to my clit. That seemed to cause my orgasm to last even longer. My entire body felt like it was going into convulsions as his dick continued to stroke my G-spot. "Oh my God!"

It seemed like my orgasm gained wings and decided to float along. My entire body had gone up in flames, and my eyes rolled to the back of my head. I opened my eyes to see him staring at me. I wanted to reach up and pull all that hair loose and just have my way with it. His braid was down his back, so I could imagine that when it was loose, it was a sight to see. "What else you wanna know, beautiful?"

"Do you have... kids?"

"No."

"Been married or... engaged before?"

"No."

I could barely focus to ask anything more. His dick was lethal, and I wanted to believe that he was right. I would want more of it. However, I couldn't tell if he was enjoying me as much as I was enjoying him until he closed his eyes and bit his bottom lip. "Mm," he hummed.

That was so damn sexy. He grabbed my ankles and stretched my legs high and wide as he wound his dick inside of me. I couldn't help but pull my hair. I couldn't reach him,

so that was the next best thing. His pace increased, and I realized he hadn't been giving me everything. "Give it all to me, Ali. I'll adjust."

He released my ankles and hovered over me as he pushed inside of me. While I thought my body had adjusted initially, it hadn't. He went balls deep upon entry, but when he started stroking, he wasn't giving me everything. Now that he was, I couldn't contain my body or its functionality. The tears were falling down my cheeks, my pussy was leaking for him like it was in love already, and my legs felt paralyzed.

His face was red. He was feeling the effects of what this was between us just like I was. Maybe that was why he was holding back. Maybe he didn't want to feel. He lowered his head to my ear and said in a deep voice, "You got some good ass pussy, Riley. I hope you ready, because I can be possessive as hell. Cum for me, baby."

He bit my earlobe as he moaned. I swore my spirit had left my damn body. He was killing me softly, but I knew the beast would make its appearance soon. His pace had increased slightly, and his strokes had become rougher. I wrapped my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck, holding him close like we were old lovers. My orgasm was stalling, skirting around the coast like a damn hurricane not wanting to leave the water.

Ali sank his teeth into my neck, and I moaned in excitement. "What the fuck did I tell you to do? I feel that shit right there. Let it go and let this dick change your fucking life."

I swore I levitated. He was so damn rough while he was so damn gentle. I felt crazy as fuck. My body was trembling uncontrollably. I turned my head and bit his earlobe as my orgasm hit me like a typhoon. It felt like I went blind and deaf, but Ali began ravaging my shit like I had lost feeling or something. I screamed, but my pussy was enjoying that shit, because after only ten seconds, another wave hit me.

"Oh, you like that thug shit. I forgot. Let me show you something."

After kissing my neck like he was about to make love to me, this nigga went up on his knees and pulled my leg to the other side of him, turning me on my side, his dick never leaving my pussy's confines. He popped my ass and leaned over me and fucked me hard, until I was literally crying. He didn't let up until I'd cum all over him again. Not long after, he began nutting in the latex, but this fucking thug stroked me right through that shit.

He'd grabbed ahold of my breasts and hair, making them the focus points of his aggression as he plummeted in me like it would be his last time. As I panted, he pulled out of me and walked away. I wasn't sure what was up, but he wouldn't even look at me. I sat up and watched him go to the bathroom to clean up. He brought me back a towel, but he was looking above my head. I frowned then stood from the bed. I stood right in front of me. "Look at me."

His head dropped back a bit, then he lowered it to stare me in the eyes. I saw the torment in them. I wasn't sure what was bothering him, but whatever it was, it was something heavy. I went up on my tippy toes and kissed his lips, sliding my tongue to his. He gripped me by my neck, separating our kiss for a moment, then he gave in to me, sloppily kissing me, like he was ready for whatever. When I felt his dick against my stomach, I knew that he was indeed ready.

He pulled away from me and said, "I hope you know how to work around those braces with a dick in your mouth."

He put his hands on my shoulders and gently pushed me to my knees. My God, this man was something serious. However, I was afraid that after this, I wouldn't see him again, just by the way he was behaving before I asked him to look at me. I stared up at him as I admired his gorgeous body. He was flawless, even with his navel being positioned a little higher than most. That was the only flaw I noticed. I didn't even know if I would call it a flaw.

"Take your hair loose," I requested.

He frowned as he stared at me. I maintained my gaze until he reached behind him and began doing as I asked of him. I

pulled his anaconda into my mouth and began teasing it. After a few seconds, I deep throated his shit, taking as much of him as humanly possible. When he moaned, I looked up at him to see his head tilted backward slightly, his eyes closed, his bottom lip tucked into his mouth, and him gripping his now loosened hair.

I didn't know how God could make this man so sexy. He lowered his head and stared at me. "This what you wanted?"

His hair fell to the sides of his face as he stared at me, and his dick slid from my mouth as my mouth fell open. "Damn."

He smirked, then laid his dick back on my lips, urging me to continue. I didn't waste any more time as I slurped him into my mouth, giving him my best technique. "Yeah, shit," he said softly.

I grabbed the base of his dick and stroked it in a rotating motion as I bobbed on it, letting him feel the back of my throat. He removed my hand and pushed his dick further into my mouth, causing me to gag hard. When I started coughing, he said, "That's the shit I want, Riley. Don't fucking shortchange me, baby."

I stared up at him as the tears streamed down my face. I was extremely angry that I was still turned on. His authoritativeness made my pussy contract, while my mind was saying, *Nigga, hol' up*. I hated to compare him to Gabriel, but shit, even Gabe wasn't this damn rough. I began sucking his dick like an animal... just reckless and shit until he pulled out of my mouth and shot nut all over my chest.

I could honestly say that if he would have shot that shit in my face, I would have done my absolute best to fuck him up in this room. He yanked me up from the floor and literally threw me to the bed. My damn teeth clacked together, and I almost bit my damn tongue. Before I could utter a word, his tongue had stroked my entire pussy, sending chills up my spine.

Suddenly, his roughness didn't even matter. I grabbed handfuls of his hair as he devoured me. He took his time, though, making sure he cleaned the plate. Hearing his slurping noises and feeling his tongue stroke and circle my clit was

taking me down fast. “Jesus... Christ!” I screamed as my orgasm surrendered to him.

He pulled away from me and wiped his mouth with his hand. Once again, he looked to be far away from here. He disappeared into the bathroom once again. I stood from the bed and was heading to the bathroom when he came out. He was literally about to walk past me. I grabbed his hand and said, “Stay with me tonight, Ali.”

“I don’t think I can do that.”

“Please? You gon’ just leave and make me feel like a ho? I’m far from that, and I know you could feel the resistance in my pussy to prove it.”

He stared at me. It looked like he was looking at me, but after further inspection, I could tell that he was looking slightly above my head. *What in the hell is up with him?* He took a deep breath, then his eyes shifted slightly. I backpedaled and gently pulled him to the bathroom with me. Using one hand, I started the shower.

I played with my hair in the mirror as he stood behind me. He slowly wrapped his arms around me and kissed my shoulder. I took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly. This man was a troubled soul. I didn’t know what I had gotten into, but I was more than willing to find out if he let me in. His eyes journeyed to the mirror, and he asked, “You lost a lot of weight, huh?”

“Yeah. I’ve been working out a lot to tighten up this loose skin. Is that how you knew?”

“Naw. When I researched you, I saw older pictures of you. What made you lose the weight?”

I looked away from him, and he said, “I got it. Grief... depression... loneliness. Despite the reason, you look good. Fine as hell.”

My cheeks heated. “Thank you.”

“I don’t know why you blushing. You already know you fine.”

“I do, but it feels good to hear it.”

I grabbed his hand and went to the shower. I glanced back at him, and he was staring at my ass. His low eyes lifted to mine as he said, “Don’t start no shit. I ain’t got another condom, but I don’t have a problem dipping into your born-again-virgin pussy raw.”

“You aren’t scared of STDs or pregnancy?”

“If you had an STD, I wouldn’t be up here. Don’t you think I know that shit already?”

I frowned slightly. “That’s protected by HIPAA.”

“HIPAA and Ali. Ain’t shit a secret if there’s paperwork. I’m a smart-ass nigga. What ain’t on paper, I can usually figure out. Don’t waste time trying to figure out how I get ahold of information. Plus... don’t make me regret telling you this shit either. Just like I can find out medical records, I can make muthafuckas disappear too.”

“Are you threatening to kill me?”

“The word kill never left my lips, lil mama. Get in the shower.”

A slight tremble went through me. Even still... I wasn’t scared. I was intrigued. Killers like him didn’t intimidate me. Hood niggas didn’t usually kill for no reason unless they were an ain’t shit nigga. Ali had plenty going for himself. He wouldn’t kill someone just for the hell of it. However, I was more than sure he had a body count. That only solidified his bad boy status in my book.

I grabbed my shower gel and loofah from the vanity and got in the shower. The moment we were in and Ali had slid the door closed, he rubbed his dick between my ass cheeks. I quickly turned to him, and he fell out laughing like some shit was funny. As I stared at him with a slight frown, he said, “I promise, you gon’ let me do it.”

He lifted his hand and gently stroked my cheek then kissed my lips. “I’m gon’ nut all in that ass. Just say, okay, papi.”

The goosebumps popped up on my skin, and he noticed. A smirk appeared on his slightly tinted pink lips. I took a deep breath and slowly shook my head. “Okay, papi.”

CHAPTER 7

ALI

As I rode in the Uber, I couldn't help but think about Riley Domingue. Sex with her had me a fucking mess. Just like I knew I would, I penetrated her ass and made her cum every fucking where. Once she fell asleep, I called for an Uber and got the hell out of there. She had me feeling all sensitive. I wasn't trying to feel that way. Looking into her beautiful, ebony eyes had me surrendering to her pull on my soul. I wasn't ready for no shit like that. I just needed to feel and fill her insides.

I probably should have found someone else to fuck, because more than just my dick was involved, and I didn't understand why. I didn't even know her... other than the shit I found from researching her. I honestly didn't expect her to concede as quickly. I thought she would have given me more of a chase. However, I didn't feel a certain way about it, especially knowing she hadn't fucked anybody since her deceased boyfriend. Riley was a good girl... hood, but good, just how I liked them.

It was nearly three o'clock in the morning before she fell asleep. I'd officially been awake for twenty-four hours, and I just wanted to go home and crash, but there was some shit I had to check on. I was on my way to the business so I could get my car, then I could ride by Camila's place. She'd called four times and texted a few times while I was with Riley. I'd never responded to her text messages from earlier.

When I called her back and she didn't answer, I got slightly nervous. I checked the doorbell that I'd had installed

at her place and didn't see her coming or going between the hours she messaged me and now. I was hoping that this wasn't the one time that someone would follow through with their threat of killing her. There was part of me that wanted someone to get the balls to do it though. I was tired of fucking around with her.

Then after I would think that thought, I would get angry at myself for thinking I'd feel a sense of relief if someone would just take her out. No matter how much she irritated me, she was my mother... a human that probably had demons she was dealing with that I had no clue about. There were a lot of unknowns about the way she grew up, especially since I never knew her parents. They were probably illegal immigrants.

Taking the time to sit and talk to my mama about her upbringing stressed me the hell out. The one time I tried to talk to her about it was when she told me that they came from Puerto Rico, and she ran away. Then she started talking about a lot of fuck shit I didn't wanna hear. She chose to ignore my questions about the pertinent shit, like why she ran away in the first place.

When I got to the business, I noticed Shy's car was there. I frowned slightly. It was nearly four o'clock in the morning. After getting out of the Uber, I headed inside to find him sitting at my desk with both babies in his arms and them screaming at the top of their lungs. I stood in the doorway frowning until he noticed me. He frowned right back and asked, "Why the fuck yo' shirt open?"

"Why the fuck you in my office with screaming babies?"

"Man, they been like this all night. Brittany was dealing with them all day yesterday. She said they both have ear infections. How the fuck a baby get an ear infection? I came here to give her a break so she could sleep. They been giving her hell, and now it's my turn. Now, what happened to you?"

I walked over to him and grabbed one of the babies and laid her on my chest. She snuggled herself into a ball, so I wrapped my arms around her tightly, and she stopped crying. Shy was staring at me in amazement while the other baby

continued to scream. Shy immediately opened his shirt and did the same thing I did, and the other baby calmed down as well.

“I fucked Riley, and now I don’t know what to fucking do with myself.”

He frowned. “What you mean? It’s been a long time since you fucked around. You feeling her?”

“Yeah. When I tried to leave, she asked me if I was good with making her feel like she was a ho. I was her first since her nigga died over two years ago. It was like, when I entered her, my soul said, *who da fuck is this?* I felt some shit I ain’t never felt during sex. My mind is telling me to run.”

Shy took a deep breath then tended to his squirming baby. I continued talking and changed the subject before he could respond. “Babies get ear infections all the time. It’s not uncommon. They get them more than adults do.”

“You thinking about her, huh?”

I glanced at him but refused to answer. Dahlia had a baby when I met her. That little princess was my heart. However, when I got rid of Dahlia, her baby and her mama went with her. Severing that bond with my JuJu was harder than leaving Dahlia. JuJu was almost three years old when I got rid of her ho ass mother.

It was like when Dahlia did that to me, all I could see was my parents in New Orleans. JuJu was me. She was innocent in the bullshit but would most likely be the one it affected the most... just like me. I hadn’t held a baby since JuJu until Shy’s girls were born. They were adorable, although they looked just like Shy’s ass.

“They just needed love, man. Skin to skin is the most soothing for babies. Lucky for you, I just took a shower. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have done this. You know I’m gonna go back and look at the footage of how you was trying to get them to stop crying, right?”

He chuckled. “Whatever. You better keep it to yourself. All the shit I keep to myself. I’m pretty sure Riley is a situation I should keep to myself, too, right?”

“Yeah. I can’t fuck with her no more.”

“Why? If you felt all the shit you say you did, why wouldn’t you want to keep feeling it?”

“Honestly? I’m not great at accepting love. Everybody is always suspect. I craved it when I met Dahlia. Now, not so much. While I believe women of color are the most delicate and beautiful creatures God has ever created, I don’t trust their asses.”

“Man... every woman ain’t Dahlia or Camila. Those two are the epitome of who not to fall in love with. I understand your hesitancy, but if love is something you crave, don’t let those two fuck it up for you.”

I glanced at him then gave him the baby back. “I have to go. I just came here to get my car. I gotta go see if Camila still alive.”

He just stared at me as I went to another room to change my shirt. I kept clothes up here at the office. We all did. I never knew when duty would call. Plus, sometimes, I slept here. I took off my shirt and jacket and slid on a T-shirt then headed to my car. The babies had started crying again, but I couldn’t be concerned with that right now. I had to make sure Camila was good.

As I got inside my car, my phone vibrated in my pocket. I was hoping it was Camila so I didn’t have to go to her place. I pulled it from my pocket as I cranked the engine. *I hope tonight isn’t the last time. It was more than I expected.*

That shit was way more than I expected too. I should have known better though. Just by the way I was paying extra attention to her and the way she had my insides melting, I knew when I slid into that pussy, she was gon’ snatch my inner being from me, and I did the shit anyway. She was so hard to resist, not that I tried very hard. Choosing not to respond, I dropped my phone in the console and continued to Camila’s place.

When I got there, it looked dark. I grabbed my heat and got out of the car to head to her door. There were a couple of

lil niggas watching me, so I gave them a head nod. They were always watching shit. They'd seen me unhinged on a few occasions, so I wasn't worried about them. I put my key in the door and attempted to open it as the music blared from inside. She'd left the music blasting on countless occasions, so that wasn't a determining factor.

The chain was on the door. She had to be here then. That only pissed me off that she didn't answer my call.

I took a step back and barged through the door. I heard a faint scream during the pause in the music, so I pulled my gun and made my way toward her bedroom, only to see her getting drilled from behind with her face buried in the pillow. The music was loud as fuck, so they never heard me. My upper lip twitched as I did my best to contain my anger.

This wasn't the first time I'd walked in on her, and I was more than sure it wouldn't be the last if I didn't let her ass go. Instead of alerting them to my presence, I walked out of there and left the door open. I was beginning to hate her, and that bothered me. I never felt loved by her anyway. Maybe I was searching for what I should have received from my mother. The only pleasant memories I had in my life were with Shy and his family.

I felt like the only reason I wasn't locked up or dead was because of how smart I was. I didn't know where that gene came from, because it seemed that neither of my parents had enough intelligence to make a better life for themselves. Although I hadn't seen my dad in years, I knew that his ass was still in New Orleans in Third Ward. Troy Joseph ran drugs and women and stayed in and out of jail. That didn't represent intelligence in my book.

I drove to my place... somewhere I rarely frequented. On my way there, though, I saw that muthafucka Jules. I was shocked as hell. I immediately hit Jericho. He answered groggily, "What's up, nigga?"

"Jules is in Beaumont."

"Kisa ou di?"

He asked what I said. When we were kids, he'd taught me Haitian Creole. I was fluent in four languages: Haitian Creole, Jamaican Patois, Spanish, and of course, English. Most niggas only knew I could speak Spanish. I had no reason to speak the others around them. "Nigga, you heard me. Jules is in Beaumont. I just saw that muthafucka standing at the car wash, talking to some niggas. They looked to be giving him directions. You need to get gone. Real shit."

"I'm not running from that muthafucka. You forgot who the fuck I am, Li? Fòk! He's a koko, and he's pulling the dangerous man I once was out of hiding."

He'd basically called Jules a pussy. "Jericho, calm down. Let's handle this shit together. Me, you, Seneca, and Shy. If you don't want Jungle and his guys involved, we'll work this shit on our own."

"Fine. Let's do it. I trust Jungle, but not his people. Some of those muthafuckas are foul. I ain't got time for bullshit. Where Seneca at?"

I pulled up the tracking devices I installed on their cars and saw he was at home. Only Shy and Jericho knew that I did that. Those muthafuckas didn't know how I knew where the fuck they always were. They thought I was following their asses. I shook my head as I thought about that. "He's at home. That nigga a family man now."

"Right. The last nigga I thought would settle down."

"Who you telling? You wanna meet at the office?"

"Yeah. Just us four," Jericho reiterated.

"Okay. Got'chu."

I formed a group thread between the four of us. *Meet at the firm at 10.*

That would give me time to catch a nap. I was more than sure I would be going to the Berottes' for Sunday dinner once our meeting was over. Although, depending on how serious this issue with Jules was, we all might need to steer clear of their house until he was brought down, especially Jericho. He

didn't go as often as I did, for obvious reasons, but he still went occasionally.

Once everyone confirmed that they would be there, I let Jericho know, then ended the call. When I got home, I was feeling like I could actually sleep, despite how my mind was racing about Camila and Riley. Once I got inside and to my bedroom, the minute I stripped down to my boxers, my phone vibrated on the nightstand. After I checked this message, that shit was gonna have to go on 'do not disturb' for a couple of hours.

I couldn't be there for everybody all the fucking time. I needed sleep. Had I relaxed and stayed with Riley, I would probably still be asleep. I picked up the phone to see a message from Camila. While I should have not read her message, I did. *Did you come here, Ali? Why in the fuck would you leave the door wide open? I was paying Kelvin what I owed him, and you could have messed everything up.*

I swore she knew how to fuck my mood up every time. Lucky for her, it was already fucked up. I glanced at Riley's message again, and before I could talk myself out of it, I messaged back. *I enjoyed you too.*

The message didn't make any promises of future hookups or something more stable either. It was what it was. When she didn't respond right away, I set my 'do not disturb' time block, then fell in the bed to get a much-needed nap.

CHAPTER 8

RILEY

I was sitting on the couch, still trying to recover from what Ali did to my body. I found myself zoning in and out. I wanted to go take a nap so bad, but Aina wanted to play with her dolls. No matter how tired I was, I tried to never turn her down when she wanted to play. That wasn't fun when I was a kid... not having anyone my age to play with. I always wanted to be around other kids, but I was an only child, so I always asked my mom to play with me. She didn't disappoint... ever. I wanted to be the same way for my baby.

As I sat there combing her doll's hair, she said, "Mommy, who's Ali? Is it Prince Ali from Aladdin?"

I almost swallowed my damn tongue. "Where did you see someone named Ali?"

"It was on your phone."

I frowned and grabbed my phone. My notifications showed on my lock screen. I'd have to be sure to change my settings. Aina had been reading for the past couple of months. She was doing so well. We'd started about a year ago, when she was three, and she just proved that she was learning well. One of her bedtime stories was *Aladdin* though. In the story, Jasmine called him Ali a couple of times, so she knew exactly how it was spelled.

I grabbed my phone as I thought about his vague ass text message from last night. *I enjoyed you too*. That only led me to believe that we were a one and done type of situation. I hated that because I liked him and thought he was better than

that. He answered every question I had the audacity to ask, and when he said he would stay with me, I was somewhat shocked. Despite his words, he was gentler than he put on. It was like he was trying to only give me his rough side, but I ended up getting so much more.

I could see his sensitivity shining through on several occasions. I wished I could crack the code to see more, but if he wouldn't allow me to be close to him, I didn't know how I was supposed to do that. He was all I could think about this morning and this afternoon. I needed a distraction, but I also knew I needed to answer my daughter. "Aina, baby?"

"Ma'am?"

"Ali did some work for my job. He was the security guard, and I was in charge of telling him what to do and when to do it."

"Oh! Well, Prince Ali wasn't a prince in the beginning either. Maybe this Ali will become Prince Ali."

I smiled at her innocence. I wanted her to stay that way for as long as possible. As I checked my phone, hoping that Ali had messaged again, I noticed it was just the notification center on the lock screen from the message he sent earlier this morning. It was like my heart sank. I'd broken my celibacy for a one-night stand. I was ashamed of myself. Letting him talk me out of my panties wasn't planned, but my inhibitions were practically gone when he sat next to me at the bar. I didn't know how he fucking did that shit.

"I'm sorry, Gabe. I replaced my final sexual memory of you with someone that doesn't even give a damn about me. How could I be so stupid?" I whispered to myself as my daughter frowned at me.

"What did you say, Mommy?"

"Nothing, baby. I was talking to myself. Are you ready to go to the store so we can get your snacks and Lunchables for the week?"

"Yes, ma'am! Let's go!"

For some reason, she loved going to the grocery store. She didn't ask for everything she saw, so I didn't know what the deal was. I slowly shook my head at her enthusiasm and went to the kitchen to get my keys. She headed to the car as I locked the back door. I unlocked the doors, and we both got inside. I put on a playlist that I'd made that was kid friendly, of songs that we both liked. Some were kid songs that she enjoyed as well.

When we got to the store, I helped her out of her booster seat. She grabbed my hand, and we headed inside. Once we'd gotten a basket, we walked around the store for a little bit so she could enjoy the scenery. I was tired as hell, but I refused to break our tradition. We did this every time we came to the store. She loved it. Whenever I was in a hurry for whatever reason, she'd be so depressed about it.

When we made our way to the bakery so she could look at all the desserts, my eyes lifted and landed on a pair I didn't expect to see. Ali Joseph. I wanted to speak, but I honestly wasn't sure if he would speak back. The guy that I thought looked familiar from last night was with him. He looked away from me, so I brought my attention back to my daughter... like my fucking soul wasn't hurt.

I'd never been involved with someone so cold. I wasn't a virgin when Gabriel and I hooked up, but I had at least maintained a friendly exchange with men in my past. We would at least speak. I felt used beyond the word, and I didn't know how to handle it. Aina stared up at me and smiled, then we headed to the freezer section.

We weren't big on sweets, so she rarely asked for any. The closest thing we ate to sweets were sugar free popsicles. We ate those often, even when it was cold. As we got to the freezer section, I realized Ali had followed us. I cleared my throat as he said, "Hey, Ms. Domingue. How are you?"

I wanted to roll my eyes at him, but I knew he was speaking that way because my baby was with me. "Hello, Mr. Joseph. I'm okay. How about you?"

"I can't complain. This your princess?"

“Yeah, but I’m sure you already knew that,” I responded, saying the last part under my breath.

He’d researched me, so he knew exactly who Aina was. He glanced at me as he waved at her. She smiled and waved back. “I’m Ali. What’s your name?”

She frowned as he stooped to her level. “Prince Ali! I saw your name on Mommy’s phone!”

Ali’s eyebrows lifted as he let out a slight chuckle. “Prince Ali, huh? I like it.”

She smiled big then glanced back at me. I nodded, giving her permission to tell him her name. “My name is Aina.”

“Wow. That’s a beautiful name.”

“Thank you,” she said as she blushed.

He had the same effect on little women too. He was a natural charmer. His smile was everything. His perfect white teeth were on display as he talked to my baby. “Are you in school?”

“Yes! I go to preschool. I like school, and I already know how to read! My mommy said I’m soooo smart.”

“Wow. That’s impressive,” Ali said while glancing up at me.

I wished he would just walk away. He was torturing me by standing here being all friendly with my daughter, when he was Satan with her mother. There was nothing holy about what he’d done to me last night and part of the early morning hours. I had to soak in my tub because my asshole was so damn sore.

He finally stood, so I gave him a tight smile as I grabbed Aina’s hand. “Have a good day, Mr. Joseph.”

He nodded, and I walked away as Aina said, “Bye, Prince Ali!”

“Bye, princess!” he said excitedly.

Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde ass nigga. “Mommy, Prince Ali was so nice! You think he would come play with me sometimes if I ask?”

I glanced down at her hopeful eyes and gave her a tight smile. “Probably not, baby. He has a life he has to tend to, just like we do. Okay?”

“Okaaaay,” she said, then quickly averted her gaze to the canned biscuits and cinnamon rolls.

I felt my phone vibrate in my purse, but I refused to look at it right now. I had a feeling that it was Ali. I didn’t understand why I was so upset. I should have been upset with myself for letting him slut me the fuck out last night. That nigga ran through every hole in my body and had me screaming for more. As Aina and I made our way up and down every aisle, grabbing what we needed, I could see Ali and his friend at the register. When I turned to get syrup from the shelf, I could feel his eyes on me.

“Mommy, Prince Ali waved at me!”

“That’s great, baby.”

“You don’t like him?”

“I don’t know him well enough to not like him, baby. He seems like a nice man.”

She smiled brightly as she watched him walk out of the store. My poor baby was smitten. When my phone rang, I pulled it from my purse to see Ms. Maria’s picture. I answered to see what the deal was. “Hello?”

“Hi, Riley. I’m calling to say I won’t be able to take Aina to school tomorrow or pick her up.”

She didn’t offer an explanation why, so instead of asking, I just said, “Umm... okay. I’ll take care of her. Thank you. What about Tuesday?”

“Yes. Everything will be back to normal Tuesday.”

“Okay. Thanks again.”

I looked down at Aina. “Abuela won’t be able to watch you tomorrow, so I’ll leave work early to get you. You may have to go back to the office with me, though, if I don’t finish my work in time.”

“Okay. Will I be able to color?”

“Of course.”

She smiled up at me. While I had my phone in my hand, I decided to check my text messages. Sure enough, there was one there from Ali. *Can I speak to you while your daughter is with you?*

Now I felt stupid. He was being considerate. It was probably the reminder vibration about the text. He'd most likely sent that before he approached us. I didn't understand why he would think that I wouldn't allow him to speak to me in front of her. I slid my phone back into my purse, and Aina and I finished our shopping. By the time we got to the car, my phone had vibrated again. We loaded the groceries in the trunk, then I helped Aina in her car seat, although she was very capable of doing it herself.

She was just growing up so fast. Gabe and I had talked about this... about how one day she wouldn't need us anymore. One by one, things she didn't need my help doing were being added to that list. It seemed like yesterday when she no longer needed me to feed her. Time was flying by, and I just wished I could make it stop or at least slow down. Before I knew it, she would be a teenager, not wanting to be seen with me.

After getting in the car, I checked my phone to see a message from my co-worker. She was letting me know that she wouldn't be at work tomorrow. *Great.* That would just mean I would have to go back to work after I picked up Aina. While it wasn't mandatory for me to handle her desk, she always handled mine when I couldn't be there, for whatever reason. I more than appreciated her for that, so it was only fair that I returned the favor.

I supposed I had better get home so I could cook and rest up for a long day tomorrow.

CHAPTER 9

ALI

“It shol in the hell took y’all a long time to bring that key lime pie and cake back!” Chad yelled.

I shot him the finger as Seneca smirked and tilted his head to me. Alexz was supposed to bring desserts, but she wasn’t feeling well, so she stayed home. That left us to go hunt down some sweets at the grocery store. “And fuck you too, nigga,” I said to Seneca as we headed back outside to smoke.

He chuckled. “So this shit with Jules is making my fucking nerves bad. If it’s just the four of us working, it’s gon’ take us longer to find his ass, and technically, it’ll just be three of us.”

I nodded repeatedly. “You right. Shy gon’ be at his office majority of the time. I can’t go against what Jericho wants though.”

“Yeah, you can. Shit. I’m not tryna bury that nigga. I’ve gotten close to him over the past year and a half. His brother know more than we giving him credit for. I’m willing to bet he got a squad, and he knows about us. There’s no telling how long he been here or how long he’s been watching. I hate that Jericho had us stop looking for his ass.”

“Me too, but what can we do about it now? Not a damn thang,” I said, answering my own question. “We just gotta make sure that our eyes open. Fuck what he say about subduing him. If you got a clear shot, take that shit.”

Seneca lifted his hand, and I held mine out for him to slap it. I already knew that was what else he wanted to say. I wasn’t about to play with Jericho and Jules. I remembered that fucker,

and he always gave me a hard time when Jericho wasn't around. I was just a kid. He was about to meet a grown muthafucka now though.

Although we were sitting here talking about Juels's ass, my mind was on Riley. She looked so fucking good in her denim shirt dress thingy. It looked like an oversized shirt, but I assumed it was a dress since she didn't wear pants with it. I was never good with the names of clothes. I just knew what looked fly and what didn't.

However, seeing her thick legs only brought my mind back to them being wrapped around my waist or when I had them high and wide like the peace sign. I wanted to slide through tonight, but I knew she wouldn't be having it, not in her place with her daughter. I was surprised she'd let her daughter talk to me.

She was overprotective of her, and I couldn't blame her. She'd lost her fiancé, and she had to protect what and who she had left. Her parents were deceased, and she was an only child, like me. Aina was all she had left. That little girl was so beautiful and, according to her, smart as a whip. I stared at my phone, wanting to message Riley, but at the same time, I didn't need to be around her right now. She would have me wanting to spend all the time in the world with her instead of working. I knew she had a job, too, but shit, I would be clingy as a muthafucka. Her pussy almost took my ass out.

“You good?”

“Yeah, I'm good,” I said, responding to Seneca.

“She got'chu. That shit happened when you weren't expecting it. You slept with her, huh?”

I took a pull from the blunt and said, “Yeah. I did.”

Even his dialect was changing from him being around Kaysyn. The old Seneca would have just asked if we'd fucked. Then he would have asked if she was cool with any of the ladies at the benefit. He didn't give a single woman at the event a second look. Kaysyn had his nose wide open. I could park a big body Buick up that shit.

Seneca nodded as he took a pull from the blunt I'd passed him. "You gon' talk to her?"

"I don't think so. I got too much shit going on. Camila is on my last fucking nerve."

My mama had been texting me all day. I'd also received a text from an unknown number, and that shit had my skin crawling. I didn't know why I got that feeling simply from an unknown number, but whatever.

"Baby, y'all better come get some of these desserts. Y'all know how those Berotte men are," Kaysyn said from the door.

Seneca smiled at her then stood and picked his pants up. "Y'all decided what y'all gon' do about Luckey yet?" I asked.

"Man, we ain't got no choice but to allow him to see them. I talked to Jericka and assured her that it was okay to wanna see her dad and that I wasn't going to feel a certain way. She seemed to relax almost immediately. Then she perked up. She was excited about being able to spend time with her dad. Everything about Ell's facial expression when Kaysyn told him said, *fuck him*."

I chuckled. Seneca could tell some fucking stories. "Man, quit lying."

"Yo, I didn't say he said it," he said, then chuckled. "I said his facial expression looked like that was what he was thinking. I mean, he's very protective of his mother."

"I know the feeling."

"Shit, you know that I know the feeling too. While my father was never in the picture, she tried to date some fuck niggas. I had to lay the law down every time she went out on a date. Gave her ass a curfew and everything."

"Nigga, shut up! Ms. India didn't abide by that shit."

"Yeah the fuck she did," he said as he began heading to the door so we could head inside. "She knew I would embarrass the fuck out of her if she didn't listen to my rules."

I slowly shook my head and looked at my phone. Opening the text message, my suspicion wasn't in vain. It was fucking

Talisha. I opened the message, and I almost threw up in my damn mouth. That girl was ugly as fuck. She could have sent a better picture than this shit. She looked like one of them flying monkeys from *The Wiz*.

After I got past the picture, I read the message. *Hey, boo. I need to come home. My mama is sick. She's in the hospital. Please.*

I rolled my eyes. I could put her, Camila, and Dahlia on a secluded island and forget about their asses. I responded, *hell no. And forget this number. How did you get it anyway?*

She'd messaged on my main line. I'd only given her a burner number when we first met. Every day I lived, I regretted doing that shit. She was like a fucking gnat that you couldn't get rid of. I should have killed her when she broke the windows at Watchful Eyes then dealt with the torture of my actions afterward. I felt like because of my many threats, she felt like I wouldn't take her ass out. My actions told her that I cared.

I didn't give a fuck about Talisha. I just felt guilty for leading her on. She was craving the very thing I duped her into believing I would give her. She messaged again. *Don't worry about how I got this number. I don't know why I'm asking you. I'm going to go see about my mama. Period, nigga.*

I took a deep breath and slid my phone into my pocket as Zay peeked out the door. "You not coming in, man?"

"Naw. I think I'm gon' head out. I'll holla at y'all next Sunday."

"A'ight," he said as he stared at me.

Isaiah was always analyzing somebody. I supposed it was the counselor in him that did that shit. He watched niggas as much as I did. I was scoping them out for a totally different reason. Well maybe not *totally different*. I was nosy by nature, just like those Berottes. However, I wanted to make sure they weren't trying to fuck nothing up. I could usually sniff out bullshit. My first time meeting Yolanda, I knew she was a messy bitch.

I went to my car, and I realized one thing. No matter what was going on or how many people was on my fucking nerves, Riley always came back to mind. My desire for her was strong. I could tell she was slightly offended with how I responded to her by text and in the grocery store. While I could be smooth with the ladies, her ass was making me nervous. I hadn't been into someone like this in almost ten years.

As I headed home, I took a chance and called her. Before I could change my mind and hang up, she answered. "Hello?"

Her voice penetrated my being and fed my damn soul. That was just how much she was affecting my very existence. "What's up, baby? You busy?"

"Umm... no. Just watching a movie."

"Can I take you and that beautiful princess for ice cream?"

She was quiet for a minute. "I don't know about that. I don't too much care for bringing people in my daughter's life that I don't know well. Her seeing you in a grocery store would be much different than us spending time together, like a damn family."

"I feel it. I just wanna see you though."

Again, she was quiet. I took a deep breath, trying to figure out what the fuck I was doing. "Ali, why do you want to spend time with me? The impression I got was that it was simply sexual," she said in a lower voice.

She was baiting me, trying to get me to say more than I wanted to say. I'd already said more than I was comfortable with. However, I would humor her with an answer. "You seem like a cool person to be around. I'm not gon' lie... I haven't been in a relationship in almost ten years. It's not something I'm looking for right now. I mean, I'm not totally against it, but—"

"It's cool, Ali. Maybe we can just talk on the phone, and we can hang out next weekend. You're saying that for right now, you want to be friends?"

I took a deep breath. “I’m saying, chill out, man. Just let shit flow. Why it gotta have a title? You wanna ride with me or not, Riley?”

“I like titles. I don’t like feeling insignificant. While that shit may work for you, it doesn’t necessarily work for me.”

“Fine. Maybe I should leave this shit alone then. I’m not giving you a title until I know you deserve the shit. I can’t call you a friend if I don’t even know what makes you tick. People crazy as fuck. Calling people friends just for the hell of it. As of right now, you’re an acquaintance and a fuck partner. How are those titles for you?”

“Right now, I’m about to be a bitch, ’cause, nigga, fuck you. I don’t include people in my life without purpose. If you wanna be here just to fuck me, then I don’t need you. If I just wanted a fuck partner, you wouldn’t have been the first in over two years. Right now, your purpose seems chaotic, and I don’t need that shit either.”

She ended the call. I smirked. I had to see if that hood would come out, and it did. I clicked her number again, and she answered. “What, nigga?”

I chuckled quietly. “Whatever you wanna do or call what we have, is cool, baby. I just wanna get to know you. Once I know you, I can decide what I want from you. I know for sure that I want that pussy though. You put it on a nigga. Can I have that shit again, Riley? Can I fuck you to sleep? Can I do figure eights with my tongue in that shit?”

Her breathing got heavier, and I knew she was imagining the shit I did to her last night. Hell, I was thinking about that shit. My dick had reached its full potential as I talked. Her silence only fueled my desire. When I parked in my driveway, I grabbed my dick through my pants and closed my eyes. A low moan left my lips as I imagined her bobbing on my shit, sucking it like it was worth a million dollars.

“Aliiii... stop. I don’t know what you keep doing to me. I thought it was the alcohol, but I’m completely sober now. You say you wanna get to know me, but I feel like you only wanna

know what's between my legs instead of what's between my ears.”

“I wanna know all of you. I'm trying to be patient and give you the option, showing you I can be nice to you like I told you before. That's just a cover up for what I know this is.”

“What is it then?” she asked in almost a whisper.

“That pussy belongs to me. Whenever I want it. I'm gon' pull up when lil mama goes to sleep, and I need you to come outside and handle this shit. You feel me?”

Her breathing was extremely heavy now. “Riley? You better not be touching my pussy. That's my shit. You hear me?”

“Yeeaaaah, papi.”

“See, you like that rough shit. Don't make me come over there and choke you. I know where you live, Riley. Nine o'clock. I hope baby girl sleeping.”

She was fucking with me. I was about to bust on myself. “Ali,” she whispered sexily.

I closed my eyes and leaned my seat back a bit as she said, “I'm about to cum.”

“I told you to quit fucking playing wit' yo'self, Riley. You hardheaded as fuck.”

“What you gon' do about it?” she asked through her moans.

“You gon' find out tonight.”

I was about to lose my damn mind as I listened to her quiet moans. “Fuuuuuck!” she whispered.

I opened my eyes and got out of my car with a hammer in my pants. My neighbors were outside, but I didn't give a shit at this point. Normally, I didn't draw attention to myself. I kept a low profile. When my door closed, the lady on the porch looked over, and she watched me walk to the front door. I grabbed my dick as she watched, and her lips parted. I winked at her then unlocked the door and went inside the house.

“I have to clean up, Ali. I’ll call you back.”

“No the fuck you won’t, wit’ yo’ selfish ass. You gon’ do all that shit in my ear and then hang up without me getting mine? Stay yo’ sexy ass on this phone, girl. Tell me how you gon’ fuck my shit up.”

She moaned and said, “You making me wanna cum again.”

“Good. I can’t wait until tonight when you sliding that pussy on all these inches.”

“I can’t wait either. I don’t know why you turn me on so much, but you do. I *do* know that my body already craves you, so I’ll make sure I’m ready to go see a man about a horse when you get here.”

“Mm. This horse ain’t been trained. That muthafucka wild as fuck. I hope you can ride a bucking horse.”

“Those are the best kind. Now let me suck that nut up out you, Ali.”

I dropped my pants where I stood and stroked my dick as I imagined Riley on her knees in front of me. I slightly swayed my hips like I was fucking her mouth. “Mm, take that dick in your mouth, girl. I’m about to nut in the back of your throat.”

“Give it to me then. Shit.”

I shot my shit all over my clothes on the floor as my knees buckled and my head dropped back. This woman was going to be the death of me. I couldn’t hold on to my reservations. I needed to feel her insides in the worst way. Although I’d nudded, my dick was still hard as a rock, wanting more.

“Riley, see what the fuck you did? Don’t be toxic, girl, manipulating a nigga with the pussy.”

She chuckled slightly. “I feel like I’m the one being manipulated though. I just hung up in your face a little while ago, and now I’m cumming all over myself. I’m feeling you, Ali. Just tell me one thing.”

“What’s that, baby?”

“Are you feeling me too?”

“You know that shit. Since I first laid eyes on you, I knew I wanted you in a hundred and one positions. Although I know a lot about you, I wanna know the real you, Riley. I’m just... trying to trust you. Okay?”

“Who hurt you?”

And that was a conversation for another day. I remained quiet, and she got the point. Hearing my other phone vibrating on the floor didn’t make shit better. I knew it was most likely one of my many headaches. I was about to go on a spree and just start taking muthafuckas out of here, starting with Camila. She was the source of all my issues. I didn’t need counseling to figure that shit out.

“Okay. I won’t push. Go get cleaned up.”

“Yeah. Nine o’clock, baby. I want you walking out the door. No panties or bra. Preferably wearing a dress like you had on earlier. I need easy access. Fuck!”

“Okay, papi. Talk to you later.”

She ended the call as I stared down at my hard dick. I didn’t know how I would get through the next few hours like this. He was gon’ have to calm his ass down. I picked up my phone to see another message from Talisha. She sent a picture of her at the airport. Yeah, she was gonna be as good as gone. I’d deal with my sensitive ass feelings later.

CHAPTER 10

RILEY

I was so fucking horny just from anticipating Ali's arrival. After getting Aina in bed at eight, I'd been doing everything I could think of where I wouldn't have to watch the time. Here it was at five minutes to eight, sliding my hips back and forth on the sofa. My clit was so damn sensitive right now, I was ready to cum.

I was shocked that he'd called me, based on our interaction at the store. However, Ali had done exactly what I wanted him to do. I needed him to tell me what the fuck he wanted. He was being private and vague. I needed to know the deal, and he finally had enough of my smart-ass mouth. He needed the hood side of me just like I needed the bad boy side of him.

When I saw the headlights in the driveway, I grabbed the monitor that I kept in Aina's room so I could hear if she woke up, and made my way outside. I was almost sure there was a wet spot on this flannel nightshirt with as turned on as I was. I didn't care though. Ali had turned me all the way out in a short amount of time. I told him I didn't need sex. That was a got damn lie. I needed it like I needed air. His dick had made me an instant fiend.

When I approached his vehicle, he asked, "Should I pull further to the back?"

I nodded and followed his car closer to the backyard. As I approached the passenger side, he opened his door. "Naw. Bring yo' sexy ass on this side."

A tremble went through my body at his words. The fact that he was trying to be gentle with me earlier had made me smile. He had a little consideration about him. However, the Riley he met wasn't the real me. It was the part of me that knew she had to keep a job to take care of herself and her daughter. The real Riley was almost the total opposite, and it took the right nigga to bring her out. Ali was the first man to do that since Gabe.

When I got to his door, he pulled his dick out of his pants and put a condom on, then pushed his seat back and pulled me inside, my back to him. He closed the door and said, "Lift up, baby, and take this dick home."

I did as he asked, sliding my pussy down it slowly. Not only was that to tease him, but also to be sure I didn't knock my fucking uterus out of place. Ali was blessed with what I believed God wanted a penis to be, because there was no way God was in agreement with anything under five inches. My eyes closed as my pussy tried to digest every inch of him.

Once I was able to completely sit on him, I began scooting a bit like I was doing on the sofa. Surprisingly, Ali didn't say a word in objection. I felt like he knew what I was doing. I was simply trying to work him in and allow my shit to adjust to his size. He didn't just have big dick energy. He had a big dick, period.

When I lifted slightly and began slowly bouncing on him, a moan left his lips. "Mm, yeah. I needed this shit, Riley. Fuck."

His hands slid up my legs and around to my inner thighs. He spread them apart a little more then gripped them. I came instantly. "Ali, shit!"

My inner thighs were extremely sensitive, and he'd fucked around and found out. "Give me that shit, girl," he said in a low voice.

I began bouncing a little faster and rougher as he met each one with an upward stroke. My eyes rolled to the back of my head as I slid my hands under my nightshirt and gripped my nipples. Ali wrapped his arms around me as he fucked me

back. When I felt his forehead on my back, it became more passionate for me, although he was destroying my cervix with every thrust. “Aliiii... I’m about to cum again.”

“Let it go then.”

Those were his only words as he slid a hand up my back and gripped my curly puffball at the back of my head. “Riley, let me be the one to fill your lonely nights like I’m filling this pussy. I can be here for you whenever you need me, baby. Don’t ever take this shit away from me,” he said in a low voice.

It was like he was in another world. His voice sounded distant, like he was reflecting on hurtful times. Hood niggas never usually came out and said what was bothering them, but I was picking up on clues whenever Ali expressed himself. He didn’t trust women, and for the life of him, he couldn’t figure out why he trusted me. He craved me as much as I craved him, and that scared him.

It scared me too. Gabe was the only man I’d felt extreme passion for. He was the only man I loved. Falling in love with anyone else seemed impossible. However, Ali was proving that not only could it be possible, but if things progressed between us, it would be inevitable.

“Riley, I’m about to nut, baby.”

I bounced harder, although my thighs were killing me. I pushed through because I wanted him to have my best effort. “Ahh, fuck!” he yelled.

He nearly scared another orgasm out of me. His grip around my waist tightened, and he rested his head on my back for a moment. When I heard a slight moan come from the monitor, I turned my attention to the baby monitor I’d brought with me. “Mommy?”

Ali lifted his head, and I turned to him and kissed his lips. “You wanna come inside?”

He turned red as he looked at everything but me. I grabbed his face, holding it steady. “Look at me.”

He frowned and pulled my hands from his face. “Go see about baby girl. I gotta go.”

I took a deep breath then grabbed the baby monitor and slid off his dick. Damn, I wanted him again. Instead of questioning his actions or being pushy, I said, “A’ight. Bye.”

I opened the door and headed inside as he pulled out of my driveway. I leaned against the door for a moment then made my way to Aina’s room, only to see that she had gone back to sleep. Going to my bedroom across the hall, I headed straight for the shower. It was going to be a long day tomorrow, and this escapade with Ali would usher me right to sleep... that was if I could keep my mind off what could possibly be troubling him.

IT HAD BEEN A DAY FROM HELL. I WAS TIRED, BUT I WAS STILL moving and grooving until the receptionist called me to the front desk. I’d gotten most of my work done, but I hadn’t even started on Elaine’s desk yet. That was what I was afraid of. Mondays were the worst. When I got up front and I saw the bouquet of flowers, I frowned hard.

There was no way this was from Ali. He just didn’t seem like that type of nigga. He would probably be capable of sending gifts, but flowers were a stretch. She smiled at me and said, “Someone has an admirer.”

I gave her a tight smile and took the flowers back to my office. The moment I set them on my desk, I pulled the card out and saw Terry Griffin at the bottom. I threw the card in the trash and went back up front to set the flowers on a table in the front. The receptionist glanced at me, looking like she wanted to burst into laughter. There was no way in hell I would accept a gift from that old man.

It was like he couldn’t catch a damn hint. I’d told him that I didn’t want to be close to him. Ali had intervened a couple of times, and he was still trying to get at me. He had to be slow. How many times did I have to reject him? I hoped he wasn’t

one of those old school players that didn't know how to take no for an answer. He was giving me bad vibes, and I didn't like that. I stayed to myself, and people usually left me alone.

It wasn't that I hadn't had men flirt with me, because I did, but when I turned down their advances, they usually went on about their business. Terry Griffin didn't seem to understand that concept. That bouquet had to set him back a pretty penny too. There were all types of flowers in it, and it was huge. I'd never received a bouquet of flowers so extravagant.

When I got back to my desk, my message light was flashing. I vowed to check it when I finished what I was doing. I couldn't allow these interruptions to throw me off task. I had to go pick up Aina from preschool in an hour. Hopefully, whatever Ms. Marie had to do today had gone well, and she would be able to pick her up tomorrow. While my job was somewhat flexible, the work wasn't. The last thing I wanted to do at home was work.

Once I finished the training schedule and who would do what, I checked my message before I left to get Aina. When I heard Terry Griffin's voice as he greeted me, I rolled my eyes. He let out a chuckle, then said, "I hope you love the bouquet. I would like to take you to lunch tomorrow if you're free. I have a proposition to offer you."

What the hell? What kind of proposition could he have for me? I wasn't even willing to call him back to find out. I grabbed my purse and headed toward the exit to go get my baby girl from school. As I approached the door, I let the receptionist know where I was going and that I would be back within an hour. I didn't take my lunch break, so I wouldn't lose any time. I knew Aina was going to want to eat once I picked her up. I needed a Cobb salad from Chick-fil-A in my life right about now, and I knew that was where she was going to want to go.

When I got to the school, the teacher was surprised to see me instead of Ms. Maria. Aina hurriedly got her backpack and made her way to me. "Mommy!" she said excitedly and hugged me around my legs.

“Hey, baby. You ready?”

“Yes!”

I chuckled and told her teacher goodbye. Once she was situated in her booster, I looked at her in the rearview mirror. “I assume you want chicken nuggets with waffle fries and a lemonade.”

“Thank you, Mommy! Can I get Chick-fil-A sauce, please?”

“Of course, baby.”

She smiled and swung her legs back and forth in excitement. As I drove, I received a text message. I was about to reach for it, but I decided to wait until I got to the traffic signal. When I did, I saw it was from Ali. I smiled slightly until I read the message. *I can put a stop to that shit if you want me to.*

I frowned because I didn't have the slightest clue what he was talking about. I texted back. *Hello to you too, nigga. What are you talking about?*

I took off from the light and made a right turn into Chick-fil-A's parking lot and headed to the drive-thru. After placing our order, I checked my messages to see he'd replied. *Terry Griffin.*

I only frowned harder. I wanted to call him right the fuck now, but I knew I would say some things my daughter didn't need to hear. As I proceeded in the line, I texted him back. *Again, what are you talking about?*

Stop playing clueless, Riley. You know exactly what I'm talking about.

I don't need you to put a stop to anything. It was flowers that I set up front for everyone to see.

Clearly you haven't noticed that he and I followed you to Chick-fil-A.

My head swung around and scanned the parking lot. I didn't see Ali, but I surely saw Terry Griffin in a parking spot, staring right at me. He was fucking stalking me. This man was

crazy as fuck. I glanced back at Aina, and she was in another world as she played on her tablet. I went back to my text messages and responded. *Is he stalking me? Are you?*

Why was Ali following me? Did I have two crazies after me? He responded quickly. *I'm following him. I don't have time to stalk people for no reason. Especially when I know I can get that creamy ass pussy any time I want it.*

I swore he could make me wanna cum on the damn spot. I wondered why he was hired to follow Terry Griffin. He probably wouldn't tell me, but it wouldn't hurt to ask. *Why are you following him?*

Don't ignore what the fuck I said. I can't tell you why I'm following him.

I rolled my eyes and pulled up to the window and got our food, then took off heading back to work. Looking in my mirror, I saw that Terry Griffin was right behind me. I was scared to get out of the car now. Instead of texting, I called Ali. "Mm hmm."

"That's how you answer the phone?"

"My bad. Watchful Eyes. Can I help you?"

"Yes, sir. I have a stalker, and I'm slightly nervous about it. Can you help me?"

"Hell yeah. Say less, baby."

"Thank you."

"Naw, don't hang up. I need to get in that shit tonight. I'll be there at nine again. You pick where."

"Ali..."

"Prince Ali!" Aina yelled from the back seat.

Just when I thought she wasn't paying me the least bit of attention, she always did something to prove she had her ears in my business. I put Ali on Bluetooth and said, "She can hear you."

"What's up, princess? How was school?"

“It was good! Are you at work?”

“Yep. Something like that.”

She giggled and went back to her tablet. I disconnected the Bluetooth and asked, “How long has he been following?”

“Since you picked up baby girl. I was pissed when I saw he was following you.”

“Why?”

He remained quiet as I thought about what he said last night while he fucked me like I was his. Finally, he said, “Because I know you don’t want to be bothered with his ass.”

“Is that the only reason?”

“What’chu talking ’bout, Riley?”

“Now who’s playing clueless?”

“I meant what I said last night. That’s why. I’m tryna fill up my free time with you and lil mama in the back seat. Just like that pussy belong to me now, so do y’all. Ain’t nobody finna be in your life unwanted. I have a particular set of skills, skills I have acquired over a very long career. Skills that make me a nightmare for people like him—”

“Negro! If you don’t get off my line quoting Liam Neeson from *Taken!*!”

I laughed so loud as I listened to him chuckle. He’d effectively changed the tone of the conversation, and I would let him have that one. With Aina in the back, I couldn’t say everything I needed to say anyway. I’d gotten back to the office and had parked when I noticed Terry had parked across the lot. I wasn’t sure if he would approach me or not, but I was more than sure that I was safe.

“Don’t worry. I got’chu and your lil princess. Okay?”

“Okay.”

The call ended, so I prepared to get out. “Mommy, you like Prince Ali, huh?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I haven’t heard you laugh like that.”

I gave her a soft smile and got out of the car to help her out. I couldn’t answer her inquiry just yet. If she didn’t push, I would leave her question unanswered. Once she was out, I grabbed her hand and walked around to the other side to get my purse and our food.

“Put your backpack on your back so you can carry your food.”

“Okay.”

As she did so, I saw Terry Griffin’s door open. I tried to remain calm because I didn’t want to alarm Aina. As he got out of his car, he smiled at me, then he reached into his pocket to pull out a phone. When he put it to his ear, he frowned and looked around. *Thank God for Ali Joseph.* I hurriedly got Aina to the door, and once we entered, I released the breath I was holding. Once I got her set up in my office to eat and color, I went to the restroom.

Call me.

I didn’t want to call Ali if he was still on the phone with Terry. That man was hellbent on getting close to me, and I couldn’t figure out for the life of me why. My phone rang, and I answered quickly. “Hello?”

“Yep.”

“Was that you that called him?”

“Yep.”

“Aliiii... what did you say to him?”

“Quit whining, man. I told him that he didn’t want to do what he was about to do. He wouldn’t live to enjoy whatever he thought was gonna happen.”

My eyebrows lifted in initial shock. I didn’t know why I was shocked. I was more than sure he probably had a body count. Gabriel definitely did. “Thank you.”

“No thanks needed. See you tonight.”

“Umm... would you like to join us for dinner?”

“I can’t. I have prior obligations. Maybe this weekend when I officially meet Aina the princess.”

“Okay. See you tonight.”

“A’ight.”

I leaned against the bathroom stall and took a deep breath as I held my phone to my chest. As long as Ali was following Terry Griffin, I knew I had nothing to worry about. He was definitely good at what he did, because I never saw him.

CHAPTER 11

ALI

“**S**urprise! I’m here!”

When I looked up and saw Talisha walk through the doors of Watchful Eyes, all I saw was red. Seneca’s mouth fell open as I flew to her like a damn twister. I jacked her up against the wall before she could even try to run. “What the fuck I told yo’ ass? I told you that I would kill you,” I said in a low voice close to her ear.

“Yo! What the fuck?” Seneca yelled as he ran over to us. “I thought you took out this bitch!”

Talisha was struggling against my hold, kicking, scratching my hands, her eyes wide, begging for her life. “Well, obviously, I didn’t. I should’ve though,” I said as she began to lose steam.

Seneca pulled me away from her, letting her drop to the floor. “Whatever the reason was that you didn’t do it, you can’t do it here. Not like this.” I glanced up at the cameras in my business, but I knew I could fix that footage. However, I didn’t know who’d brought her here. I knew she didn’t drive herself, because she didn’t have a car here. She’d flown in. *Fuck!*

This bitch made me lose my cool. There was clearly something wrong with her. Seneca was standing there in disbelief that I hadn’t given Talisha’s flying monkey looking ass the ax. I was trying to give her the benefit of the doubt since I was the one who initiated things with her. All of this was my fault, but she was taking shit too fucking far.

“I can’t believe you almost strangled me!” she screamed.

“Man, what’s all this commotion?” Jericho asked as he came around the corner.

He stopped in his tracks when he saw Talisha. He already knew what I needed without me saying a word. After peeking outside, he said, “I’m on it.”

This was something he knew I would have a problem handling. As kids in Liberty City, Jericho always had my back. It was one of the most dangerous neighborhoods to be in, but that was where we called home until I was nine years old and had moved to New Orleans. I had his back too. He always struggled with family. Although Jules gave me a hard time, I never cowered. I was always going to go hard for Jericho, just like he did for me with the females.

“You couldn’t just do what the fuck I told you, could you? I didn’t want to have to kill you. This was your last chance to stay the fuck out of my face. That was why I relocated you, because you couldn’t just stay out of my way. I told you several times over that I didn’t want you and that all that shit was a game, to get you out of DJ and Shavozz’s business.”

“No man can fake the tenderness you showed me, Ali!” she yelled through her tears. “It felt so real.”

“It felt that way because you wanted it so bad. I told you that before. I can assure you that it wasn’t real. You ain’t had shit going on that would have made me attracted to you.”

Seneca was quiet as he watched our interaction. This revelation had stunned the shit out of him. I was thankful no one else was in the office. As Talisha finally stood from the floor, Jericho reappeared. “Let me help you, Miss.”

“Stay the fuck away from me!” she yelled at him right before he snatched her up.

Seneca had never seen Jericho in action. That was why I had that nigga on my team. Apparently, no one was outside waiting for her. She had me all discombobulated now, trying to remember what the fuck I was doing before she walked her ugly ass in here.

It had been a few days since I'd had to threaten Terry Griffin. I'd called him from my burner phone and told him if he even thought about approaching Riley, I was going to shoot him on the spot. I was dead ass serious too. I was willing to kill for her and that little angel she had for a daughter. I'd spoken to her every day this week, and she had me feeling like I could conquer anything.

Riley was so encouraging and positive. Despite her hood demeanor, she didn't have an evil bone in her body. The person she'd convinced herself she was, wasn't who I saw. She was kind, loving, considerate, and passionate... everything I needed to mellow me out. I liked that she could flip the script and have some feistiness, too, though. She would need it to deal with a nigga like me.

I was going to her house for dinner tomorrow, and I almost couldn't wait. Being around her and Aina would give me a sense of family, something I never really had until I started hanging around the Berottes. However, I wasn't too close to any of them but Shy. No one knew the inner parts of me, and that was the way I wanted it. I didn't need sympathy, and I knew that was what I would get from the women, especially Alexz.

She tried to be hard, but she was as sweet as they came. I had a slight thing for her when we were teenagers, but there was no way Shy would have allowed me to go after his sister. Out of respect for my boy, I would have never pursued her anyway.

"I gotta get out of here so I can follow that bitch, Terry Griffin. Any news on locating Jules?" I asked Seneca.

The nigga was still somewhat in shock. "Umm... naw, I haven't spotted him yet. You'll know when I do, because I'm gon' be home for a couple of days afterward. Terry Griffin's wife has to know he's a fuck up."

"Yeah, but she needs proof. She just ain't gon' get the proof she needs if he keep fucking with Riley. I'll gladly reimburse her money after I take him out of here."

Seneca glanced at me and said, “I can’t believe you didn’t kill her. I mean, I can believe it, because of what you’re going through... but why you didn’t tell me? Jericho seemed to already know.”

“Jericho and Shy were the only ones who knew. Both of those dudes been knowing me since I was a kid. I was five years old when I met Jericho in Miami. I was eleven when I met Shy. I have history with those guys. No offense to you. You my dude too, I just... I couldn’t risk my rep like that.”

He nodded repeatedly. “I get it. Now that I’ve been with Kaysyn, I’m starting to understand things like that a lot more. I was raised by a single mom, and I would do anything to protect her, but she never put that to the test. She was always working or chillin’ at home. Your mom is a gangsta. For real, man.”

I gave him a smirk and said, “Yeah. I have to go check on her ass. I haven’t heard from her since her text after I walked out her shit and left the door open.”

“A’ight. You know I got’chu. You ain’t gotta withhold shit from me. I get you more than you know.”

I nodded then slapped his hand. When I walked out the back door, I saw Jericho’s car was gone. I didn’t know where he was going with Talisha’s ass, but it was probably best that I didn’t know. When I got in my car, I saw I had a few minutes before I had to catch up with Terry. I pulled up the tracking device on his car and saw that he was at home. He usually left at three to go ‘handle business’ with the medical board.

I took off in the direction of Camila’s place. She was going to eventually get killed. She was reckless and had no fucking direction. I was taking care of her financially, so I didn’t know why she thought she had to keep fucking niggas for money. It was crazy as hell. She’d been ho’ing for so long, though, she probably didn’t know how to stop. Niggas would stick their dick in anything. I couldn’t fuck no damn prostitute.

When I got close to her place, I could see her sitting on the porch, talking to some nigga. I pulled over and just watched them for a moment. He was standing really close to her, but

that was nothing new. I was more than sure she was trying to persuade him to fuck her for forty dollars. I rolled my eyes at the thought.

Here I still had almost four million dollars left of what Chad gave me and the million Sandrene had given me, and my mama was fucking strangers for forty dollars. That didn't make sense. She wore the best of everything. Even with all the fucking around she was doing, she was a beautiful woman. When we moved to Beaumont, she could barely speak English, but she learned quickly.

Her clientele was mostly English-speaking individuals. She no longer had my dad getting tricks for her. She had to get them herself. That was how she kept the lights on in the house. My childhood was hard. The only reason I didn't get teased in school was because I had to make an example out of somebody and fuck them up. I stole anything that wasn't nailed down and had taught Shy how not to get caught after he took up for me when I didn't know how to play basketball.

Camila stood from her seat and put her hand to the man's cheek, then grabbed his hand and led him inside her place. I rolled my eyes and slowly shook my head. There were some people that just couldn't be helped. Unfortunately, my mother was one of them. Putting the car in gear, I headed to my designated area to wait for Terry to leave his house.

As I did, a text came through. I looked at my phone to see it was from Jericho. I took a deep breath as I looked at the word 'done'. I felt horrible about that shit, but she was going to have me melting down on her ass. That wouldn't have been good for her or me. I was so close to that today. Had I not been, I wouldn't have let Jericho handle her.

The way I slammed her against that wall by her neck was enough to break that shit... her neck and the wall. I was trying to convince myself that her death was her fault and not mine. I'd practically zoned out thinking about that shit. I was no better than the men who abused women now. *But she pushed me to that!*

Just as I got close to their house and my hideout spot, I saw that nigga walking to his car. His wife had given me ink pens and all kinds of shit he used that I could possibly hide a camera in. She'd also given me the code to their home alarm and everything. When she told me he was a hard sleeper, I went there one night and mirrored his phone. The shit was way too easy, so I wasn't sure why his wife needed me until she tried to fuck the other day.

She was a nice-looking lady, but I wasn't about to get caught up in their bullshit. Plus, Riley was the only woman I wanted. I'd only dug in her pussy Wednesday night, but it was hard trying to do that in my car. We could have gone inside, but I told her that I needed baby girl's permission to be up in their house first. She'd giggled and called me sweet.

I had to remind her that nothing about me was sweet or nice, but she assured me there was definitely something there, especially when it came to Aina. I could only nod in acceptance. It seemed every little girl made me think of JuJu and the bond we'd established. She was who had me soft on little girls. Aina was only a year older than she was the last time I saw her.

There were times when I wanted to get in touch with Dahlia's ho ass, just to be able to check on JuJu. She had to almost be a teenager now. I was depressed for a while after I kicked her mama out of our place and out of my life. Not only was I in love with Dahlia, but that little girl had my heart.

As I followed Terry, my mind went back to Riley and how he had looked her over. That shit made my skin crawl. I wanted to fuck him up on GP. Mrs. Griffin didn't deserve that. I was just happy that Riley was nowhere near interested the night of the benefit. Had she yielded to his advances, I would have told her that his ass was married.

I was somewhat bound by confidentiality. I said somewhat because I knew if I said he was married, she would ask more questions that I wouldn't be able to answer. Just the fact I told her that he was my case was more than enough info.

When I noticed where he'd turned, my heart started fucking racing. That muthafucka probably knew who I was. He was at my mama's place. She had a couple of pictures of me on the wall. It was taking everything in me not to jump out of this car and go fuck his old ass up. He walked to her door, and after knocking and standing there for a few seconds, my mama answered with a big ass smile on her face.

I was disgusted as I watched her pull him inside by his shirt. She was just with another muthafucka a minute ago. The more I thought about what he was in there doing to my mama, the more disgusted I got. He wouldn't think I was watching him if I went in there and fucked him up. He would just think I'd come to visit my mother. I grabbed my heat and got out of the car, not even bothering to hide it. Nobody was snitching around these parts.

I was about to kill this nigga. I quickly texted Jericho, Shy, and Seneca. *Meet me at my mama house, ASAP!*

I walked through the door that she left unlocked and followed the train of clothes to her room. I screwed my silencer on my gun while listening to his grunts. I could hear soft music playing like they were having a fucking romantic moment. I opened the door to her bedroom, and the fuck shit I walked in on almost made me throw up.

Terry was taking it in the ass from that nigga that was here earlier and eating out my mama at the same time. He was their bitch. This was some nasty ass shit. When I sent a bullet through the pillow next to my mama's head, all those muthafuckas were running. "Ali! What the fuck!" my mama yelled.

"Shut the fuck up," I said calmly. "I'm tired of you taking my generosity for granted. This is my fucking place because I pay the bills in this muthafucka. Now both these niggas gotta die, especially this nigga. He was trying to holla at my girl last weekend." Turning to the other guy, I said, "Wrong place, wrong time, my nigga."

I shot him first, sent one blazing right between his eyes, then turned to Terry. "Your poor wife. She better off without

yo' ass anyway.”

I shot him right in his phony ass heart, then stood over him and sent another one through his head. Camila was screaming, so I turned my gun on her. “If you don't shut the fuck up, you gon' be next. Put some fucking clothes on and pack you a bag. Try some sneaky shit and you good as gone. I'm sick of yo' shit.”

My hand was trembling like hell as I lowered it. I'd never pointed a gun at my mama. All the times my dad beat her ass flashed through my mind like a movie on the big screen. I wondered if he'd ever walked in on some bullshit like this. I was on the verge of killing her ass, and I was only her son. I could imagine why he beat her as her husband. That shit had to fuck him up to know his wife was giving his shit away like that.

My phone vibrated, so I checked it to see Seneca had messaged. *Outside.*

Come in.

I heard the door open and close, so I said, “Back here.”

He followed my voice, and when he walked in and saw the dead bodies, he nodded repeatedly and walked off, making a call to the cleanup crews we used. One crew disposed of the bodies, and another crew cleaned shit up. I didn't know who this other nigga was, so his body would be burned to a crisp at the Broussard's Crematorium. Seneca's eyes never made it to Camila.

She was playing with my time. “Camila, hurry yo' ass up. I ain't tryna see you naked.”

“Why? I'm fine as fuck, chico.”

“Because you my fucking mother! What the fuck wrong wit'chu? Something happened to yo' ass growing up. Had to for you to be this fucking toxic.”

“Fuck you, puta!”

I went to her and snatched her up by her arm. “Put a, huh? All the shit I do for you and I'm a bitch? I'ma show you a

bitch.”

I yanked her to the mirror as Shy and Jericho appeared in the doorway. “You looking at it. Call that trash a puta! You ain’t shit and ain’t never been shit! How you leave a seven-year-old in Miami to fend for himself? You knew Dad wasn’t home. Huh? And you continued to do the shit! I raised my fucking self.”

“So did I! Nadie hizo nada por mi! I was alone all the damn time because my parents had to work. You had it good compared to how I had it in Puerto Rico!”

She’d said that no one did anything for her. That only pissed me off more. “That ain’t no fucking excuse. If anything, it should have made you want to treat me better. But guess what? I’m finna treat yo’ ass how I should have *been* treating you.”

Her eyes widened slightly. “And how’s that, hijo?”

“Like you fucking treat me. And don’t call me son. I’m not your fucking son anymore. I’ve always been a son to you, but you’ve never been a mother to me. This toxic shit ends today. I’m sick of it.”

The tears fell down her face as she put on her shoes. Her crocodile tears were doing nothing to settle me down this time. Usually, she could cry, and I would get all soft and shit and pull her in my arms. I needed her out of my life, just like Dahlia and Talisha’s ass. I needed to move on with my life without having to have all this fucking dead weight hanging from me.

She threw some shit in a duffel bag as the first crew came in. They scooped up both bodies like they weighed nothing, and I gave them instructions for Terry Griffin. His wife needed to properly grieve his ass. I went to the front room as Shy stood there waiting for her and found that Jericho was pulling pictures from the walls and shelves.

My boys had my back, and I couldn’t help but be grateful for them.

CHAPTER 12

RILEY

As I moved around the kitchen, making sure everything was ready, Aina appeared at my side. “Mommy, who’s coming to dinner? There are three plates on the table.”

She was so inquisitive, and she noticed everything. “Prince Ali.”

Her face brightened, and she smiled happily. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“I have to go change into something prettier! You do too, Mommy!” she said as she ran off.

My eyebrows lifted. I didn’t know where she’d gotten that from, but I sure was going to ask her. What four-year-old knew that she wanted to look her best for a man? It had Ms. Maria’s name written all over it. She’d brought her and picked her up from school on Tuesday and the rest of the week. She still hadn’t said why she couldn’t do it Monday. I didn’t want to pry, so I didn’t ask.

I made my way to Aina’s room, to see her pulling out her Sunday’s best. “Umm... why do you think you need to dress up like that?”

“I heard Abuela’s friend say that she had to put on her best outfit for a date with a man. Shouldn’t we want to look our prettiest for Prince Ali?”

“Come here.”

She came to the bed and sat next to where I’d sat. “Your beauty will shine through in whatever you wear. Ali... excuse

me, Prince Ali isn't concerned with the frilly dresses. He likes you for who you are. Okay?"

"Okay," she mumbled. "So jeans and a pretty T-shirt are good enough?"

"Absolutely. You look beautiful."

"Thank you, Mommy. You do, too, in your long shirt dress."

"Thank you. Now let's make sure the wine is cold and the spaghetti is hot."

She hopped off the bed and sashayed her way to the kitchen. If Gabriel could see her now. He would be overwhelmed with how much she'd grown and how she was becoming a little lady. He used to always say that he wanted his baby to be a baby for as long as possible. Well, it seemed she'd long left babyhood and was quickly approaching adulthood more and more every day. Before I knew it, she would be getting married and having children of her own.

I checked the time to see that Ali was a little late. He was supposed to be here by six, and it was ten minutes after. I grabbed my phone to make sure I hadn't missed any messages, and I hadn't. That was strange that he hadn't reached out. Although we'd only set times to fuck, he was on time down to the minute for that.

He was on time for the benefit as well. I turned the fire off so the spaghetti sauce didn't burn, then sat on the couch with a glass of wine. I figured I would watch a little TV while I waited. "Mommy, can I play with my dolls until Prince Ali gets here?"

"Yes, baby. I'm about to watch TV."

"Okay!"

She took off for her room, and I couldn't help but to keep checking my phone. I was hoping nothing had happened. Maybe he was just running late because he worked late. Gabriel was always late too. He'd call though. As I waited, I was bouncing my leg furiously. I stood and went and poured myself another glass of wine. I couldn't take the suspense of

waiting. If he hadn't reached out by six thirty, I would call him.

“MOMMY, IS PRINCE ALI NOT COMING?”

I opened my eyes, realizing I'd fallen asleep, and looked at the time. It was seven o'clock. I immediately grabbed my phone to make sure that he didn't text or try to call, and I somehow slept right through it. Nothing. Phone was as dry as a Popeye's biscuit. I turned back to my little princess and said, “I guess not, baby. I hope nothing happened.”

“Like what happened to my daddy?”

My heart sank from the position it was in, just thinking that because of what Ali did for a living, it could be a possibility. “I don't think so, baby. Let's pray for the best.”

“Okay.”

She walked away, her shoulders somewhat slumped. While I wanted to be irritated that we'd been stood up and my baby was disappointed, I couldn't help but be worried about him. I immediately called him. Him not answering only made me worry more. I had no other way of contacting him, other than to look up his business and make a trip to the office. I would have to be desperate at that point.

I closed my eyes and said a silent prayer for him, then went to the kitchen to fix Aina and me something to eat. My appetite was dwindling the longer it went that I didn't hear from Ali. This week had been great. There didn't seem to be a problem between the two of us. We talked every day. Although we didn't talk for a long time, he did carve out time before I went to bed to talk to me. Wednesday, we'd had sex again. I just didn't get it.

Sex with him... God. I found myself in a trance, just thinking about how he loved my body the three times we'd been together in that manner. The last time was so fucking passionate, although we were in the back seat of his SUV. I

didn't understand how sex could be so powerful with him when we barely knew one another. He rarely talked about anything personal, although he knew all kinds of personal information about me. I felt like his family life was the source of whatever his issues were with relationships.

Men didn't typically like talking about things that hurt them, for the risk of looking or feeling weak. Since when was anyone immune from the effects of a broken heart? I called Aina into the kitchen so we could eat. We were both quiet, and that was so unlike either of us. We always had something to talk about. Disappointment had taken over us.

"Baby girl, have you decided where you want to go eat after church tomorrow?"

"Can we go to Golden Corral?"

I wanted to roll my eyes. I never ate my money's worth. That was why I didn't like buffets. One small plate of food was enough for me. However, I knew this would pick her spirits up. I truly believe she was looking forward to seeing Ali as much as I was. She was indeed smitten, and I couldn't blame her. "Okay, sweetheart."

She wiggled a bit in her seat and continued eating her spaghetti and breadstick as I chuckled. My mind couldn't help but go back to Ali. Surely, he wouldn't intentionally stand us up, especially when he asked me not to leave him. He was about to spill his sensitivity all over me that night, but he pulled back. Now I was confused. Before I could get carried away in my thoughts, my phone rang.

I hurriedly picked it up to see a number I didn't recognize, hoping it was Ali. "Hello?"

"Hello. May I speak to Ms. Dough-min-gay?"

"Hi. This is Riley Do-main," I said, correcting their pronunciation.

"I apologize. My name is Hannah Vogeli. I'm calling from the emergency room at Baptist Hospital. You are listed as next of kin for Maria Saucedo. She's here, and it's not looking good."

“What’s going on?” I asked as I stood from the table.

“Her body is shutting down. It’s rejecting the chemo—”

“Chemo? She never said anything about that to me.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. We were just making you aware, in case you wanted to come to the hospital.”

“Yes, ma’am, I do. Will my daughter be able to come? She’s four.”

“In this case, yes.”

“I’m on my way.”

I ended the call and met my baby’s eyes. “Abuela is in the hospital. We have to go.”

“What if Prince Ali shows up?”

“He has my phone number. This is an emergency. Go get your coloring backpack. We may be there a while.”

She nodded and ran to her room while I put the food in the fridge. Normally, I used containers, but I didn’t have time for that. I put the entire pot in there. By the time I grabbed my purse from the couch, Aina was joining me in the front with her Dora the Explorer backpack. I hurriedly grabbed her hand, and we left.

I couldn’t say that I was emotional or feeling sad about what was going on with Ms. Maria. She was the only person relatively close to family that I had here though. My parents were originally from Dallas, so I wasn’t close to any of my relatives. However, the only reasons where we seemed to bond involved Gabriel and Aina. I honestly wasn’t sure why she listed me as next of kin. She had siblings and other kids who weren’t too happy about Gabe dating a black woman.

I rolled my eyes at the mere thought of them having the audacity to be prejudiced. We rarely went to family gatherings when Gabe was alive. We spent most of our time with my mother. His family never disrespected me, but they didn’t talk to me either. Gabe refused to have me feeling alone in a room full of people.

When we got to the hospital and had walked to the area where she was, they had the family in a consultation room. Maybe Maria had others listed as next of kin but added me because she knew they wouldn't call me. They all gave me looks as if I shouldn't be there but spoke to Aina like she wasn't part of me. Instead of waiting for them to fill me in, I asked, "Are they letting anyone see her?"

One of Gabe's cousins responded, "Yes. Just go to the desk."

I grabbed Aina's hand, and we walked toward the nurses' station. "Did Abuela ever tell you she didn't feel good?"

"She was sick yesterday, but she said she just needed to lay down and she would feel better. She took a nap, and when she woke up, she said she was feeling better."

"Okay."

We made our way to the counter, and they led us to her room. She'd probably just found out she had cancer. She'd lost weight over the past couple of years, but it wasn't anything drastic. I would have noticed that something was going on. We were around one another every weekday for at least five minutes. I wasn't sure why she felt she couldn't share this with me. What if something would have happened while she had Aina?

When we got to her room, she was laboring. I closed my eyes as Aina slipped her hand from mine. After reopening them, I joined Aina at her bedside. "Abuela, are you okay?"

Ms. Maria opened her eyes, and she smiled slightly. One thing I could say was that she loved Aina with all her heart. "Hola, niña," she whispered.

Aina began to cry, and it made me emotional. She looked up at me, so I asked, "When did you find out that you had cancer?"

"Only a couple of months ago. It was too far, but they tried anyway. My body hated the chemo," she said and began coughing.

I took a deep breath as Aina crawled in bed with her. Slowly walking to the chair, I couldn't help but remember how close Gabe was to his mother. Maybe they would be reunited now. With as weak as she was, she'd slid her arms around Aina. I looked around the room to see they only had her hooked to an IV. They were only managing her pain at this point.

Staring down at my phone, I decided to text Ali. My nerves were on edge. I didn't know what to think had happened. *Hi, Ali. You didn't show up for dinner and Aina and I are worried about you. Although we're disappointed, we just want to know that you're okay. Please.*

I could feel my heart sinking. Even while sitting here in front of a dying woman, all I could think about was Ali. If he didn't contact me by Monday, I would be making a trip to his office on my lunch break. I couldn't take not knowing. At least if he wasn't there, someone could tell me what the fuck was going on.

CHAPTER 13

ALI

“That lil nigga has been handled. We brought him to Broussard’s and watched them do it. That shit stank like hell,” Seneca said. “Griffin was thrown under a bridge in Vidor. He should be found soon.”

I nodded. My nerves were on edge as we sat at the Berottes’ for Sunday dinner. Friday had been rough. Shit, this past week had been rough. Allowing Talisha to be killed was bothering me, and getting rid of my mama was killing me. Yesterday, I’d spent the entire day researching that nigga Troy to make sure I wouldn’t have any surprises when I got there. I needed to talk to him about my mama. I needed to know what the fuck happened to her, because she refused to answer my questions.

When I realized what time it was, I knew I had missed dinner with Riley and Aina. My pride wouldn’t allow me to answer her numerous phone calls or respond to her messages. I felt like I’d let her down. I didn’t listen to her voicemails or read her texts. We’d eaten, and Seneca and I had made our way outside to smoke. I was about to light my second blunt when he stopped me.

“You good? Camila is good. I assure you.”

I nodded again. I’d shipped her ass off to a women’s shelter in Florida. My whole life had encompassed taking care of her. She took that shit for granted. She talked to me any kind of way, treated me like shit most days, and still expected me to pay her bills and provide her with the necessities, like food and hygiene items. I refused to subject myself to her

toxicity any longer. Until she could come to grips with how she damaged me, it was best for her to be on her own.

Maybe fending for herself would teach her... or maybe it would kill her. She may not have been able to function without me. Would I be able to handle if she died as a result of my actions? Probably not. I tried to stop loving her, and it seemed nothing I tried to do helped me accomplish that feat.

My plan was to call Troy Joseph this evening to see if we could meet up. Although he didn't see our resemblance back then, now that I was a grown man, I saw it. I had his smile and his eyes. I surely had his thug mentality. I'd watched everything he did and learned how to provide for myself. He gave Mama money, and she tricked it off. It was bad enough he didn't think I was his, so he surely didn't provide anything extra. We barely had a relationship.

"Yo, you good?" Isaiah asked as he placed his hand on my shoulder.

I nodded, and he did the same. Everyone knew something was going on with me, and I wasn't really trying to hide it. I felt like shit. After smoking my final blunt, I stood and shook everyone's hand and headed to my car. I couldn't deal with trying to socialize right now. The kids were everywhere, and that shit was getting on my nerves, because I wasn't in a good space.

As soon as I pulled off, I saw Seneca and Shy getting in a car together and pulling off to follow me. They refused to let me be, and that was why they were my boys. They wouldn't force me to talk, but they would be there if I needed them to. I was more than sure they'd called Jericho as well. I hadn't spoken to him since Friday. I was more than sure he was good, but that wasn't like me either. I usually checked in with him every day.

Mrs. Griffin had called, wanting to know if I'd seen where her husband had gone Friday. She'd only hired me to watch him for a certain amount of time each day. They'd waited to dump him yesterday, so the timeline wouldn't match. I honestly didn't think she would be that upset about it. Since

she asked, though, I told her I followed him to another bitch's house that he frequented, and that was where he was when I left him.

I wished we would have just destroyed his body. I let my inner shit get in the way of that, thinking she would want to grieve him properly. I normally didn't give a shit. It just fucked me up when he showed up at my mama's house, especially after I'd just had to get at him for following Riley the other day.

Riley...

I kind of missed her. My dick surely missed her. She hadn't slid that hot pussy on me in four days. It was more than that though. Her smile was infectious. The way she spoke made me weak with desire. I was so fucking soft around her, although she said she'd seen glimpses of it. If she only knew how rough I could be at times, she would understand that it was way more than glimpses.

When I turned in the driveway, there was a car sitting there. Who in the fuck knew where I rested my head? I quickly grabbed my heat from the console as I parked behind them. Seneca and Shy parked against the curb, and they both got out with their guns drawn. The door opened to the anonymous car, and a woman's leg hung out. I frowned hard as hell until I saw it was Mrs. Griffin. How in the fuck did she know where I lived?

I got out of the car with a frown on my face and my gun drawn as well. She lifted her hands and said, "I'm sorry. You didn't answer your phone. It's not necessary to return payment. You followed him and sent pictures of the places he frequented. Just because you didn't catch him in the act, you got enough information for me to research who lived at the places he went to. I came to bring your money back."

Good thing I didn't take a picture of him at Camila's place. I knew better though. That spot was in my name. "How did you know where I lived?" I asked her.

"I was heading to the store around the corner and saw you. Out of curiosity, I drove this way and saw you in the driveway.

I watched until you got out. You had a bunch of paperwork and a satchel with you, so I assumed this was where you lived. I knew I needed to get in touch with you, especially after they found Terry's body this morning."

I slowly lowered my gun, but Seneca kept his gun trained on her. She had an envelope in her hand, and she extended it to me slowly. Shy approached as I said, "This is my attorney and partner in Watchful Eyes, Shyrón Berotte."

"Oh, I know exactly who he is," she said, scanning him from head to toe. "Sorry. Light complexioned black men are my weakness."

"Well, my wife is my weakness," Shy said as he walked toward the porch.

"Thank you, Mrs. Griffin. You have my condolences."

She took a deep breath. "I'm glad he's gone. Now I'm free."

I nodded as she got in her car. "Thank you for helping me know the truth."

"You're welcome."

I went to my car and moved it to let her out. When I pulled back into the driveway, I checked the envelope to see the same couple of thousand dollars she'd given me. I stuffed it in the glovebox, then got out of the car and headed to the porch where Shy and Seneca were waiting.

"I just knew she was about to be on some bullshit. That's why I didn't lower my gun until she got back in her car."

"She glad that nigga gone. She always flirts. Yo' black ass ain't her type."

Seneca laughed and shot me the finger. "That's a'ight though. I'm Kaysyn's type. That's all that matter."

Shy slapped his hand, then turned to me and asked, "What's up with Riley?"

I slid my hand down my face, and Seneca said, "Aww shit."

“I stood her and her daughter up for dinner yesterday evening. I haven’t called her to explain or apologize.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know,” I said, refusing to say that I was scared.

Neither of them said anything for a moment. Shy finally broke the silence and said, “You need to talk to Zay. He’ll help you work through your thoughts. It don’t make you weak to talk about your feelings, man. We’ve all had talks with him. It don’t necessarily have to be a counseling session. Just talk to him.”

“Yeah. I went over there to talk to my mama and ended up talking to him. His advice helped me get Kaysyn. Real shit. I had never thought about talking to him until he opened the door that night, trying to escape hollering babies,” Seneca added.

I’d just started talking about everything to Seneca. While I was around the Berottes quite a bit, I still wasn’t as close to any of them, besides Shy and Jamel, although, technically, he wasn’t a Berotte. I was tired of feeling the way I was, so something had to give. It couldn’t hurt to talk to Isaiah. I should probably make an appointment so I could be covered under client privilege with some of the shit that may come out.

“I’ll make an appointment.”

“He may counsel you at his house. You’ll be more comfortable there,” Shy said.

I took a deep breath, then pulled my phone from my pocket. “In the meantime—”

Before I could finish, someone was banging on the door. We all pulled our guns. You couldn’t be too careful. Shy peeked out, then opened the door for Jericho. When he walked in and saw our guns, he said, “My bad. I was a little pissed before I got here. I didn’t realize I’d made a disturbance.”

I rolled my eyes as I listened to him be all proper and shit. Seneca slowly shook his head. “What were you saying, Ali?”

“I gotta call Troy Joseph.”

“Who’s that?” Sen asked as Jericho and Shy’s eyebrows lifted.

“My sperm donor. I need to know more about Camila. The shit she ain’t saying. The only person I know that can give me that info is him. I’m gonna call in a little bit.”

“Damn. How long has it been since you’ve seen him? At least you know that muthafucka,” Seneca said.

“Shit, I barely know him. He was there, but not all that accessible. I haven’t seen him since I was eleven.”

He nodded, and I decided to call him while they were all sitting here. These were my brothers, and if I couldn’t trust them, I couldn’t trust no-fucking-body. I grabbed my phone from the table and placed the call on speaker as they stared at me.

“Hello?”

“Can I speak to Troy Joseph?”

“This is him. Who is this?”

“Ali Joseph.”

“Ali? Who is this fucking with me? Ali and his mother disappeared over twenty years ago. I ain’t seen them since.”

I could hear his gun cocking like he was gonna shoot me through the phone. “I ain’t got time to fuck wit’chu. I’m tryna find out some shit about Camila. If I ride out there, can we meet up?”

“This really you, man? Why I named you Ali?”

“You said I had big hands and that I would be a boxer like Muhammed Ali. Satisfied?”

He was quiet for a moment, then he said, “Yeah. I can’t wait to see you. I know I wasn’t shit back in the day, but maybe my explanation of things will make sense to you.”

“Send me your address to this number. I’ll see you in the morning.”

I ended the call and didn't know how to feel. He sounded like he actually missed me... like I meant something to him. "That didn't go like I expected," Jericho said.

He knew Troy and how much of a thug he was when we were kids. It was nothing for him to rob somebody and fuck them up while doing so. He was a whole asshole in the streets and in just regular life too. We were scared of him when we were little. At least Jericho's dad would talk to us and speak. Troy would just stare at us like our very existence was bothering him.

"Yeah. Better than what I expected too," I said as my phone chimed.

I looked at it to see he'd sent his address. "What time are you leaving?" Jericho asked. "You need me to ride wit'chu?"

"I'll probably leave at six. I'ma go by myself."

"You sure? I'll sit in the car, just so you don't have to take the drive by yourself," he pressed.

I knew he was worried that I would get myself into some shit I wouldn't be able to get myself out of. "You can ride then."

Shy stood and said, "Well, talking is good, but I gotta get back to my babies."

"Thanks, bruh," I said as I stood and slapped his hand.

He hugged me and said, "You know I love you, nigga. Whatever you need, I got'chu. Always. Good or bad."

"I appreciate that, bruh. I really do."

Shy was the truth. That nigga looked out for me for no reason. As an adult, he decided to go the legit route, but that didn't stop him from catching up with me whenever he came to town. Although he was only in Houston, there were days that he couldn't hang. He had moves to make in his career and had to put all the petty bullshit we used to do to the side.

I was a bad influence on him, but watching him get himself together was an inspiration to me. While I still did a lot of stupid shit, I was on the right track. I would have never

imagined that I would own my own business. The crazy part was that if I didn't bring up that he was part owner of Watchful Eyes, no one would even know. He didn't tell a soul. He trusted me with his life, and I owed him mine.

“Don't forget to call Zay,” he said as he backed away.

“I won't.”

Seneca slapped my hand next and wished me luck. “I hope you can find out the answers you're searching for.”

“Thanks, man. Me too. Maybe I'll be able to let some shit go when I do. I know he knows everything I need to know.”

He nodded, then they left. I locked the door behind them. Jericho had already turned on the TV to the football game. “May as well watch the Saints game. That'll give y'all something to talk about to break the ice.”

I side-eyed him as he laughed. He knew I didn't give a damn about no ice. I chipped all that shit off at once by getting straight to the point.

CHAPTER 14

RILEY

I was sitting at my desk in disbelief. They'd found Terry Griffin dead in Vidor. There was a bullet to the chest and another to his head. Ali crossed my mind, and it made me wonder if he did this. I still hadn't heard from him since early Friday. I'd been texting him, and I'd called him again and left a message. This shit made me want to believe that he was laying low.

I didn't have proof that he'd killed Terry, but damn... coincidence? Probably not. Despite all that, I was still worried about him. Why wasn't he returning my calls or messages? Was I really just a fuck to him? I didn't want to believe that because of the things he'd said to me, but I had to also realize a lot of it was in the heat of passion.

After looking at the clock and seeing it was eleven o'clock, I decided to take an early lunch. I wasn't accomplishing shit anyway. They'd told me I could stay home since Ms. Maria was barely hanging on, but as long as Aina was at school, I needed to come to work to be productive and wouldn't have so much to catch up on.

I went to my car, and I just sat inside for a couple of minutes. Grabbing my phone, I looked up the address to Watchful Eyes, programmed it in my navigation, and headed there. I was so damn nervous. If he was there, this would probably be it for us. While I liked him a lot, I didn't have time to entertain a nigga that didn't have his shit together. I thought he did though. That was from the outside looking in. Mentally and emotionally, Ali was broken.

When I got there, I sat in the parking lot staring at the business office for the longest. Someone was there, so I stopped stalling and went inside before they left. When his friend came to the front, his eyes widened slightly. He remembered me and clearly knew about me and Ali... more than what he'd witnessed in the grocery store that day.

I lowered my head as he asked, "Can I help you, Ms. Domingue?"

I lifted my head and stared into his eyes. I swore I knew this man. "You look so familiar to me, like I've seen you before. It's been bothering me since the benefit."

He frowned slightly then shrugged. "I'm sorry, but I'm coming up blank."

I nodded then swallowed hard. "Is Ali here? Is everything okay?"

"He's not here. He's out of town. I can tell him you came by."

"You know what? Don't even worry about it."

I turned to walk away, pissed. Before I could get to the door, he gently grabbed my elbow. I turned back to him. "It's not what it seems. Give him a chance to explain when he comes back."

"What exactly is there to explain? I'm sorry. What's your name?"

"Seneca."

"Hmm. I like that name. It sounds familiar too."

He gave me a slight grin. "He has a lot of personal shit going on. If he knew I was telling you this much, he would kill me. I can tell that he likes you though. Apparently, you care for him if you're here."

I huffed slightly. "How do you know he'll even contact me to explain?"

"I don't. But if he's truthful with himself, then he will."

I nodded. I gave him one last look and a tight smile and walked out. I was shocked he told me what he did. That proved to me that Ali felt something for me, that I hadn't imagined any of it, and he meant the things he'd said to me. I just wished he wouldn't have left me in the manner he begged me not to leave him.

AFTER AINA AND I GOT HOME AND HAD TAKEN A SHOWER together, I was beat. We'd been at the hospital all evening. I picked her up at three, and here it was nearly seven o'clock. Ms. Maria was unconscious. They were simply waiting for the family to say, let her go. They were hanging on to her. I could understand they loved her and didn't want to let go, but she was in so much pain, the doctors had practically sedated her.

Aina was taking this so hard. I knew how she felt. I was the same way when my grandparents died. They babied me when my mama wouldn't. I wasn't as young as she was, but I was still a kid, maybe eleven or twelve. I'd already lost my father, who I barely remembered now.

We were in my bed, and Aina had just fallen asleep. I decided to get up to go through my box with my dad's things in it. I was sensitive to him at this moment because of Ms. Maria's predicament. There were mostly pictures in there, along with his obituary. After obtaining the box from the top shelf of my closet, I sat on the foot end of the bed and opened the box. The first picture I pulled out brought a smile to my face. He was holding me as a newborn baby.

I continued scanning through them, and as I stared at him, I got an eerie feeling. As I stared at his eyes, the shit hit me like a two-ton weight. I dug through the box and found his obituary. I opened it and scanned it until I got to a list of his survivors. My mom's name was first along with me and his parents. However, there it was in black and white. *A son, Seneca Roberts of Houston, Texas.*

I almost screamed. That man looked familiar to me because he looked like my dad. He was his love child with another woman. I hadn't looked at this obituary in forever and had literally forgotten that I had a brother out there somewhere. I had long given up hope that we would ever meet. My dad refused to be in his child's life, because my mama had chosen to stay and forgive him. All the memories were flooding my mind.

My mama used to get on him about taking care of his seed, but she never pushed to find him when my dad died. Seneca had to be about four or five years old when Dad died, because I vaguely remembered my parents arguing quite a bit when I was in kindergarten. That had to be the cause of the disruption in our routine.

He looked so much like Dad. There was no way I could sit on this. I wondered if Seneca even knew who he was. Dalton Domingue was everything to me, and I hated he couldn't be everything to Seneca for those short amount of years. While I couldn't remember much about him, I could definitely remember how spoiled he had me behind him.

I looked through more pictures to see if there was one of Seneca anywhere in there, and I landed on it. It was at the very bottom like it didn't exist. There wasn't a name on it, but it had to be him. It was a little chocolate baby, and Dad was smiling. I knew for sure that it wasn't me. While I hated that he'd cheated on my mama, Seneca didn't deserve to be treated like he was just a smudge in his background.

I supposed I would have to go back to the Watchful Eyes office tomorrow to show him the picture and obituary. I could imagine that he was angry for a long time that his dad chose not to be in his life. I could also imagine that he would feel some sort of way about me at first too. Why was I so important that I got to know him? Why was I better than him?

I took a deep breath, trying to make sense of a senseless situation. I didn't remember if there was any drama with Seneca's mother, but even if there was, it wasn't a reason to shun his flesh and blood. There was no excuse for that, and the man that I'd once held on a pedestal had been knocked off it.

That lapse of judgment he had while handling his business was something that never happened before. His mind had to be occupied with the son he'd wanted to love on. His decision to trust the wrong man that ended his life had to be from him not being able to think clearly.

There was no way the man that taught me morals had none himself. He didn't live by what he believed in. While he was a street nigga, he treated me like his princess. I understood that we made bad decisions in life, but how we adjusted or dealt with the aftermath of those decisions was what was important. My dad failed Seneca. That made him a failure. He died a failure.

As I continued to sit on the foot of the bed in my feelings, my cell phone rang. I quickly ran to it, hoping it was Ali. It wasn't. It was someone calling from Ms. Maria's phone. I already knew she was gone before answering. "Hello?"

"Riley, they just turned off the machines. She's laboring a lot. I didn't know if you wanted to come to the hospital."

I recognized the voice as Gabe's cousin, Imelda's, voice. She was the only person that was cordial to me whenever I came around. "Yes. Thank you for calling. I'm on my way."

"Okay."

I quickly stood and threw on something comfortable, then woke up my baby. I was happy that I'd put pajamas on her instead of a nightshirt or gown. I was going to take her to the hospital just as she was. She was so out of it I just picked her up from the bed, grabbed her tennis shoes from the dresser, and headed out of the house.

This was one time I was glad she put her shoes on the dresser. I always had to remind her that her shoes went in the closet. They were just where I could find them this time. When we got outside and I'd locked the door, I headed to the car and placed her in her booster seat as she groaned. After buckling her up, I got the weird feeling that I was being watched. I stood up and looked around, then hurriedly got in the driver's seat and took off for the hospital.

If someone was watching me, hopefully they wouldn't feel froggy enough to try anything. I hadn't done anything to warrant anyone following me. The only person that had followed me was Terry. He was dead now. I still believed Ali

What if he was the one watching me? Couldn't be. He was out of town. Seneca had said so. He had no reason to be watching me when he could just walk up to me and talk. I missed him like crazy. It was like I'd known him forever, and he took his love away. When Ali came into my life, he was like a force of nature. He took over everything... including my damn thoughts.

The crazy part was that I could see the tenderness and passion in him that he was trying to restrain or keep hidden. Maybe that was why he was avoiding me. I made him too "soft". He was right though. He wasn't a friendly person, but damn if he didn't befriend every part of me. Just his stare catapulted me into another stratosphere and had me agreeing to shit I said I would never do. How did he do that and in such a short amount of time?

I was supposed to be feeling solemn and somewhat sad as we headed to the hospital, but instead, I was sitting here getting horny as I thought about the way he stroked my kitty in the back of his blacked-out SUV. His dick had the power to have me bowing and worshiping its existence. If he came back and apologized for standing us up, I would probably say, *Okay, papi.*

I had all these comebacks floating around on how I would curse his ass out and demand an explanation. I wanted to give him an ultimatum. *Nigga, fly right, or fly right on out of my life.* I didn't want him to be in and out of our lives and having Aina thinking it was okay to let a man string her along, no matter what the reason was. But he had me so stupid over his loving, I'd tell Aina that he was just a friend and disguise what was really going on in front of her.

He told me not to ever leave him. I was holding on, but he was pulling away, making that shit extremely difficult. Trying

to act nonchalant about it in front of my daughter was hard as well, even while seeing her disappointed this past weekend.

After getting to the hospital, I scooped her out of her seat, and she woke up. “Where are we?”

“The hospital. Abuela has gotten worse. She may be going to heaven tonight.”

“Oh no. We have to say goodbye,” she said as she cried.

She was making me emotional as well. This woman was her grandmother, and they spent a lot of time together. “I know. Let’s put on your shoes right quick.”

She quickly slid her feet in them, trying to run off before I could tie them. I held her up and tied them in record time, then we both ran to the entrance and made our way to the second floor to her ICU room. Before we could get there, I saw everyone crowded in the hall. Aina looked up at me. “Mommy?”

I released her hand, and she took off running, squeezing her way through the crowd. When I got to the entrance, she’d already gotten in bed with her abuela. My heart sank as I watched her cry and snuggle against her grandmother. Ms. Maria was struggling hard. My guess was that it would be any minute. I wished Aina wouldn’t have had to see this. Although I’d explained to her what was happening to her grandmother, seeing it was a totally different thing.

Suddenly, Ms. Maria stopped gasping for air, and her eyes popped open. I quickly went to her and closed her eyes before Aina saw her, then tried to pull her away. “Mommy, no!”

“Aina, she’s gone, baby.”

She lifted her head and looked at her grandmother, then burst into tears. “She’s not gone! She’s right here! Abuela! Wake up! Please!”

She shook her lifeless body for a few seconds, then she turned to me and fell against me as the tears cascaded down her cheeks. I picked her up and walked away from Ms. Maria’s bedside as the entire family released their emotions of sadness.

I kissed Aina's head repeatedly as I rubbed her back. "I'm so sorry, baby."

I walked out of the hospital room and went to the waiting area with her. I felt like I'd made my first mistake as a mother by taking her in that room. Although she would have had a meltdown if she couldn't see her before she died, I would have rather dealt with that than the nightmares she could possibly have. I just hoped that she was young enough to not remember this later in life.

CHAPTER 15

ALI

“G ood luck, man.”

I nodded at Jericho as I parked along the curb in front of where Troy lived. After taking a deep breath, I grabbed my heat from the console and opened the door. Once I stood, I put it in my waistband, then headed to the door. My nerves were on one because I didn't know what I was walking into.

Before I could get to the door, he opened it and stepped outside. The closer I got, the wider his eyes got. It was like he was in disbelief that he was actually seeing me. My hair was in a bun on top of my head, because I didn't have time to get it braided. Well, I had time, but I missed my appointment Saturday, and she didn't work on Sundays. I surely didn't have time today since we'd left at six this morning to make the four-hour trip.

I took off my shades when I got closer, and I saw his bottom lip tremble. He held his hand out to shake mine. I frowned slightly, trying to figure out if I could trust him. He'd caused so much hurt back in the day. I'd even caught a few of his blows trying to protect my mama. After staring at him for a few seconds, I slowly extended my hand, and he swiftly grabbed it and pulled me to him, hugging me tightly.

That shit had me almost pulling my gun on him. I fought against him, pushing him back. “Man, what the fuck?”

“I'm sorry, son. I just...” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I thought y'all were dead.”

“We would’ve been had we stayed with you.”

“I would have never intentionally hurt you. I know some fucked up shit happened back in the day, and you caught a few blows in the crossfire. It was never my intent to hurt you, Ali.”

“What about Camila?”

He turned and stared at the porch for a minute. “You wanna sit outside or go inside?”

“Inside,” I said, glancing back at the car.

I didn’t want Jericho witnessing any more than he already had. “Somebody in the car? They can get out too.”

“Naw. That’s just my boy who came along for the ride. You remember Jericho from Miami?”

“Yeah, I do. Damn. I’m glad y’all were able to reconnect.”

He turned his back to me and led me inside. When we walked in, I noticed his place was clean. He didn’t seem to have much, but at least it wasn’t filthy. It was the total opposite of what our house used to look like growing up. I supposed he wanted Camila to cook and clean since she didn’t work... Well, she was working alright.

“What do you wanna know?”

“Everything,” I said as I sat on the couch. “Start from the beginning.”

He sat in a chair across from me. Without hesitation, he said, “Your mom wasn’t a runaway. She was fourteen or fifteen when they migrated to Florida. I don’t know what the conditions were on their trip, but they definitely didn’t have any money when I ran into them in Florida.”

“What’chu mean, ran into them?”

“Literally walked right into your mother when I was coming out of a store. They were standing outside, begging. I thought she was cute, but I kept going. They were dirty and they smelled. Later that day, your mother showed up on my doorstep, begging me to take her in. As you know, I was into a lot of shit back then. So I had plenty of money. I was only

twenty, but I had no idea how old she was at the time. She couldn't speak English, but I could tell by her mannerisms what she was trying to offer. I didn't want no part of that shit until she was clean."

I released the air I was holding, trying to understand what he was telling me. All this time, I thought he snatched her up. Her parents pushed her to him to try to give her a better life. Kind of like the song, "Fancy", by Reba McEntire. "So they wanted her to have something better?"

"Naw. They wanted money. They sold her to me."

My eyebrows lifted. "They what?"

"She was their oldest child, and they needed money. She was the only one who could help them. I refused to pay them for her, but I gave them a parting gift of a couple of thousand dollars. It was like I had given them a million. They left, and we never saw them again. I had your mom go through blood tests to make sure she was clean. Just from foreplay, I realized she wasn't a virgin. She was way too comfortable and looser than a virgin would be, if you know what I mean."

I frowned. This shit was a lot deeper than what I thought. Her parents sounded like they weren't worth a damn at all. How could a person sell their fifteen-year-old daughter? I mean... I'd seen a little bit of everything, and there wasn't much that shocked me, but knowing that my mother's parents did that shit to her made me understand her a little more. The people that should have loved her the most hurt her deep. I knew what that shit was like. She'd passed down that hurt to me.

"I got her a private teacher to try to teach her to speak English. Within that time, I was falling for her. While I knew she wasn't a virgin, she just seemed so innocent. I finally asked how old she was, and I was blown away at her revelation. At that point, we were already having sex, and she'd recently found out she was pregnant. I married her. I couldn't risk her being deported. She was carrying my child. I couldn't allow something to happen to the mother of my child.

I was pissed, and I did my best to find her parents so I could fuck them up, but they were gone.”

I was irritated by the truth. I wished Camila would have just told me the truth. I could have gotten her the help she needed. Right then, I pulled out my phone to schedule a meeting with Isaiah. *What’s up Big Zay? This is Ali. I really need to lay on your couch, man.*

He responded right away. *You got it. I have time today. What time?*

I checked the time, and it was only ten thirty. *Around 4?*

That’s cool. Meet me at my house.

Thanks.

I looked up at Troy when I finished and said, “So I can imagine what happened after that. I found out she was cheating on you in New Orleans. Saw it with my own eyes. So you started pimping her out.”

“It wasn’t that simple of a transition. I loved your mother. When I caught her cheating on me, it made me question everything, including you. Her parents were her pimps. They were the ones pimping her out in Puerto Rico. That was how they made the trip. But yeah, after I found out she was cheating, that shit hurt. But what hurt even more was that I found out she was prostituting herself. The same shit her parents were doing to her, she was doing to herself.”

I stood from my seat and paced back and forth in front of it. “So why didn’t you kick her out?” I asked.

“Where was she gonna go? Had I kicked her out, she would have been living on the street with you. Although I had started hating her, I couldn’t have you out there like that. I may not have been the best father or husband, but I did my best under the circumstances. Do I regret beating her? Yeah. I wish I would have just put her out and raised you myself. People told me you were out in the streets, anyway, when I wasn’t there. You practically raised yourself.”

“Ain’t no practically about that shit. I *did* raise myself.”

“Where did y’all go?”

“Beaumont, Texas. We ended up there, and I met a kid at school that took me in like a brother. He’s responsible for who I am today. Without his influence, there’s no telling where I would be. Honestly, I think I fared better being there than staying here. It had nothing to do with Camila though. Shy showed me the meaning of family. His dad was raising all five of them alone because his wife died during childbirth with his baby sister. I inherited a father, four brothers, and a sister.”

He licked his lips and nodded. “I’m glad it worked out. How’s Camila?”

“Up to her same old shit. That’s why I needed to know what was going on. Did you even try to find us?”

“Yeah. I searched all of Louisiana for y’all. I never expected Camila to leave the state. It wasn’t like the internet was popular back then. AOL had just come out. I don’t remember there being search engines. What was it, nineteen ninety-six?”

“Nineteen ninety-nine. There were search engines back then. They just weren’t as popular for home usage. Of course, you had to have a computer and a smart phone. Smart phones didn’t become popular until the 2000s.”

He nodded as I scanned him. He seemed to be doing well for himself. The fact that he was happy to see me was still blowing me. It was like, I didn’t have much to say, but I didn’t want to leave just yet. I felt like a part of me was here with him... the little boy that I’d long forgotten... the one that just wanted his father’s acceptance. He’d rejected me because of Camila.

Gathering the nerve, I said, “I hated you. You said you started questioning whether I was yours or not, so you started treating me like I wasn’t supposed to be there. I was glad I knocked your ass out, and I was glad we left. You taught me not to trust muthafuckas, even the ones I loved. Thankfully, I’ve gotten better with that. I have brothers that will go to war for me, and I’m grateful for that. However, the shit I watched Camila do to herself has taken an even bigger toll on me.”

“How so?”

I looked up at him and knew I wouldn't be telling him any more of my personal business. “Let me just say that I still don't trust you. You still ain't shit to me. I needed answers about Camila. That's it. Watching you put your hands on her the way you did killed any relationship we could have. Just because I've gotten past it doesn't mean I need to include you in my life. That shit ain't gon' happen. However, I feel like I became my mother's protector. The information you gave me helps me understand her and why she does the shit she does.”

It was like all the memories of what he did to my mom and me started to flash through my mind at once. My previous thoughts of not being ready to leave came to a screeching halt. As I was about to stand, he asked, “How did you find me?”

“I'm a private investigator. I can find anybody. I found you a while ago. I just needed to make sure the address I had was still a good one. I could have popped up on you at any moment, but I wasn't willing to make a trip out here unless I felt like I had to.”

“You've been taking care of your mother, and you were getting to your wits end. Now you feel sorry for her. Same way I felt. She didn't know any other way to be. She told me she lost her virginity when she was eleven. For the record, I know you're my son. With my heart... I can see me in you, although you have more of your mother's complexion. For what it's worth, I'm sorry. I can be man enough to know when I'm wrong. I was wrong for a lot of years.”

I nodded and stood to my feet. I couldn't get into no emotional shit with his ass. I was feeling uncomfortable as hell. Once again, he extended his hand to mine. I frowned and walked away. “Just know that I'm a better man now. I hope you got what you needed to be at peace or to eventually be at peace, because that's probably the last thing you're feeling right now. I can see the turmoil in your eyes. Be careful, son.”

I got the hell out of there because I needed to get back to Beaumont. What he'd told me had been eye-opening, and I suddenly had an urge to make a trip to Florida. When I got to

the car, Jericho stared at me, waiting to see if I would say something as Troy stood on the porch, watching. When I pulled away from the curb, I glanced at him and asked, “What’chu wanna eat?”

“For real? We in New Orleans. I want some beignets.”

I slowly shook my head and went to a spot that I remembered on Decatur Street. The rest of the ride was quiet, and I was more than sure the ride home would be that way too.

“I RECONNECTED WITH MY FATHER TO FIND OUT MORE information about my mother’s upbringing. She’s the reason I’m so sensitive with women.”

I slowly shook my head as I recalled all the details I received from my dad, with Big Zay. Surprisingly, it was easy for me to tell him everything... once I started talking. It took me a few minutes to say anything. After Jericho and I had eaten at Café Du Monde, we headed back to Beaumont and got here in enough time for me to drop him home and pass by Riley’s house to see she was at home. I also went by the office to see if everything was good. It seemed it was.

The surprise came when I checked in with Seneca. He told me Riley had been by the office to check on me. Once she found out I was okay, she was pissed. I never even thought about her being worried about me, knowing that her fiancé was killed, and we were somewhat involved in the same shit. While I wasn’t selling dope, I lived on the wrong side of the law often.

I hated that I hadn’t reached out and just talked to her. Now that I knew she was upset, that was going to make it harder to reach out to her. However, I knew that I would have to. Losing her was the last thing I wanted. My inner demons needed to be handled before I could effectively pursue her and be with her. I learned that when I realized how sensitive I felt with her and how I tried to hide it.

“So you believe that you have a sensitivity to women because of what your mother went through with your father, and now that you know about her family, that makes it worse. Tell me about the women in your life to prove your sensitivity.”

I took a deep breath and told him all about Dahlia... how I fell in love with her and her baby girl and how she fucked over me. I also told him about Talisha and how everyone had thought I killed her. I had to let him know that she was dead now though, but it wasn't because I did it. However, it was fucking with me too. Seemed like her blood was staining every part of me, because I knew what was about to happen and didn't stop it. Despite privilege, I didn't tell him who killed her, although I was sure he had a clue.

When I got to Riley, I took a deep breath and began telling him how perfect she was. After a week of talking to her, not to mention stroking her pussy after a year of celibacy, I knew I wanted more with her. I wanted to be the man to take care of her and Aina. But that incident with my mama, Terry, and that other guy had me in seclusion Saturday and caused me to miss our dinner.

“I have news for you, Ali. You aren't overly sensitive to women.”

I frowned slightly as I tried to figure out where he was going with this. “What'chu mean?”

“You are overly sensitive to Camila. The women you described exhibit some of her traits, except Riley. They remind you of her. Dahlia fucked over you just like your mom fucked over your dad. Talisha was begging for love and attention, just like your mom seems to be doing with these men. They both expected you to be the one to make them feel validated. Your mom doesn't know any other way to be, and neither did Talisha. I believe Riley represents everything you wanted your mom to be.”

I lowered my head as I thought about what he said. It made sense. Before I could respond, he asked, “Had you been the

one to see that woman about to shoot Chad, would you have hesitated to take her out?”

“Naw. Not a second thought.”

“What about Tip? What if she would have tried to get at Sandrene?”

“No hesitation.”

I nodded repeatedly. He drove his point home with that shit. Fatima would have suffered the same fate had I been the one to see her instead of Seneca. Tip made my ass itch. I wanted to handle her just because of what she said to Sandrene about her father. I looked up at Zay and asked, “What do I do about it?”

“I think you’ve already done the work. You talked to your father and got to know more about your mother. While your actions were a bit extreme, in my opinion, you got her out of your life since she doesn’t want to change or at least respect you for what all you do for her. Your next step is to make things right with Riley. You’re operating out of fear, and the Ali I know ain’t afraid of shit.”

I smirked at his last statement. It was how Shy had first introduced me to his brothers. Immediately after telling them my name, he said that shit. I could remember nodding and giving that nigga a pound. Chad had put me in a headlock right after. Chad and Zay were like the big brothers I never had, although they didn’t know as much about me as I knew about them.

“You right about that shit. I need to let her know what’s up with me. So I should leave Camila in Florida?”

“I think you should do whatever you feel you need to do. You know what you can handle.”

“I’ll just check in on her from time to time then. If I bring her back here, nothing will change.”

“I think you may need to try one more time to have a serious conversation with her now that you know what you know.”

“It’s worth a try, but only after I make things right with Riley.”

I extended my hand to shake Zay’s hand and headed to the door. When I got to the door, I paused for a moment then turned to him. “Thanks, man. You made this easy.”

“Well, you’re like my lil brother. While I didn’t agree with a lot of shit you did, I will still look out for you, man. That’s what family does. You a good guy when you wanna be.”

I chuckled as he smiled. “I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Go get your woman.”

I left his office feeling like I could conquer the damn world, but I only wanted to conquer one thing: the mess I had created between Riley and me.

CHAPTER 16

RILEY

When I drove in the driveway, it was almost midnight. I was worn out. My baby had been crying almost the entire time. Imelda told me she would call once arrangements were made. I was appreciative of that. I didn't want to be there when the funeral home arrived to get her body. Aina had seen more than enough.

I glanced at her in the back seat and saw that she'd cried herself to sleep. Once I was in the garage, I took a deep breath and prepared to carry her inside. Suddenly, I got that eerie feeling again, like I was being watched. I glanced around as best I could without getting out of the car, then removed my keys from my purse. I had to be sure that I could get inside the house as quickly as possible.

While in the car, I reached in the back and unbuckled Aina's seat belt and grabbed her from her seat, pulling her to the front with me. That shit was hard as hell to do with her dead weight. She was small, but still. I looked around once again, then hurriedly got out of the car, doing my best to make it inside. As I stood at the back door and put my key in the lock, I took one last glance.

When I did, I saw a figure appear in my peripheral. My heart rate sped up as I unlocked the door. Before going inside, I turned to get a look at who was stalking me, and I almost came unglued when I saw Ali standing there. I nearly forgot my baby was asleep.

I remained silent but cut my eyes at him as I went inside. He followed me in and closed the door for me. While I was

happy to see him, I wasn't happy about him scaring me half to death. As I continued inside, Aina woke up. She started crying as soon as her eyes opened. "Shh, it's okay, baby. Mommy's here for you."

As I glanced at Ali, I said to her, "Prince Ali is here too."

She quickly lifted her head, her eyes stretched to the limit as I chuckled. He gave her a small smile as she frowned slightly. "Why didn't you come over the other night? We were waiting for you."

He lowered his head slightly. "I'm sorry, princess. I had a slight emergency with my mom."

"Did she die like my abuela?"

Ali's eyes saddened somewhat, and he shook his head. "Almost, but I'm sorry about tu abuela."

Aina slid from my arms and down my body and made her way to Ali. He stooped in front of her, and she hugged him. He glanced at me then hugged her back and closed his eyes. He was hurting about whatever had gone down it seemed. She pulled away from him and led him to the couch. "Ali, would you care for anything to drink?"

He lifted his eyes to mine. "No, thank you."

"Okay."

I sat on the couch next to Aina as she asked him, "Is your mom okay now?"

"I don't know. I hope so though."

He looked up at me, and my breathing paused. The man controlled me without even trying to. "I'm so sorry, Riley. Thank you for letting me come inside to explain."

His presence seemed to calm Aina down as well. She was just staring at him. "Prince Ali, can I comb your hair?"

Before he could respond, I said, "Sweetheart, it's time for you to get some rest."

"Okaaay. Can I sleep in your bed?"

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’m going to get my stars.”

I smiled as she hopped off the sofa to get her projector. Ali grabbed my hand and lifted it to his lips, causing my insides to melt. He’d better be glad I talked to Seneca earlier; otherwise, he wouldn’t have gotten this side of me. There was no way he would have come inside my house tonight. “I really am sorry, Riley. Once Aina goes to sleep, I’ll do my best to explain.”

I nodded as Aina came back to the room with us. She glanced down at our hands and smiled. I pulled my hand away from Ali’s and stood. “Good night, Prince Ali. I hope I can see you again.”

“You will,” he said as he glanced at me.

I followed her to my bedroom and plugged up her projector and watched the stars appear on the ceiling. When I looked down at her, she was laying in my spot with her squishmallow staring at me. “Mommy, is Prince Ali your boyfriend?”

Instead of giving her a simple no, I told her the details. I could tell that she wanted him to be, simply by the twinkle in her eyes. She’d had enough disappointment today. “I’ll let you know soon. That’s what he and I have to talk about tonight.”

She smiled as I bent over to hug her tight. “I love you so much, baby.”

“I love you too, Mommy.”

I pulled the covers over her and left the room, leaving the door partially open. My nerves were getting the best of me as I headed back to the front. Ali was standing at the mantle, looking at pictures. I quietly sat as I observed him. Although his hair was in a man bun, it looked somewhat tangled, not nearly as put together as it normally was. He had on a T-shirt, a pair of black jeans, and combat boots. He wasn’t as comfortable as he was trying to appear though. I could see it in his eyes.

“You think I don’t know that you’ve entered the room, Riley? Think again. The energy has no choice but to shift to

mirror yours,” he said with his back to me.

“I wasn’t hiding.”

He turned to me and made his way to the couch where I was sitting. Once again, he grabbed my hand. “I know you were upset and probably still are. Truth was, my mind was fucked up. I have been allowing my mama to control my entire existence since I was a kid. It came to a head Friday. I had her moved back to Florida. That shit tore me apart. I’ve been taking care of her for as long as I can remember, even as a kid. After talking things out with one of my bruhs, I knew I had to let go and move forward. I hope you can forgive me, baby, because I wanna move forward with you.”

I could feel his hand trembling. This was hard for him. While he didn’t go into details, I didn’t need him to at this point. He was here trying to make things right with me. I looked away from him for a moment. When I turned back to him, I could see the hesitancy in his eyes, something I’d never seen. Ali was always sure of himself.

“Thank you for being vulnerable with me. I know that was hard for you. In time, I want to be the person you can confide in... trust. If you think there’s anything I need to know about what went on, please tell me when you can. I don’t want anything to pop up later and knock me off my square. I saw the danger in your eyes when I first met you. It was one of the things that attracted me to you.”

“Are you saying you wanna move forward and ride with a nigga?”

His gaze was unwavering, and I really wanted to straddle his ass. I would never forgive myself if Aina walked in on us though. I brought my hand to his face and stroked his cheek as he closed his eyes. “Yeah. I wanna do that, Ali.”

He leaned in and kissed my lips then exhaled. When he pulled me in his arms, I could feel his heart racing. “Thank you for giving me another chance. I promise, when I can, I’ll tell you more about my upbringing and what I had to deal with this past weekend. I just can’t verbalize it right now.”

“I understand.”

“I’m sorry about Gabriel’s mother.”

“Thank you. We weren’t that close, but she helped me with Aina tremendously. She kept her until I got off work in the evenings. Aina loved her abuela.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, relaxing in his arms for a moment. The silence was refreshing. Ali stroked my arm as I lay against him. “You know, if you need me to, I can braid your hair.”

“For real?”

“Yep. I’m from the hood. What’chu expect? I can braid hair.”

He chuckled. “I can’t be in between yo’ legs right now. My shit look that rough though?”

“It doesn’t look rough, but it isn’t as kempt as you normally keep it. I don’t think you or Aina can have bad hair days.”

As if I’d summoned her, she called out, “Mommy...”

I stared up at him and said, “I knew it wouldn’t be long. If I didn’t know any better, I would think she had a crush on Prince Ali.”

“Well, I mean, can you blame her? At least we know she got good taste,” he said as I giggled.

“Nigga... whatever.”

“Uh huh. Go get baby girl.”

As I was about to stand, he pulled me to him and laid a kiss on my lips that made me dizzy as fuck. When I stood, I nearly stumbled and fell back to the couch. When I looked at him, he had a big smile on his face. I swore his smile was everything. It was something I could probably never resist. I smiled slightly and made my way to the bedroom to find Aina sitting up in the bed.

“Mommy, I’m scared to be alone. I keep seeing Abuela.”

“It’s okay. Come on.”

She hopped out of the bed quickly, making her way to me. When she walked in the front room and saw Ali was still here, she smiled. “Prince Ali, you’re still here.”

“Yep. You okay?”

“Extraño a mi abuela.”

Aina rarely spoke Spanish around me because she knew I only understood so much. However, I knew exactly what she’d said, because I’d used that very word when I spoke about her father. She missed her grandmother. I wasn’t sure how she knew Ali spoke Spanish other than the fact that he looked Latino. He definitely had the swag of a black man... all fucking day.

“Lo siento mucho, princesa.”

She smiled big and caught him off guard by hugging him tightly once again. He’d told her he was so sorry and because he said it in Spanish, I believed she bonded with him even more. When she finally let him go, she stared into his eyes with a big smile on her face. “Prince Ali, can I comb your hair?”

He chuckled. “I don’t know what it is with you women. Both of you wanna play in my hair.”

He looked right at me and licked his soft ass lips. My clit tingled, wanting that tongue to get at her. He hadn’t been face to face with my pussy since we were at the hotel that night, but my God, she sure in the hell hadn’t forgotten how that shit felt.

Deciding not to let Aina down, he pulled his hair loose and her eyes widened. “Yeah, lil bit. You can comb it.”

She jumped up and down and ran off to get her comb and brush. To hell with a fucking Prince Ali. Tarzan was here, and I was waiting for him to go into savage mode on my kitty. He stared at me for a moment, then he said, “I’mma take care of that pussy. Don’t worry. I’ll make it up to you if I have to lock us in the bathroom. Now stop looking at me like that. You making my dick hard, baby.”

“I’m trying to, but you so damn sexy.” I looked away from him and cleared my throat. “I know what will definitely change the mood in here.”

He frowned. “What?”

“Your friend that you were with in the store... I thought he looked familiar. I went to your office to check on you, and he was there. The feeling only got stronger. After we got home, I was thinking about my dad and ended up going through some pictures. When I looked at my dad, I saw him. After checking his obituary, I realized that your friend... Seneca is my brother.”

“What?”

“My father cheated on my mother. He had an affair with Seneca’s mom. When my mother chose to forgive him and accept him back into our lives, he cut ties with Seneca’s mom not long after he was born. Seneca’s name is in the obituary. I was only eight, so I barely remembered about his affair and the fact that I had a brother out there. However, when I saw Seneca’s name, all those memories flooded my mind.”

“Damn. That’s fucked up. He hates his father. He doesn’t know who he is, but because he didn’t stick around, Seneca ain’t got shit for him.”

“Can you text him tomorrow and see if he would be interested in talking to me? I’ve always wanted a sibling, but I don’t want him to feel like I’m barging into his life.”

“He gon’ be pissed, but I don’t think he’ll feel that way. That’s my brother, and you gon’ be coming around. I need to formally introduce you and Aina to my people.”

My eyebrows lifted. *Oh he was serious, serious.* Although he didn’t say it, I believed he was saying that I would be Seneca’s sister anyway. I nodded as he gave me a slight smile and a wink. I squeezed my thighs together as his gaze followed my every movement. He licked his lips again as he scooted closer to me.

Leaning in to me, he said, “I can’t wait to feel that shit wrapped around my dick, choking him to death.”

He bit my earlobe as I heard Aina making her way back. When I turned to her, she had bows and shit to put in his hair. “Umm... baby girl, Prince Ali doesn’t wear bows. Only girls wear bows.”

She giggled. “Mommyyyy... this is so he can do my hair!”

I chuckled as I looked over at Ali. He didn’t seem to have an uncomfortable bone in his body. He slid to the floor and Aina quickly got on the couch behind him. When her hands ran through his hair, she said, “Your hair is so pretty.”

He chuckled. “Thank you, princess.”

As she played in his hair, I decided to go and get more comfortable. I could take a shower in the morning. Although Ali was here, I was wiped out. I’d gotten a burst of adrenaline when I saw him, but it was wearing off. I pulled off my clothes and slipped on some sweats and a T-shirt. I never wore sweats to bed, but I could not go out there in less clothing. I would be torturing my-damn-self.

Ali would probably eye fuck me the entire time and make me orgasm in front of my daughter. I couldn’t have that shit. When I walked back up front, he glanced at me as Aina brushed his hair. She was smiling, and I couldn’t be happier about that.

“Okay, Prince Ali! I’m all done!”

His hair looked a mess. I wanted to laugh, but I didn’t want to hurt my baby’s feelings. “Oh, I bet this hairstyle is fire. Let me go look in the mirror before I start on yours.”

She giggled as he stood from the floor and headed to the mirror that was hanging on the wall. It was a fancy mirror that my mother had in her house. I promised myself that when I bought a house, I would hang it in there. When I bought this house a little over a year ago, it was the first thing I hung on the wall. Whenever I looked at it, I saw my mother. She loved that damn mirror.

She’d found it in Austin at some boutique. I remembered when she came back from her outing with her friends. She was so proud of it. Gabe had hung it in her house for her, and she’d

sat there for a good hour just staring at the thing. I remembered laughing at her, telling her it was not that serious. Now I found myself doing the same thing, but for a different reason. Not only could I see her face and beautiful smile, but I could hear her voice.

“You can laugh if you want, Riley. One day, you’ll have something... that one material thing that you won’t want to part with. That will steal your breath away every time you look at it. I can’t wait so I can tell you it ain’t that serious.”

I smiled as Ali surveyed his hair. “Maaaan, this is amazing! Can I hire you as my new stylist?”

Aina hopped up and down while clapping. She was so excited. He walked back to her and picked her up and hugged her. “Gracias, bebe.”

“De nada! Mi turno!”

I chuckled at her excitement. She ran to the corner of the room and got her chair so she could sit in front of Ali. I was waiting to see how this would turn out. He ran his fingers through her hair and took a deep breath. When he began parting her hair and putting the bands she’d brought, I was shocked.

I watched him with my mouth slightly opened. This muthafucka knew how to comb hair? What in the hell couldn’t he do? I saw him glance at me as he put a bow in Aina’s hair, then start on the other side. “Close your mouth, Riley. Years ago, my girlfriend had a little girl. We were close just like me and Aina finna be. Right, princess?”

Aina giggled. “Right!”

I snapped my mouth shut and watched him comb her hair better than I could. She looked so beautiful when he finished. He picked her up and took her to the mirror. Her eyes widened, and she threw her arms around him for the umpteenth time tonight. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think she was trying to steal my man.

He walked back over to the couch with her and sat her on his leg. They both just looked so comfortable, but I was

jealous as hell! I wanted to sit on his leg too. The third one. “Mommy, Prince Ali combed my hair! Isn’t it pretty? Es bonito!”

I slowly shook my head as Ali kissed her forehead. “We have to get you two to bed now though. I can see your mom is tired. She might fall asleep sitting up and fall off the couch. We can’t have that.”

Aina giggled. “Okay. Are you staying?”

“Naw, baby girl, but you’ll see me tomorrow.”

“Okaaayy.”

He reached out to me and helped me from my seat while I was still stunned into silence. This nigga had caught me completely off guard. The same man that possibly killed Terry Griffin was sitting here combing hair like he was a fucking hairstylist. I was in awe. I licked my lips as I stared into his eyes and whispered, “Please stay with us.”

His eyebrows lifted, and he kissed my lips. When he pulled away, he nodded. I led them to my bedroom. He put Aina in it first. When I got in and scooted to the middle, Aina stared at Ali. He took off his shirt and got in bed with his jeans on. I knew that was the last thing he wanted to leave on, but he didn’t have much of a choice with Aina in here.

“I’m gonna stay until y’all fall asleep. I have a couple of things I have to check on before I call it a night. Okay?”

“Okay.”

He kissed my cheek then my neck and pulled me into his arms. Aina scooted closer to me, and I held her close. Briefly, my mind went to Gabe. We used to sleep this way all the time. I closed my eyes and kissed Aina’s head and removed her bows. Ali took them from me and put them on the nightstand.

After he wrapped his arms around me again, I turned my head to him and said, “Good night. Thank you.”

He kissed my lips. “Get some rest.”

CHAPTER 17

ALI

“You gon’ have to be quiet, or you gon’ wake up Aina. You want this to stop?”

“No. Please don’t stop, Ali. Oh my God.”

We were in the bathroom, because Riley couldn’t take feeling my hard dick pressed against her ass any longer. I was glad she said something, because I was suffering big time. My dick was on the verge of bursting through my jeans and just taking what the fuck he wanted. Her pussy had baptized my shit a couple of times. It was too much moisture to be just a christening.

I grabbed her neck, cutting off her moans, and fucked her like I knew she wanted it. I had to squeeze her a lil bit more, because she looked like she was about to scream. Leaning over to her, I bit her shoulder as my dick went on an excursion in her pussy, getting reacquainted with the territory. Her warmth was about to make this come to an abrupt end though. Her feet were leaving the floor as I killed her pussy, treating it like I was its master. I was asserting the fuck out of my authority.

I released her neck, and she panted a bit, then turned around, pulling that snappa off my dick. She went to her knees and pulled the condom off and sucked my shit like he was melting. As I watched her cream that had traveled to the base of my dick coat her lips when she kissed me there, I couldn’t help but pull her to her feet and lick that shit off of them. I missed her taste.

I slid that condom back on with the quickness, then pushed Riley to the nearest wall. Stooping and sliding my arms behind her legs, I picked her up and lowered her on my dick. *Fuck!* What I wouldn't give to be able to fuck this wall up. Her shit felt so good. There was no way I would last much longer.

After sliding her arms around me, she kissed my lips and licked my neck. "One day, I'm gonna kiss and lick every tattoo on this gorgeous ass body, starting with this 305 on your chest."

"One day, I'ma let'chu do that shit too."

My eyes rolled to the back of my head as I fed my dick as much as he could handle until he spewed his satisfaction in the latex. "Damn, Riley. That was so fucking good."

"It was. I think I can probably go to sleep now."

I chuckled. "Yeah, I bet."

She wet a towel and began cleaning up then passed it to me. I really had to get going now. I'd gotten a tip that Jules had just gotten to World Gym to work out. While Jericho only wanted the four of us to work on it, I'd pulled Chad in to help us, and he was the one who'd found his ass.

After Riley put her shirt back on, I stared at her beautiful body. The loose skin showed her character, strength, and resilience. I was proud of her for taking charge of her health the way she had. Once she got the shirt on, I kissed her lips. "I have to go, baby."

"Okay. Be careful, please."

"You got that."

I kissed her lips again, and she walked me to the door. Turning back to her, I wanted to have her bouncing on this dick all over again. Instead, I kissed her one more time for the road and left her standing in the doorway, watching me leave.

Before I could even start my car, my phone vibrated. It was Jungle. I hadn't heard from his ass in a minute. "What's up?"

"You got time to roll to Houston any time soon?"

“I do. What’s this about?”

“Jontae.”

He left it at that. He knew I killed him. Had to. I’d killed him because that nigga was trying to get at Seneca. Instead of trying to force him to say more, I just said, “A’ight. See you tomorrow.”

I didn’t know what that shit was about, but I didn’t have a good feeling about it. I would have my boys with me just in case.

WHEN I GOT TO WORLD GYM, I SAW SENECA, CHAD, AND Jericho posted up talking. I gave them all a pound then asked, “How long he been in there?”

“An hour. Where you been?” Seneca asked.

I had to catch myself, because I almost said, at your sister’s house. Those muthafuckas would have gotten all defensive, thinking I was talking about Joyy. “Minding my fucking business, nigga.”

I pulled out a blunt and lit up as he watched me. After taking a puff, I gave him a wink. “At my girl’s house,” I admitted.

Chad frowned as he stared at me. “Nigga, what girl?” he asked.

“Riley Domingue’s fine ass. I plan to bring her with me Sunday if things keep going the way they are. She understand a nigga more than any woman.”

“Damn. That’s what’s up. I guess I should say congratulations,” Chad said as he stared at me.

I knew, at that moment, he was seeing a side of me he’d never seen... my sensitive side. So I knew I had to bring that shit into hiding. “A’ight, let’s get in position and get ready for that nigga. Jericho, you good?”

“Good as ever.”

He was wearing the face... the face that said, *I don't give a fuck*. The nigga was always 'bout it when he got like this. That shit made me nervous. Although he was never reckless, the shit was never personal. Now that this was his brother, I was hoping he didn't fuck up. We all got into our cars, covering every part of the parking lot close to the gym. It was in a strip mall, so there were a lot of places he could disappear inside.

As I sat waiting, I got a text message. It was from a number I didn't recognize. *Fuck you for sending me all the way out here. You've turned into your father. I hope you can live with yourself now. I hope you rot in hell.*

My face was hot as hell. Reading that message from Camila pissed me off. If anyone was there for her, it was me. The past couple of years, she was practically unbearable, but I was the fuck up? Everything in my soul wanted to go get at her ass, but then I realized what this was. This was confirmation that I'd done the right thing. Removing her from my life was necessary before I did something I would regret.

I put my phone down and watched the door as I took deep breaths. Jules needed to be a done deal. I was sick of his shit. Jericho was a good man... always had been. Their actions corrupted him. It was them that pushed him into a corner. They knew how protective he was of his sister and his mother. They wanted to push him and cause him to become like them.

It killed him to leave his mama and sister there, but either he did, or he would have been killed by his brother or a nigga in his father's circle. His dad was as evil as they came. Troy ain't had shit on that nigga. Jericho had to have inherited his mother's genes. When he came to Texas though, he was a shell of a man for a long time, working as a hitman. I got to know a side of him that I had never known.

He killed people, without a heart. I didn't know how he did that shit. People who did nothing to him or anyone he loved, people he didn't even know, had to suffer from the coldness that invaded him when he killed his father mid-stroke into his

sister. I couldn't imagine walking in on no bullshit like that. I supposed I would have gone on a fucking killing spree too.

He'd killed a couple of his dad's guards before making a clean break. He couldn't tell anyone goodbye other than his mother and sister. Friends were left without warning, along with his girlfriend, Whitney. My heart was heavy for him when he first got here. I didn't understand why Jules was just now coming for him though. It had been over fifteen years since that shit had happened. Surely if he wanted Jericho dead by now, he would have gotten him already.

This whole thing had my anxiety kicked up. Something wasn't right. Jericho and I would have to talk to see if there was anything he was withholding from me. If I was gonna be involved in it, I needed to know everything. I hadn't had time to even think about this shit with all the fuck shit that was going on with Camila and me trying to get to know Riley. Now Jungle wanted to talk. As I thought about it, I texted all of them, letting them know I needed a meeting with all of them tomorrow morning at ten.

This muthafucka was taking a long time to come out of that gym, and I was tired of waiting. I got out of my car and went to my trunk. Pulling my shirt over my head, I put on my vest on top of my under shirt, then put my graphic tee back on. After tucking a gun in my waistband, I sent a text, letting them know I was going in.

Jericho stepped out of his car, and I lifted my hand, halting him. Jules didn't need to see him right now. Although he knew what I looked like, I felt like I was the best one to run into him and find out what the fuck he wanted. I noticed all the guys had stepped out of their vehicles and watched me as I headed inside.

I glanced around, trying to see if I could see him, and I didn't. "Hi! Can I help you?"

"Yes, ma'am. My friend's brother is here, and they have a family emergency. He isn't answering his phone."

"What's his name? I can page him on the PA system."

Hmm. Simple enough. Flush his ass out of hiding. “Jules Marcellus.”

As she paged him, I looked around the gym, scanning the crowd repeatedly, and didn't see him. That muthafucka had somehow got by us. He wasn't here. “I'm gonna check the log to see if he signed in.”

I nodded at her as I continued my search. Still no luck. “Hmm. I don't see that he even signed in. Are you sure he came here?”

“That was where he told his family he was going. Damn. Okay. Thank you for trying to help me.”

She smiled tightly. “No problem. I hope everything works out okay for them.”

“Thank you.”

I walked out of the building to find the guys still holding their positions, waiting for me. I held my finger up and circled it in the air to let them know to pack it up. Jules was in the wind, and that muthafucka was good at getting the fuck out the way.

I headed to the office, and the guys all followed me. Jules was gon' get what was coming to him eventually. I was sure of it. I didn't know how he could even be out here all this time. Who was running the business? Those niggas had a whole operation going out in Florida. I swore every Haitian there worked for them.

When we got to the office, I headed to the entrance and unlocked the door. Everyone walked in behind me, and I noticed Shy had joined us. I didn't waste any time getting to the point. “Jules knows we're after him. There's no doubt about it. That nigga either wasn't in there or he was hiding. We ain't got time to be sitting outside, possibly setting ourselves up for an ambush. Y'all feel me?”

They all nodded. “We gon' keep doing what we were doing. If you can take a shot, take that shit. Chad, I can imagine that you couldn't do that, nor *would* you or Shy do

that. Just call one of us. Jericho is number one on the call list if y'all spot his ass again."

Everyone nodded again in understanding. "If y'all aren't busy, I need backup tomorrow."

Shy frowned. "Backup for what?"

"Jungle wants to see me about Jontae."

"I thought that nigga already knew you did that shit," Seneca said.

"I didn't tell him, but he knows the bullshit Jontae was trying to do to you. He should have known that nigga was gonna get handled. I'm always down for my niggas. Y'all know that. Hopefully, as we get older, we can slow down on some of this shit."

"Hell yeah," Shy said. "You know how hard it was to find all the cameras them niggas passed before they dumped Terry's body? Had that shit not been handled, you would have been getting called to the carpet. I'm surprised they hadn't called you yet."

"That's because Terry's widow wants to fuck him. I heard she wants to get at you too, Shy," Seneca said with a smirk on his face.

Shy huffed. "Yeah, I had to let her down easy."

Chad laughed and shoved his arm. "So what time you wanna head to Jungle's tomorrow?"

"About ten."

"You don't think that nigga gon' take offense to all of us showing up? He got more than an army, and the five of us are no match for all them niggas," Chad said.

"Shiiiiid, his army is mostly street runners. I can take twenty of those bitches by myself," Jericho said. "We are all experienced killers, for lack of a better word. Chad, I know you haven't killed anyone, but you can if provoked. You were trained to. The police ain't gon' be looking hard for somebody who killed some dope dealers. It sounds cruel, and it is, but it's the reality of the world we live in."

“Jericho is right. Most of them niggas can’t do shit against us. Seneca is a quick draw. We just need to make sure we strapped. Jungle is like family, but that nigga ain’t gon’ be loyal to us if I fucked up his operation by killing Jontae. So all this is Seneca’s fault.”

Seneca frowned. “Like hell it is. I ain’t tell yo’ ass to kill that nigga.”

“Mm hmm. Again, you know I’m down for my niggas, and that muthafucka was trying to sabotage shit. He had footage from back in the day of you stealing from Jungle and another nigga getting blamed for it. You care to see it?” I rebutted.

He frowned once again but remained quiet. “I didn’t think so, nigga. So again, we’ll leave at ten. Are all of you in?”

“Let me check with Lexi, and I’ll let you know. I also have to see if Mama can watch Foster,” Chad said.

“A’ight. Everybody else good?”

Everyone nodded and began slapping each other’s hands to head home. I went to my office and got comfortable. For some reason, I just felt safer here. Shy peeked his head inside. “You good?”

“Yeah. I’m just gon’ chill here tonight.”

“Did you talk to Zay?”

“Yep. Earlier. Riley and I are together. I was with her before meeting the guys at World Gym.”

He slapped my hand then shook it. “That’s what I’m talking about. I take it he said some helpful things.”

“He did, and I felt comfortable talking to him. You know how I can be.”

“Hell yeah. Look how long you’d been dealing with that shit before it really started showing to everybody else.”

I nodded as he stood there watching me. He tended to do that when he was analyzing me. So to stop him from doing so, I said, “I’m getting my shit together. The last thing I would want to do is tarnish your name, man. I’ll let you figure out

how to get at people without killing them. Now that I have something to lose, I realize how I could have put you in a position.”

“Nigga ain’t had a woman but a day and having epiphanies and shit,” Shy said then laughed.

“She has a daughter too. She reminds me so much of JuJu. It’s crazy. Riley is a good woman. I think I struck gold this time. For real. I just lucked up because she likes bad boys. Otherwise, she would have kicked my ass to the curb. I don’t ever want her to feel like she’s in danger though.”

“That’s grown man talk. You’ve never been childish or nothing like that, but grown men look out for their women. The right woman can have you changing all kinds of shit. Look at Seneca’s ass. He only slabs his pants around us now.”

“Aww shit! Has he left?”

“Naw. He out front talking to Jericho.”

I called him and asked him to come back inside. I headed back to the front as Shy followed me with a slight frown of confusion on his face. When Seneca walked in, he frowned, matching Shy’s facial expression. “What’s up?”

“If I knew information about your sibling, would you wanna know?”

“Hell yeah. What Joyy ain’t telling me?”

“Naw. A sibling on your father’s side.”

He frowned hard as shit, and I could see the vein popping out on the side of his head. “Fuck that nigga. If I see him, I might fuck him up.”

“I didn’t say him. I said a sibling.”

“I’on know, man. You found him?”

“He’s dead. I found his daughter though.”

“Who is she?”

I lowered my head but maintained my gaze. He immediately caught on without me saying a word. “You

fucking lying. Riley is my sister?”

“Yeah. She wanted me to break the news to you because she didn’t know how you would take it coming from her. She wants to establish a relationship with you.”

Seneca was pacing, and I knew this shit was blowing his mind. He’d said on more than one occasion how he would fuck his dad up if he knew what he looked like. “She said you look like him.”

“That’s probably why she thought I looked familiar. I figured as much since I don’t look like my mama. Fuck! I don’t want her to think I’m being hateful if I say no.”

“I don’t think she’ll think that, but again, she wants to get to know you. Take time to think about it. She’s not him, and the two of you got two different versions of him as well.”

“Yeah. That’s the part that bothers me. She idolizes him while I’m hoping that he’s burning in hell. I already gotta deal with Luckey tomorrow. It’s his visitation, and Kaysyn wants me to go with them because she doesn’t want to be in the same room with him without me. I wanna choke his ass.”

He had his hands full with that Luckey situation. I knew it was hard for him, because Luckey would have been dead had it not been for those kids. “I’ll think about it. Tell her I said that,” he said and walked out of the office.

Shy was standing there in shock. “How coincidental could that shit be? You’re dating the piece of him that he’s never wanted to admit that he wanted to know.”

“Right. Hopefully, he agrees to talk to her. I think it’ll be good for him to get to know her.”

Shy nodded in agreement, then slapped my hand. “I’m gonna head out. You sure you gon’ kick it here?”

“I think so. I’ll text if something changes.”

“A’ight, bruh.”

“Oh, I meant to ask how that shit went down about Lamar.”

“Oh. Brittany said in so many words, fuck him. She already knows him, and they don’t need a brother/sister relationship. She wouldn’t even be comfortable with no shit like that.”

“Good. Has he stopped calling?”

“Mm hmm. The last time he called, I told him that I was giving him his final warning. If he called again, that would be the last number he’d call.”

I slowly shook my head. And he wanted to talk about me and my shit. Deep down, he was just like me. I’d trained him well. I chuckled as he turned to leave.

Once he left, the office was quiet. I got my blanket and pillow from the storage closet and took off my pants then made my way to the sofa. I wasn’t sure what was pulling at me to stay here, but whatever the reason, I was sure to listen to it. I always trusted my gut, because it never steered me wrong.

Just as I got comfortable, my phone vibrated against the coffee table. I grabbed it to see a message from Riley. I sat up, hoping nothing had happened, only to see a text saying, *I hope you’re safe, Ali. Let me know that you’re good so I can go to sleep.*

I smiled slightly. *I’m good, baby. About to go to sleep. You should have already been asleep.*

As long as you have ‘business’ to handle, I’m going to be awake until you let me know that you’re good. Good night, handsome.

I smiled at her message. It felt different having a woman to care that much about me to make sure I was safe. *Good night, beautiful.*

CHAPTER 18

RILEY

I couldn't sleep. Even after Ali texted me, I tossed and turned for an hour until I just decided to get up. Thankfully, I didn't have to go to work today, or I would have been dog tired. Since I'd called my job about Ms. Maria's death, I was given bereavement days to take care of my daughter's needs, so I was able to be off for the rest of the week. I would definitely need to find a daycare that could pick her up from preschool in the evenings.

Although Maria and I weren't close, she was still family. Now Aina and I had no one in this world. The rest of Gabe's family shunned me, and I surely didn't trust them around Aina without me or Ms. Maria. I didn't know how we would move on without her, but I knew that it was something we would have to do.

I cleaned the entire house while Aina slept. The only thing I couldn't do was vacuum the rooms with carpet, because I didn't want to disturb her. As I sat on the couch, folding clothes, I saw my phone light up with a message. I had my phone on silent so it wouldn't disturb us if we were asleep. It was already seven in the morning.

When I picked it up and saw a message from Ali, I smiled. *Good morning, beautiful. Call me.*

I clicked his name, and the phone only rang once before he answered. "Good morning, Riley. Why are you awake, baby?"

"I couldn't sleep. Good morning, Ali."

"Come open the door."

I only smiled bigger at his request. I quickly stood and made my way to the back door. There he was in all his glory. He had a plastic grocery store bag hanging on his arm and slight bags under his eyes. His hair was somewhat disheveled but so damn sexy. He was looking out at the backyard but suddenly averted his gaze to mine. He bit his bottom lip then smiled.

Dear God, the man you sent to me is perfect. I opened the door, and he rushed to me and picked me up. I giggled softly as he kissed my neck. “Hey.”

“Hey, Ali. How’d you know I was awake?”

He twisted his lips to the side. “I watch you. I know that shit sound stalkerish and shit, but it’s habit. You get to know a person better by their actions than their words.”

I slid my arms around his neck as he let me slide down his body. He was about five to six inches taller than my five-foot-six-inch frame. I loved looking up at him. “So what have you learned by watching me?”

“That you worry a lot about shit you can’t change. You’re a thinker,” he said as he slid his fingertips down the side of my face. “You are always thinking about situations and possibilities of how they could turn out.”

“Hmm.”

I kissed his lips and pulled away from him. He was right on the money. Ali was very attentive, but I supposed that was what made a good private investigator. “So what’s in the bag?” I asked, changing the subject.

He smirked but let me be. “I wanted to ask you to braid my hair. I have to leave in a couple of hours to head to Houston with my guys. I don’t wanna look like a sex symbol while I’m with them.”

My eyebrows lifted, and I bit my bottom lip as I scanned his body. Sex symbol was an understatement. “Stop looking at me like that, Riley, before I slow fuck you against that wall.”

“You made that sound like it would be a bad thing.”

“It would be. Just because it would be slow doesn’t mean it would be powerless. I’ll put a fucking hole in that wall right now as bad as I want you. Then baby girl will wake up and think I’m killing her mother.”

I gave him a half smile. “Bring your ass in here so I can do your hair.”

As I turned to walk away, he pulled me back to him and kissed me tenderly, sliding his tongue to mine. I moaned softly into his mouth then brought my hands to his hair and slid my fingers through it. He gripped my ass and backed me into the refrigerator. *Damn.* I wanted him so bad. My panties were already soaked.

He separated our kiss and nibbled on my ear. “I can’t wait to destroy you piece by piece and delicately build you up again. God, you are so gorgeous, baby. Let me fuck you.”

“Take what the fuck you want, Ali.”

He grabbed me by the neck and bit my ear then released me and took me to the laundry room. “Take that shit off.”

I did as he demanded while watching him drop his pants to his ankles and strap up with the condom he took from his pocket. Before I could make another move, he picked me up and set me on the washer, as it entered the spin cycle, and pushed his dick inside of me. My head dropped back, and my mouth opened. He quickly covered it with his hand and stroked my kitty until she purred uncontrollably. The vibrations from the washing machine only enhanced the take down I was experiencing.

When he removed his hand, he slid it to my back while the other lifted my leg. He kissed it at the knee as he slowed his pace a bit, winding his dick into me. “Ali, fuck,” I whispered.

He stared down at the action then quickly pulled out of me and dove in face first. I grabbed my ankles and let him have his way. His eyes were pinned on mine as he ate my fruit down to the fucking rind. Right before I came, he stopped and reentered me, fucking me with purpose. It was like he had a vendetta out against her for being so wet. He yanked me from

the washing machine like a rag doll and committed a senseless crime by murdering my pussy like it fucked him over. I bit into the flesh on his shoulder to keep from screaming.

When he finally came, he gripped me even tighter as I held on to his hair and bit his earlobe. He released his hold and allowed me to slide down his body. “Damn, baby. I just wanna lay up under your ass all day now,” he said.

I smiled lazily at him. “Damn is right. I’m gon’ have to soak when I finish your hair.”

He licked his lips then pulled his pants up. Once I finally got my leggings on, I led him out to the front room. He grabbed his bag from the countertop, and when he got to the couch, he sat on the floor between my legs. “You want me to wash it first? You have a little... umm...”

“Naw. I’ll wash it another day. Leave your cum right in it. Probably gon’ have my shit shining and healthy.”

I chuckled as I slowly shook my head and began detangling it. My eyes closed for a moment as I thought about what he could possibly have to do in a couple of hours. I took a deep breath and continued what I was doing. However, he stopped my progress by turning to me. “What’s up? You good?”

I nodded. “Just thinking about you. Hoping that you’re good. Hoping that you won’t be in danger when you leave me.”

“What exactly do you think I do, Riley? Let’s get a clear understanding of that.”

I brought the comb to my lap, and I stared at it for a moment, then lifted my eyes to his. “You obviously own an investigation firm. So you investigate stuff and sometimes provide security detail for people. I feel like you probably dabble in illegal things as well, like selling drugs, and I feel like you probably have a few bodies on that gun you carry around.”

“I used to sell drugs. I gave that up completely a couple of years ago... closer to three. Basically, shit I’m involved in

now is to protect my family and people close to me. Are there bodies on this shit? Absolutely. But I'm not a reckless nigga... until that Friday with my mother. Before you draw conclusions, I didn't kill my mother. I sent her packing though."

I nodded as he stared at me. Our conversation was cut short when Aina walked into the room and shrieked. "Prince Ali! You're still here!"

She ran to him and hugged him tightly. He chuckled then was sure to clarify, "I didn't stay the night, baby girl. I just got back about thirty minutes ago."

"Are you staying with us today? Mommy said we're going to watch movies and eat pizza!"

"I have to go to Houston. If it doesn't take too long, I can come back. That cool wit'chu, princess?"

She nodded with a huge smile on her face. I leaned over to his ear and said, "Let me fix her something to eat. You want something to eat too?"

"Mm. I ate about fifteen minutes ago, but I'll take something. Thank you."

Before I could pull away, he kissed my lips. I looked over at Aina, and she'd brought her hands to her mouth. I slowly shook my head as he stood and allowed me up to go to the kitchen. As I got eggs from the fridge, I could feel her taps on my hip. When I looked at her, she smiled big. "Mommy, is Prince Ali your boyfriend now?"

I smiled back at her as he watched us from the table. "Yes. Does that make you happy?"

"Yes! Can I call you Jasmine?"

I laughed. "Chile, please! I'm Mommy. Period."

She giggled and put her hand over her mouth as she did. As I cracked eggs to scramble, she tapped me again. I looked down at her to see she had somewhat of a serious look on her face. I stooped to her level, and she went to my ear. "Is Prince Ali gonna be my daddy now?"

My face heated, and I glanced up at him to see he was staring right at us. His face reddened some. Did he hear her? I thought she was speaking softly enough to where he wouldn't have, but I was quickly learning there wasn't much that got by him. "Only time will tell, baby. It's too soon to say. We just decided we would be a couple last night. I have to make sure Prince Ali doesn't turn into Aladdin the street rat."

She laughed so loud until I couldn't help but laugh with her. "Hol' up over there. I feel like I may be the brunt of the joke. What y'all laughing at?"

I put my finger over my lips and said, "Shhh!"

Aina only laughed harder. "I see y'all already standing as a united front against a nigga. Okay. I got something for y'all."

"Prince Ali, fabulous he, Ali Ababwa!" Aina sang loudly.

"Naw, lil mama. Don't try to kiss up to me now."

I laughed and grabbed Aina's hand, taking her over to Ali. I sat on one leg and lifted her to his other leg. We both kissed his cheeks repeatedly as he laughed and hugged us both. "A'ight, a'ight. Cut it out."

He patted my ass, causing me to look at him. He kissed my lips, and my kitty moistened all over again. My mind immediately went back to what I'd just gotten in the laundry room. I stood from his lap to get breakfast cooked. As I glanced at them, I smiled at just how quickly Aina had taken to him. She was still sitting on his leg, pointing at his different tattoos, asking him to explain them. He didn't get tired of her questions. He answered every one of them with the same amount of enthusiasm as she had when she asked the question. Aina literally looked like she could be his daughter.

While they talked, I put some breakfast sausage in the air fryer and bread in the toaster, then began scrambling the eggs. My mind traveled back to the conversation we were having before Aina interrupted us, and I was grateful that he was no longer selling drugs, but the killing shit gave me pause. Not a bad pause though. I knew what I was signing up for.

It made me curious about the dynamics between him and his mother. He didn't seem to be the disrespectful type with as gentle as he was with Aina and me, but I needed to be sure. He didn't seem like a liar either, but shit, we'd only known one another for a week and a half! It seemed like I'd known him forever, but I knew that was because his bad boy image reminded me of Gabe's.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when his arms slid around me. "What'chu jumping for, baby? Where you at?"

He softly kissed my neck, and I glanced to see Aina was gone. I knew he was asking what was on my mind, but I didn't think I could just come out and voice my concerns just yet. While he made me feel comfortable, I didn't know if I could be that comfortable. "Sorry. I was just thinking about the things I have to do this week."

"You wouldn't lie to me, right?"

I remained quiet as I scrambled the eggs, because that was exactly what I had done. He remained silent until I turned the fire off and took the pan from the burner and dumped the eggs in a plate. "Look at me."

I turned to him, and he grabbed me by the chin. "Ask me whatever you wanna ask me."

"I can't. I don't wanna make you uncomfortable. You said you would tell me when you were ready."

"Ask me what you wanna know, Riley. If I don't wanna answer, then I won't."

"Your relationship with your mom... umm... was volatile... I mean, shit."

"I was never abusive to my mother. It was the other way around. I had to get her away from me before I lost it. I can't go into detail, but I know you're probably wondering how safe you and Aina are with me. The relationship a man has with his mother is tell-tale signs of how it will be with you. I get that, but you won't ever see my relationship with her. She fed my toxicity. She had to go, her or me, and I've built too much here to leave it."

He pulled me in his arms, and I exhaled. To say he was hard, I was getting a totally different vibe, and I loved that. “Thank you for that.”

He pulled away from me and put his palms to my cheeks. “I know how to treat a woman, Riley. Every fucking inch of her.”

I couldn’t even find my voice to respond to him. *Lawd have mercy*. I didn’t know what I did to deserve him, but whatever it was, I was glad I did it.

“Mommy, is the food ready? I brushed my teeth, Prince Ali.”

“Good job, lil mama. Come on. Let’s get to the table so Jasmine can get our food to us.”

Aina’s eyebrows shot up, and she giggled so much until Ali had to pick her up to take her to the table. She was so dramatic at times. I went to the stove and fixed our food. After taking theirs to them and getting their drinks of chocolate milk and apple juice, I made my way back with my plate and a cup of coffee I brewed from my Keurig.

When I got to the table, they were waiting for me, neither of them having touched their food while they waited. I smiled big as I stretched my hands out to grab theirs. “Bow your head, Aina,” I said then began to pray.

As I did and I thanked God for Ali’s presence at our table, he squeezed my hand. When I was done, he stood from the table and said, “Excuse me for a minute.”

His face was red as hell. Just from our short talk at the stove, I had a clue why. I didn’t go after him, because I knew he needed time to himself to calm down. “Mommy, Prince Ali’s food is gonna get cold.”

“Yeah, but it’ll be okay. Eat yours.”

“But he’s not at the table.”

I smiled softly at her and put my fork down too. I supposed we would all be eating cold breakfast.

CHAPTER 19

ALI

When I walked back inside, they were still at the table, their food untouched. “I’m sorry, ladies. Breakfast is probably cold.”

“We’ll all eat cold breakfast!” Aina said.

I smiled at her as Riley said, “I can slide them in the microwave for a little bit.”

I nodded my thanks as she stood from the table. As she prayed earlier, asking God to bless me and thanked God for me being there, I got overwhelmed. They were happy that I was even there, although I had brought nothing but myself. This was why I had to get Camila out of my life. I didn’t know how to accept genuine appreciation from a woman. Riley hadn’t asked for anything but my presence, and that was a bit much for me at the moment.

I supposed it didn’t help that she’d brought my mother up in conversation. While I wasn’t ready to talk about her, I could see she needed reassurance. We’d moved fast. I wanted to believe that had I not seen her in the store that Sunday, I probably wouldn’t have met Aina so soon. Riley needed to be sure that I wasn’t a thug in every sense of the fucking word.

She didn’t have that shit to worry about. I’d kill to protect her and Aina. I was prepared to do just that last week. I didn’t know I’d end up killing that muthafucka anyway. Surprisingly, I hadn’t received a phone call about that yet. While I wanted to seem proactive and ask if they needed a statement, I didn’t

want to bring attention to me. If they were doing good police work, they would have ended up at the firm by now.

That was the very thing we were banking on by having him dumped in Vidor. It had only been a few days, though, so I wouldn't count them out just yet. Shy had tapped into camera footage of surrounding areas and deleted information for the entire day. Even footage of him driving to Camila's house. The last documented place he could be tracked was his home. I couldn't put Shy in a position like that again.

Riley brought our food to the table, and I smiled at her. Aina wiggled in her seat and dug in immediately. She was hungry. I was outside for a good ten minutes, trying to compose myself while they stared at their plates, waiting for me to return. As Riley picked up her fork, I took it from her and stabbed some eggs with it to feed her.

She stared at me for a second like she was in shock, then opened her mouth and took it from the fork. Her eyes stayed on mine as she chewed. I fed myself some, then fed her more. I could see Aina in my peripheral, looking back and forth between us with a smile on her face. These two little ladies were going to be my new family. No doubt about it.

“YOUR STYLIST FIT YOU IN TODAY?” SENECA ASKED.

“Naw. Riley did it.”

He gave me a slight head nod. I knew he didn't want to talk about Riley at all. He was still trying to figure out if he wanted to proceed with a relationship with her. If he didn't, I knew things would get weird between us. Riley was my woman and would be until one of us were no longer breathing. This shit wasn't her fault, just like it wasn't his. She showed how considerate she was of the situation by having me approach him first.

We'd just gotten to Jungle's spot, and it looked rather quiet, which was somewhat unusual. It was always somebody

moving around here. When the fellas met up with Seneca and me, Shy asked, “Is it normally this quiet?”

“Naw. That’s what got me fucked up.”

When the back gate opened and I saw his fine ass sister, Fawn, walk through it, I knew he was home. We proceeded to the gate, and lil mama pulled her weapon on us. Everybody lifted their hands. When she got closer, I could see the tears that had fallen down her cheeks. “What’s up, Fawn?” Seneca said.

She frowned slightly as we all ogled her. “Seneca?”

“Yeah. You good?”

“Fuck. I didn’t know who y’all were rolling up here like that.”

“Where’s everybody? Why you out here by yourself?” I asked as her husband came through the gate.

“You know I do what the fuck I want,” she said to me and gave me a half smile. “It’s good to see you too, Ali. Y’all looking for Jungle?”

“Yeah. He back there?”

“Yeah. We just had a private memorial for our dad and Mega.”

“We could have made the trip another day. I wonder why he didn’t say anything about that yesterday when I told him I was coming today,” I said mostly to myself.

Fawn’s husband, Law, gave everyone a head nod and put his arm around his wife’s waist. He was one of the Gutierrez brothers and was responsible for keeping the Patterson dynasty afloat and getting Jungle aka Milton Patterson, Jr. out of prison around ten years ago.

After she introduced him to Seneca and me, and I introduced Shy, Chad, and Jericho to them, we made our way to the back. Jungle was sitting in a lounge chair, staring at flowers and pictures of Ice and Mega. When he saw us, he stood and extended his hand for handshakes. That was a good sign that all was well.

His right hand, Vegas, stepped outside and gave everybody a pound. As everyone got seated, he said, “Vegas, tell Fawn and Law to come back.”

I was sitting here confused as hell. He remained quiet, and none of us knew what to say. He didn't look angry, but we all knew he was feeling a way. His father and brother were on his mind heavy. When Law and Fawn's fine ass sat next to him, she allowed more tears to fall as he pulled out his phone. I saw Jericho in my peripheral, preparing for the unexpected.

“So, you killed Jontae, right?”

“Why you ask?”

“Because that muthafucka belonged to me. I have a right to know, Ali. You took him out or not?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“He was threatening my boy and his new family. He had to go. You know how I ride for my people. I can admit, I should have come to you first.”

“You fucking right you should have come to me first.”

He stood from his seat, and so did I. Whether I was right or wrong, there wasn't a muthafucka alive that I would allow to get one up on me. He mean mugged me for a minute, and when Fawn stood, he put his arm around her. She broke out in tears again, and Law pulled her to him while Jungle bit his bottom lip for a second.

Seneca stood by my side, silently letting me know that he was down for whatever, and Jericho did the same. I wasn't backing down. That wasn't the type of nigga I was. Finally, Jungle said, “Jontae been a part of the Patterson organization for a while. His dad and my dad were cool. When his dad left the game, Jontae replaced him. He was family.”

He wiped his nose, and I felt a chill go up my spine. Just as I was about to say something, he said, “Just like Roulette.”

Roulette was the nigga responsible for getting him locked up and getting Ice and Mega killed. He extended his hand to

me. When he did, I realized he was thanking me. I slapped his hand, and he pulled me in for a one-armed hug. When he released me, we all sat, waiting for an explanation.

“Jontae and his punk ass father were the ones who drew Ice and Mega to that location. We were so focused on Roulette’s ass, we missed them. Surprisingly, Roulette kept his bitch ass mouth closed about them. When we searched Jontae’s belongings, looking for my product, we found another phone and all kinds of incriminating shit. That muthafucka had my brother’s necklace. If I could kill him again, I would. Although you took the kill from me, I wouldn’t have known had you not.”

“Over ten years later, and this shit still feels so fresh. My big brother with the megawatt smile and my daddy... To know so many muthafuckas wanted my family is sickening. It’s hard to know who to trust,” Fawn added.

“That’s why I’m making the difficult decision to start dismantling this shit piece by piece,” Jungle said.

My eyebrows lifted in shock. The Patterson empire had been around for over thirty years, before I was born. Ice was that nigga, and that was why niggas wanted him gone. They wanted what he had. Jealousy could be a powerful thing. It was what put him and his youngest son in body bags and Jungle behind bars, not even being able to attend their double service. Fawn had nearly suffered the same fate.

“You sure, man?” Seneca asked.

“Naw, I’m not totally sure. But surely this ain’t what Ice had in mind. Niggas are getting more and more disloyal daily. When you find a brotherhood... a genuine brotherhood, you gotta hang on to that. I appreciate y’all for accepting me into your family. Y’all my brothers.”

He took a deep breath, then said to Fawn, “Muthafucka come up here deep like I was gon’ pop his ass. I’m fucking offended.”

When he chuckled, I chuckled too. “Man, you can never be too careful. You had me on edge with that phone call.”

We all relaxed a bit as Jungle called his chef to come prepare a meal for us. “Oh, and Jericho, that nigga Jules is back in H-Town. I saw him earlier, but I couldn’t do shit because I had to get back for the memorial. I’m not sure what he’s doing, but he was moving pretty quickly. He had a woman with him too.”

Jericho stood. “Did she look like him?”

“Naw. She was fair complexioned... lighter than Fawn.”

He nodded then sat again. I was more than sure he was thinking that Jules had his sister. His ass was next on the agenda. I was ready to be all about Watchful Eyes and having a family. As Riley’s beautiful face came to mind, I sent her a text. *Thinking about you, baby. See you this evening.*

“Yo, call Mel and Arrow and see if they wanna come eat. I know Mel in town because he was talking about hooking up tomorrow. Arrow has been slowing on his hours because he’s opening his own office,” Jungle said.

“And tell Mel to bring Obsession with him! We got some shit to go over,” Fawn added as Jungle rolled his eyes, and Law bit his bottom lip while staring at her.

I smiled slightly. I missed my boys. Since everybody was coupled up, we rarely hung out anymore. Maybe now that I had a woman, we could change that. As I thought about Riley, she texted back. *You’re always on my mind, Ali. I can’t wait to see you. Someone else has been talking about Prince Ali since you left.*

I smiled and responded, *Tell my princess that I’ll see her soon.*

I slid my phone back in my pocket to see Shy staring at me. He nodded repeatedly, giving me somewhat of an approval for what he knew was happening with me. A good woman could always make a man better, and I knew that was what Riley would be for me.

Before I could even get comfortable again, my phone vibrated. I pulled it from my pocket to see a random number. I answered, “Watchful Eyes, Ali Joseph speaking.”

I had a feeling it was business... unless it was Camila's ass. "Hello, Mr. Joseph. Just the man I needed to speak to."

It was the police. Took them long enough to reach out. The man was found four days ago. "How can I help you?"

"This is Detective James from the Vidor Police Department. I wanted to ask questions about what you saw while investigating Terry Griffin. Do you have any footage or pictures we could possibly use?"

"I sure do. I don't have any the day he was found, because he was in the wind. I can give you what I have up until Friday when my time was up for the day."

"Okay. Anything could possibly help."

"Will someone come to get it from me?"

"Yes, sir. What's a convenient time?"

"Tomorrow morning. I'll be in the office first thing."

"Thank you, sir."

"Yes, sir."

I ended the call to see everyone staring at me. "Questioning about Terry Griffin," I said, enlightening them all.

Jungle was obviously confused, so I filled him in, leaving out details about Camila. He didn't need all that information. I just told him he was stalking my lady. That wasn't a lie. However, that nigga forgot all about Terry when I said I had a lady.

"That must've been why yo' ass was smiling a minute ago. You always smile, but not while texting somebody. Congratulations," he said.

I nodded then looked at my phone to see Riley had texted back while I was on the phone. It was a video of her and Aina blowing kisses at me. I stood from the patio table and headed to my car to video myself blowing them a kiss back. There was no way I was about to do that in front of those niggas, but

I refused to leave my babies hanging. After I sent it, I went back to the back, and they all laughed.

I frowned hard as Jungle pulled up video footage from a camera he had on the side of the house that caught my every move. “Fuck y’all.”

Fawn smiled and said, “I think it’s sweet, Ali. Every woman wants to be loved whether she admits it or not. Law sends me shit like that too. Don’t let his hard demeanor fool you. He’s not hard with me, and I love every minute of that. All these niggas prolly do the same shit with their women too.”

Law nuzzled his head into her neck as she squirmed. I knew those fools, Shy, Seneca, and Chad were all whipped. They were the last ones that should have been laughing, especially Seneca’s ass. Had me sitting in the fucking driveway while he finger fucked Kaysyn against the front door that day. “Thanks, Fawn.”

She smiled, her dimples winking at me. We’d talked on a couple of occasions back in the day, but nothing ever came of it. I was busy hustling in Beaumont, and she was a spoiled daddy’s girl. I wondered if she was so attracted to Law in the beginning because he reminded her of me. That shit didn’t matter at this point, though, since they’d been married for a long time... actually, not long after they met.

“I’m proud of you, man. You know we like fucking wit’chu,” Shy said.

“I know. Those twins gon’ exact my revenge as soon as you get home.”

He laughed and shoved me. He knew I wasn’t lying. Those girls had him wrapped around their pinky fingers already, and they weren’t even six months old yet. I glanced over at Jericho and could see his mind was on one. I stood and sat next to him. “What’s up, bruh? Talk to me.”

“I wanna find his ass. I’m thinking that putting Jungle on it may be a good idea. The five of us can’t possibly do this shit by ourselves. I need him caught soon, although this may be a

good time for me to take a trip to Miami to check on my sister.”

“If you gon’ go to Miami, I can’t have you going by yourself. Let me know when, and I can go with you. How long you plan on staying?”

“Just a couple of days.”

“A’ight. Let’s get this shit wrapped up. If we have to, we will bring her back with us.”

His eyebrows lifted, and he nodded repeatedly. “Yeah. She needs to be with me.”

Before we could really get into the conversation, Arrow came through the back gate, and Mel and Sandrene weren’t too far behind him. Lynn was probably at work. After slapping hands with them, I hugged Sandrene. “Everything still good?” I asked her.

“Yes. Thank you, Ali,” she said, then kissed my cheek.

“Aye! Don’t be kissing that nigga!” Mel yelled, causing Sandrene to giggle.

I slowly shook my head. Sandrene and I had developed a real friendship. While we didn’t talk a lot now that I wasn’t looking out for her, we shared a lot of personal shit with each other that bonded us for life. There were moments where she cried in my arms, and I was damn near on the verge of tears myself. I’d never forget how she was there for me and how my boy was gracious enough to allow her to be.

Before she could even sit, Fawn had grabbed her hand. “Girl, come inside so you can show me this trick. Law gon’ fuck around and find out tonight!”

They giggled as they disappeared inside. “I don’t know where Pops, me, and Mega went wrong with that girl,” Jungle said.

“Shiiid, nigga, y’all did everything right,” Law said.

Everybody laughed. We were having a great time, getting more acquainted with Law and catching up with Jamel and Arrow, but I couldn’t wait to get back to Beaumont.

CHAPTER 20

RILEY

When the doorbell rang, Aina and I hopped up from the sofa. She screamed all the way to the back door as I ran behind her. We'd been watching movies today, trying to keep her mind off her abuela. The funeral would be this weekend, and I just wanted my baby to have as much time not thinking about it as possible. We'd watched two movies already and had played a couple of games.

When I opened the back door and Ali stood there with two bouquets of flowers, my heart melted. He had a big smile on his face. I swore René and Angela were singing their damn song "Your Smile" every time I saw his pearly whites. That smile lit my fire, and I could only hope to see it forever. "Flowers!" Aina said as she hopped up and down.

I allowed Ali to come in, and he handed me the bouquet of roses. When I realized that the other bouquet was smaller, I knew it was for Aina. When he handed them to her, her mouth opened. "Are they for me, Prince Ali?"

"Yes, princess. You deserve flowers, don't you?"

Her face brightened. "Yes!"

She ran off and set them on the table then ran into his arms. "Thank you so much, Prince Ali!"

He smiled at me as she rested her head on his shoulder. I made my way to him and kissed his lips as he held her. My eyes closed as I slid my hand over his braids. "We missed you."

“I missed y’all too. But I’m here for the rest of the day. So what’s up?”

“You wanna watch *Trolls* with us?” Aina asked as she lifted her head.

“I wanna spend time with y’all. So if y’all watching *Trolls*, then I’m watching *Trolls*.”

I bit my lip and led him to where we were seated. Our bowl of popcorn was on the table and so was the leftover pizza. “I’m sorry, but I haven’t cooked yet. Aina and I decided we would have junk today. I’m gonna do burgers in a little while.”

“That’s cool. I ate at my boy’s house in Houston.”

I nodded then cleared my throat as I thought about Seneca. “Umm...”

I turned away when he looked at me. It wasn’t that he was intimidating, but he was. I didn’t want to ever say anything to anger him. He grabbed my chin. “What I told you about that?”

“Did you talk to Seneca?” I asked quickly.

“Yeah. He said he needed to think about it. He was angry. I feel like he’ll talk to you eventually, but he needs to calm down. He doesn’t want it to seem like he’s taking things out on you.”

“He can still talk to me. I’m not that sensitive. I’ll know where his anger really is. It’s toward someone he can’t get to, and I’m the closest he can get.”

“Naw. I don’t wanna have to bust his ass for anything that may fall from his lips. He can be a loose cannon at times, and he has no filter. The recklessness I spoke about that I usually don’t engage in... that was his M.O. for a long time. I don’t want him to relapse.”

I smiled at him and nodded my head. He was so protective of me already. “Okay. Are you gonna stay with us tonight?”

“Mm hmm. If that’s cool with y’all.”

“Yes! Thank you, Daddy!”

Aina immediately put her hand over her mouth, and my lips parted as I glanced up at Ali. His face was red. She hopped off the sofa and ran to her room. As I stood to go after her, he grabbed my hand. “Let me talk to her. You can watch from the hallway if you want to.”

I was still speechless at the moment, and I had absolutely no idea what I would say to her, so in a way, I was glad that he wanted to talk to her. I followed behind him down the hallway. She’d closed her door. I wasn’t even sure that she understood what had happened. I wanted to believe that she got scared because of our facial expressions.

He knocked on her door, and there was no answer. “Princess... you good, baby girl? I’m not angry, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Come in,” she said.

I could tell that she was scared by the sound of her voice, and I really wanted to go in there and hop in bed with her, under the covers. That was what she did when she was scared... completely covered herself up. When Ali opened the door, sure enough, that was how she was. I could see she was balled up under her comforter.

Ali got to her bed and sat on the side of it. He pinched her foot, and she flinched. “Come on, princess. Look at me.”

His voice was so tender it nearly brought tears to my eyes. Aina slowly slid the comforter from her head, and he smiled at her. Thankfully, his face was no longer red. She probably took that to mean he was angry. She’d touched his feelings. That was why he was red. She quickly ducked back under the covers, causing him to chuckle. He glanced at me, and I nodded. I had a feeling he was asking permission to get her from under there.

He pulled the covers from her head and asked, “Why you hiding?”

“Because I made a mistake,” she said softly.

“Listen. You know how many mistakes I’ve made? Remember when I didn’t come to dinner with y’all, and I

didn't show up until three days later?"

Just at the mention of that, I remembered how disappointed the two of us had been. He was proving he wasn't the man I had judged him to be. Aina nodded her head and asked, "So you aren't mad?"

"Naw, princess. I don't think you could ever make me angry."

He tapped her nose, and she stood from the bed and fell in his arms. Just as I was about to enter, he held his hand up to halt me. "I have a question though, lil mama. Was it a mistake that you called me daddy, or do you really wanna call me that?"

She dove back to the bed and tried to pull the covers back over her head. "Aina, come on. You don't have to be scared or shy, baby. You can always talk to me. For real."

She stared up at him and started to wring her hands. I already knew the answer to his question. I just didn't want her to feel pressured to answer him if she wasn't comfortable doing so. Just as I was about to enter her bedroom, he said, "I'll be your daddy any day of the week, princess, but you have to take that up with your mom. You can call me daddy if that's what you want."

I swore I stopped breathing. My heart was no good, and the tears were streaming down my face. She'd wanted a dad ever since Gabe was taken away from us. She hopped into his arms once again and said, "Te amo, Papá."

"Yo también te amo, princesa."

I couldn't watch them any longer after they declared their love for one another in Spanish. I pressed my back against the wall and slid to the floor. My head immediately went to my knees as I allowed the tears to escape me. I was happy for my daughter. I could only pray things continued to work out for us. Ali was still somewhat mysterious to me. My daughter was vulnerable, just as I was. I didn't want my decision to be hasty because of that.

When he walked out of the room and saw me on the floor, he set Aina on her feet and knelt beside me. “Give me a minute to talk to Mommy, okay?”

“Okay, Papá.”

She ran off as he sat in the doorway, his back to me. He slid his hand to me and grabbed mine. “I know this is fast. I didn’t have the heart to tell her no. I really do love her, Riley, and in time, I know I’ll love you too.”

I lifted my head and stared at the side of his face. “I just don’t want to make a mistake by allowing this so soon.”

“I know. Even if for some ungodly reason we don’t work out, I’ll always be there for her. Because you’re somewhat familiar with the lifestyle and because I’m ready to settle down, I believe we will work, no matter what happens. I don’t believe in all that toxic shit. It gives me a headache. It ain’t finna be no back and forth bullshit. When we have disagreements, we gon’ talk about shit like adults. I watched my parents fight all the time. Let me rephrase. My dad used to beat my mama’s ass, and all she did was fuck around on him.”

I went to my knees next to him and put my hand to his face. He was talking, and I wanted to make sure I didn’t miss a word. He pulled me to him, causing me to straddle him. “I was born in Miami. We stayed there until I was around nine. The beatings started back then, but I didn’t understand what was going on until we were living in New Orleans. One of my friends put me up on game and brought me to a nigga house where my mama was fucking him.”

He lowered his head and slowly shook it. “I recently found out the beatings started when she got caught cheating. So since she had nowhere to go, no family in sight, my father kept her and me around but made her his ho since she was gonna fuck around for money anyway. It was the way her parents taught her to be before they sold her to my father. He actually loved her and had married her though.”

I was starting to get a headache listening to the horrific things he continued to describe. The beatings his mother endured and the blows he caught trying to protect her. When

he looked up at me and I saw the moisture around his eyes, it made my heart sink even lower than it already had. Him describing how his mother had continuously used him made me see just how much he loved her.

“That Friday, I was tailing Terry, and he ended up at my mama’s place. I lost it. I went in there, and before I knew it, I was making phone calls because I’d—”

I put my fingers to his lips. “Ali, you don’t have to tell me what happened. I already knew that you’d possibly done that, but I understand you so much because of my past with Gabe. His father wasn’t in his life, either, for domestic issues as well. His mother left him and ended up here like your mom. I’m always here for you. Me and Aina. As long as you don’t ever shut me out, we can work through nearly anything.”

He wrapped his arms around my waist and said, “I’ve never told anyone so much about myself... not in detail. My hospital stay in New Orleans was the worst. Most days, no one was there because my dad kept saying I probably wasn’t his, and my mama was busy being his ho. But still I covered for her. CPS didn’t care about blacks and Latinos. If I said she’d gone to get us something to eat, they believed me. My dad had broken my jaw, and I’d suffered a concussion when I’d hit the wall. That shit made me tough though. He showed me the man I didn’t want to become.”

Aina was standing at the end of the hall, watching us, so I motioned for her to join us. When she did, I said, “You see us? We’re a family now, okay? A family.”

He hugged me tightly and pulled Aina in with his other arm. God my heart was crushed for him. He’d survived so much. However, seeing him nearly break down right before my eyes was almost too much to bear. “Daddy, you okay?”

His face reddened again, and he pulled her closer to him. “I’m good, baby girl. I’m just happy.”

I stood from his lap, and he stood with Aina still in his arms. I poked my lip out. Showing just how in tune he was with whatever I was even about to say, this nigga picked me up and carried the both of us back to the couch while we

laughed. When I told him we were a family, I meant that. I felt like God brought him to us for healing. We both needed it, and we were just that for each other. Other people would never understand just how fast we moved, but it wasn't for anyone but us to understand.

Thankfully, I didn't have any family I was really close to that would be in my business anyway. My dad had a brother, but he was in Virginia somewhere, living his best life. I hadn't talked to his ass in years. I could only hope that no one on Ali's side would have anything to say. I would hate to not get along with the people closest to him. I could already see that Aina and I had already made it to the top of the list of his favorite people, and I didn't want us to be knocked down a peg.

When he sat between us, he asked, "How do you feel about going to eat dinner with my people Sunday? Everyone has wives or fiancées, and there's quite a few kids running around. Aina would get along perfectly with Mariena and Ariana. They are a little younger than her. Mariena is three and Ariana is two, I think. There are plenty of babies too. About seven of them."

"Sounds like fun. We'd love to go, right?" I said, leaning over, directing the question at Aina.

"Yes!"

He smiled. "I can't wait for y'all to meet everybody, especially loud ass Alexz. She's the baby sister of one of my best friends, Shyrón Berotte."

"I can't wait either. I can see how just talking about them makes you smile."

"They say the same about you," he said, then kissed my lips. "A'ight, baby girl, let's get *Trolls* cranked up."

Aina wiggled happily and pressed play. She stood on the couch and kissed his cheek then snuggled against him. I found myself doing the same thing. This was perfect. I just prayed nothing threatened that.

CHAPTER 21

ALI

“Thank you for coming to the station instead, Mr. Joseph.”

“No problem, although being in Vidor makes my ass itch.”

He glanced at me but didn't say another word. After leading me to a private room that looked a lot like an interrogation room, he left the room to go inform the detective of my arrival. I didn't like this shit. When they called this morning, asking if I could come here, I didn't get the best vibes. I'd already put Shy on high alert. He told me he would be right outside the damn station, waiting if I needed him and watching my car to make sure they didn't try nothing funny.

As I sat there calmly, playing a game on my phone, I knew they were watching me. Police were so fucking predictable. They wanted to see if I was nervous or losing it. I was the last known person to see him alive. They clearly wanted to see if they could get me for his murder. Shy had gone over my tracks, Terry's tracks, and even Camila's to make sure nothing incriminating would pop up. I was gonna owe him big time for this shit.

All I had brought them was copies of the shit I had given Mrs. Griffin. I had no video footage or shit like that... just pictures. So I didn't know if they thought they would get more from me than they got from her. I knew they didn't have shit as far as evidence was concerned, and I was the closest one to the crime that they thought they would be able to get shit from.

I didn't know who told them I had bitch in my blood, but they were listening to the wrong muthafucka if that was what they heard. I'd been sitting here for thirty minutes when the detective finally came in. "I'm sorry for your wait, Mr. Joseph. I'm Detective James."

He extended his hand, so I shook it. When he sat, he said, "Okay. You have footage for me?"

"I have pictures for you. I didn't get any camera footage. I have them separated by dates."

"I thought you said you had footage."

"That never left my lips, Detective. Go back and listen to the recorded conversation. You asked if I had footage or pictures. I said that I sure did, not specifying which one."

"Okay. Well, we got pictures from Mrs. Griffin. Are there any in here that you didn't give to her?"

"No, sir. She was a paying customer. I gave her everything I had."

"Okay. Well, can you answer a few questions while you're here about Terry Griffin's secret life? Maybe that will lead us to who could have possibly done this."

"No, he can't, since y'all trying to install a tracking device on his car," Shy said when he burst into the room. "Let's go, Mr. Joseph."

I slowly shook my head. "And y'all wonder why I don't trust muthafuckas in Vidor."

Shy led me right out of that place. I knew in my soul they were going to try something underhanded. "They had yo' ass in an interrogation room. So every movement you made and every word you said was being recorded."

"I know. Thanks for looking out."

He nodded and shook my hand. I got in my car to head to the office. They pretty much fucked up their case. They would get zero cooperation from me now. They could have put a tracker on my car. It wouldn't have gotten them any further than they were now. However, I knew I needed to get that

property off my hands. I had no intention of bringing Camila back. I surely didn't want to be bothered with a rental property. She'd made it clear that she was done with me. I supposed the talk Zay recommended would never happen.

After I left the office, I would be going back to spend the day with my woman and daughter. When Aina called me daddy, I swore I wanted to cry. She was so trusting of me. She didn't see the nigga that could kill someone in cold blood... just the man that was nice to her and who liked her mama. Riley was trusting, too, which was why I knew I couldn't let them down.

Here we'd only been around one another a couple of weeks, and she had me in her home with her daughter. It was like she saw my soul. While she had questions, I believed she already knew the answers. She was second guessing herself because of the timing. When she said we would be a family, it touched me deeply. I didn't think I would ever have one after Dahlia. I had given up on love altogether.

Then Talisha's crazy ass and Camila almost sent me to the nuthouse. I didn't know what Jericho had done with her body, but I didn't wanna know either. My phone chimed, alerting me of a text. When I saw Troy's name, I rolled my eyes. I opened the message to see it was a picture. Camila had found her way back to his ass. I slowly shook my head. Their crazy asses could have each other. I responded. *Good the fuck for y'all. Forget this number.*

“THERE'S A LOT OF KIDS!” AINA SAID EXCITEDLY FROM THE back seat.

“There is. I think you'll have fun with them. Let me introduce you to everyone first, then you can play with them. Okay?”

“Okay.”

We had just pulled up to the Berottes' for Sunday dinner, and the place was full as always. Riley looked somewhat

nervous, so I grabbed her hand. “You ain’t gotta be nervous. Everybody’s cool.”

She smiled as I got out of the car and walked around to open their doors. When I grabbed their hands and headed to the driveway, Aina stopped walking. I turned to her and asked, “What’s wrong, baby?”

She didn’t say a word, so I picked her up. She was as nervous as her mother. “I promise everything will be cool.”

When I walked through the back gate, everyone looked to see who was walking through. Shy was the first to come over, holding one of his daughters. “This is my best friend slash brother, Shyrón Berotte. We call him Shy. Shy, this is Riley and my baby, Aina.”

“We met at the benefit,” Riley said.

He nodded. “We sure did. Nice to meet you in a more relaxed setting.” He turned to Aina. “Hey, pretty girl. You can call me Uncle Shy like all the other kids around here. This little lady is...”

He turned Kaylee to him to look at her bib as I slowly shook my head. “Kaylee. Sorry. I have identical twin girls, and it’s hard to remember who I’m holding sometimes.”

Aina giggled as Shy smiled at her. “Y’all come on back. Everybody, look who’s here!”

Mr. Sheldon smiled and nodded then stood to come greet us. When he got close, I said, “This is Shy’s dad. I look at him as my dad too. He’s the only male figure in my life that taught me some important values to have as a man. How to treat a woman was part of his weekly speeches.”

“Thank God,” Riley said as she smiled.

“I’m Sheldon Berotte. Welcome to our house. Being that Ali doesn’t bring women here, I’m gonna go a step further and say welcome to the family too.”

“Mr. Sheldon, this is Riley and Aina.”

“Nice to meet you beautiful ladies.”

After him, there was like a damn meet and greet line that formed before we could get into the house. She recognized Axton from the hospital, although he didn't recognize her. She said lots of people who didn't work at the hospital didn't recognize her, but she saw everybody that came in and out of the place.

Once they met all the bruhs, Aina said, "I have a lot of uncles now!"

I chuckled. Technically, they hadn't met all of them. Seneca was standing off to the side, watching the action unfold. As long as he didn't approach her on no foolishness, we would be good. We headed inside, and as I'd seen the women do on numerous occasions, they all got quiet and stared at us. I could feel the nerves creep back in Riley through the trembling of her hand.

Suddenly, big mouth Alexz started clapping and cheering. I shook my head as Aina clapped too. She didn't have the slightest clue what was going on. Riley chuckled then looked at me with her eyebrows lifted and scrunched together. "I guess that's a good thing?"

"That's Alexz being a jackass. I've never brought a woman here. That's her way of saying it's about time. She's Shy's sister."

The women all embraced Riley, and I knew we would be having a huge conversation of her trying to figure out who was who. I was sure to introduce her to Ms. Anissa though. If she didn't know a soul, she at least knew her. She would probably also remember Skyler since she was noticeably pregnant. I believed she was due in a couple of months or so.

After they all loved on Aina, she looked up at me and said, "Daddy, can we go back outside?"

What in the hell did she do that for? The awws that erupted from the women had my face hot as hell. I grabbed her hand, and we headed out there to find big ass Chad in the grass, playing with the kids. When he noticed Aina standing there watching with a huge smile on her face, he stood to his feet.

“Everybody, we have a new player! Let’s welcome, the fabulous Aina!” he said with his arms outstretched.

She giggled and ran right over. Chad immediately scooped her up and put her on his shoulders while the other kids cheered. When he put her down, Mariena and Ariana hugged her. It was the cutest thing and had me smiling more than I normally did. “Family looks good on you, man.”

I turned to see Dylan and Isaiah standing next to me. Zay placed his hand on my shoulder. “I’m glad everything worked out.”

“Me too.”

As I watched them play, I heard the gate open. I thought we were the last ones to arrive, unless Seneca’s mom was coming. Everybody else was here. When I saw Troy and Camila, I almost lost it. *What in the fuck are they doing here?* No one had ever seen me unhinged except Jericho, and they’d brought this bullshit to my people’s house.

Everyone was staring at them as I made my way to them. I didn’t want anyone to witness what I was about to say. However, when I looked up, Shy and Jericho were right behind me, and Seneca was behind them. “I thought I said for y’all to have a good life,” I said calmly.

“Well, I thought it could be better if you were a part of it,” Camila said. “I told your dad how much money you’re actually rolling in and how we could benefit as your parents.”

Their faces had to be in the dictionary right next to the word evil. But I was about to show them that I was a product of their toxicity. Just as I was about to grab Troy and Camila by their fucking necks, she said, “A million and we’ll disappear. Or I can just go to the authorities about what I know. I’m your mother, and you will *not* just get rid of me like one of your random hoes.”

My hand was itching to grab my gun from my waist and blow both of their brains out right here. The way they were disrespecting Mr. Sheldon’s house was eating me alive. It made me feel like I brought this bullshit to his doorstep.

Jericho looked like he wanted to do the same shit I wanted to do.

“As far as I’m concerned, you *are* a random ho. Troy decided to try to turn a ho into a housewife. Apparently, he must be still hooked to take your ass back. I wanted to feel a degree of sympathy for you and how your parents tricked you out, but I ain’t got shit for you anymore. You’ve done nothing but fucking abuse me my entire life! Now that I know what love really is, I can’t deal with your toxic portrayal of it any longer! Do what the fuck you have to do, but you ain’t getting shit else from me!”

The tears had fallen down my cheeks, and she had the nerve to slap me. Before I could stop myself, I grabbed her by her fucking neck. I was so angry I could have snapped her in half at that moment. My lips were twitching like a growling dog, and all I saw was red. Jericho had pulled a gun out on Troy to keep him in line.

“Daddy!”

When I heard my baby yell for me, I dropped Camila like a sack of potatoes, watching her gasp for air. I turned to her and said, “Go inside, princess. Please. Go meet your mother.”

Chad scooped her up and took her inside as her eyes widened. Before I could grab Camila again, Isaiah appeared at my side. He helped her from the ground and said, “Your best bet is to get the fuck away from this house, before you don’t. Ali isn’t the loner you think he is. All of his backing will unleash on the two of you, and no one will find you for years to come.”

I glanced at him, wondering where the thug in him came from. He was very convincing and intimidating because he was so tall. Jericho slowly lowered his gun. “The next time you pull a gun on me, you gon’ have to use it, you Haitian bitch.”

And there was the Troy I knew. Jericho hit the fuck out of him with that gun, knocking him to the ground. Mr. Sheldon made his way through and helped Zay pick Troy up and bring him to their car.

Camila was staring at me with so much coldness in her eyes it made my insides shiver. The woman that was supposed to love me the most. Hatred would forever live in my heart concerning her and Troy. I tried to let it go and forgive the both of them, but this was too much.

“I never wanted you. It was Troy who begged me to keep you. I didn’t want kids. You were an inconvenience, and now that you can repay me for giving you life, this is the thanks I get. You don’t mean shit to me.”

My insides quivered, but my facial expression remained hard as stone. It wasn’t until I felt arms wrap around me from behind that I knew Riley had probably heard the entire thing. I closed my eyes for a moment and tried to draw from her peace. I needed it.

“Oh, I see. You have a bitch now,” Camila spat.

I grabbed her again, and I could literally see her face turning blue. She just didn’t know when to quit. It was simply because she knew I wouldn’t kill her. Why couldn’t she just be like Dahlia and stay the fuck away from me? Riley stood in front of me and put her hand to my face.

“She’s not worth it, baby. Look at me. Let her go. Don’t let her control you this way. You’re a better man than this. I know she’s trash for trying to make you feel like you don’t matter. You matter to me and Aina. You matter to the Berotte family and everyone else here. Please, Ali.”

She turned and slid her hand over mine, coaxing me to release the grip I had on Camila. As my eyes traveled to Camila’s and I saw the evil grin on her face, Riley said, “Don’t look at her ass! Look at me. She no longer matters. You hear me?”

My face twitched in anger as I threw Camila away from me. Riley immediately wiped my face and pulled me to her, causing me to turn my back on Camila. “I’m so sorry, baby, but I’m here for you. You don’t have to suffer from her hatred any longer. I got you. Okay? I got you.”

I closed my eyes, but instead of listening to Riley, I was trying to figure out how I would get rid of Camila. I knew it wasn't Troy I had to worry about. It was her ass. He'd never said a word to me. It was her. She was Satan disguised as a woman. At this moment, I was the son of Satan, and I was about to act like it.

CHAPTER 22

RILEY

The guys all took Ali away from the house for a moment. I couldn't believe the bullshit that had just happened. When he told me about his parents, this level of evilness never crossed my mind. This was something I never expected to happen. Aina was playing on the floor with Mariena and Ariana, oblivious to what had just occurred. She knew something was wrong, but I knew she hadn't seen what I had.

This past week with Ali had been amazing. He'd spent the last few days with us, because they didn't have much work. He'd go to the office and plan for the jobs they had coming up, then he would come right back to us. We'd cook together, although he didn't have the slightest clue what he was doing.

Then once Aina had gone to sleep, he would sex me so good. I found that I loved his tender loving as much as I loved his thug shit. He was so worried about her waking up and catching us in a compromising position. The slow fucking did nothing to control my pants and moans.

The women were all talking about various things, mainly weddings and Skyler's baby. I just wasn't in the right frame of mind to participate. I was so worried about Ali. As I watched the kids and babies play on the floor, one of the ladies sat next to me. She smiled at me but remained quiet for a moment. Her daughter was six years old, but she was down there playing with the kids as well. Aina had taken to her.

"In case you've forgotten, I'm Kaysyn. I know that was a lot of names thrown at you at once. I'm also Seneca's fiancée."

I closed my eyes briefly. *She's about to be my sister-in-law.* I nodded and gave her a slight smile.

“I can imagine this is hard. While Seneca’s life isn’t like Ali’s, there were some tough moments for us to overcome. If you ever need a listening ear, I’m here.”

“Thank you.”

I wanted so badly to tell her that Seneca was my brother, but I knew that would really push him away.

“The girls are really enjoying themselves. When the guys get back, you’re more than welcome to leave her while you talk to Ali. I promise she’s in good hands.”

I gave her a slight smile. If Ali trusted them, I knew I could too. My soul felt at ease here until Ali’s parents showed up. When Mr. Sheldon walked through the door, I stood to go and check on Ali. He gave me a slight smile and said, “He hasn’t gotten back yet. He and Isaiah took some time to talk.”

I nodded. I didn’t remember which one Isaiah was, but I had to believe he was being his voice of reason right now. I saw death in his eyes. He was about to choke his mother to death right there in the driveway. I could see why he said he had to get her away from him.

When Seneca walked in, he came over to me and Kaysyn. I just knew he was about to talk to her, but he winked at her, then turned to me. “Can I talk to you privately?”

I smiled tightly. “Yeah. Sure.”

He helped me from my seat, and I looked over at Aina. “I’m just going outside for a little while, baby.”

“Okay.”

She went right back to playing like she wasn’t the least bit worried about me or my whereabouts. When we walked outside, Seneca led me to a picnic table. When I sat, he sat across from me. “Ali is cool. He’s talking to Isaiah. He’s Shy’s brother, and he’s a counselor. The nigga is gifted. He could talk Satan down.”

I chuckled and nodded. “I guess he’s in good hands then.”

He nodded then looked away from me for a moment. When he turned back to me, he smiled. “So you’re my sister, huh?”

I smiled back. “Yeah. I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“Thank you for that. My fiancée helped me through the difficult part. Once I saw past that, I could accept you into that role in my life. I would love to get to know you more as my sister. That means I’ll have two older sisters to tell me what to do.”

I chuckled then stood from my seat and stretched out my arms. He stood as well and said, “See, you already forcing a nigga into public shows of affection.”

I giggled as I lay my head against him. He looked so much like my daddy. He had everything from his build to his smile. “I’m just happy to be able to get to know you. I’ve been an only child all my life. I hate I was denied this moment for so long. I barely remembered you existed, because I was so young when I’d first heard about you. When I looked at his obituary, everything started coming back. Then I saw your name there. I was floored.”

“I’m glad we have the opportunity now,” he said as he pulled away from me.

He was staring at the door then motioned for whoever it was to come out. I turned to see Kaysyn and Aina. Kaysyn had a huge smile on her face. She knew who I was but respected her man to wait for him to say something. I could respect that. “Mommy, can I stay with Jericka until later?”

I smiled and slowly shook my head. Aina had already attached herself to Jericka. She was a gorgeous, dark-skinned little girl. She looked like royalty. “Sure, baby.”

“Yay!” she screamed and ran back inside.

I loved the sense of family she felt, especially after attending the funeral yesterday. Those muthafuckas didn’t even acknowledge my baby in the obituary. Aina was everything to Maria. Anyone that knew her, knew that as well.

I was so angry when I read the obituary and saw that she'd been left out. There wasn't one picture of her either.

We didn't sit with the family, and I didn't take her to the casket to see Maria. Imelda had apologized over and over, but it wasn't on her to apologize. I told her as much. As soon as the funeral was over, Aina and I left. Had I gone to that repast, I would have set it off, although I was the minority. My hood shit would have seeped from my pores.

Kaysyn hugged me and said, "I'm so happy for the two of you. We're about to be sisters!"

I smiled big as I noticed Alexz peek out the door with a confused look on her face. "Who about to be your sister, Kaysyn?"

I noticed another lady peeking behind her. Seneca rolled his eyes. "Your ass way too nosy."

"I need to know who's coming into the family."

Kaysyn smiled and said, "Alexz is married to my brother. Lynn is engaged to my baby brother. That's who's behind her. And behind her is Joyy, Seneca's sister."

Seneca cleared his throat. "I was recently informed that Riley and I are siblings on my father's side."

All of them lifted their eyebrows, and Joyy's hands flew to her mouth. She went to Seneca and hugged him. "You okay? Are you gonna meet your father?"

"Naw. He's deceased. I'm just gonna enjoy getting to know my sister," he said and grabbed my hand, pulling me to them.

Joyy smiled at me. "Well, you can be my sister too. I'm married to Isaiah. The triplets are my kids."

I hugged her tightly, knowing that we would probably be spending an equal amount of time with them as well since that was who Ali was with now. After releasing her, I noticed all the women were gathering up. Kaysyn turned to me. "I know you're waiting for Ali, but maybe next Sunday, you can come

with us. Sandrene is teaching us to pole dance. We have class every Sunday.”

My eyebrows lifted. “Really?”

“Yeah, girl. Seneca is enjoying everything I’m learning.”

I turned to him to see him biting his bottom lip, flashing his grill. I chuckled as my man walked around the corner. Forgetting all about them, I ran straight to him and wrapped my arms around him. “I’m good, baby. If you wanna go with the ladies...”

“No. Maybe next Sunday. I need to be with you.”

He stared down at me for a moment. While his mouth said he was good, I could see the anger and hurt in his eyes. He was smiling like nothing was wrong, but I wanted to believe it was the evil side of him in overdrive. Seeing how his mom behaved a little while ago, I knew some of that had to have rubbed off on him.

“Okay. I won’t deny you.” He grabbed my hand and led me to the table. “I hope smoke doesn’t bother you.”

“It doesn’t, but I need to go inside so Aina won’t come out. When you’re done, we’ll dip for a little while.”

“What about baby girl?” he asked with a frown.

“I got my niece. Don’t worry about her,” Seneca said.

He smiled at him and gave him a head nod as I went inside, mainly to find Isaiah. I didn’t expect him to break privilege and tell me anything he said. I just needed to know his frame of mind... how he was feeling. I really hoped he could just tell me that much. Ali was good at hiding. Almost everyone saw his breakdown and how emotional he was. When I saw the tears on his face, I knew things had gotten to unsafe levels.

As I scanned the room, I saw a man sitting near where Joyy had been, near their kids’ things. I had to assume that was Isaiah. I walked over to him, and he stood from his seat with a tight smile. Damn, he was tall. “I wanted to thank you for your encouragement and talking to Ali.”

He smiled a little more. “He’s like my lil brother. They all have my support.”

“Can I ask you something?”

He glanced around and grabbed my hand, taking me to the front porch. I didn’t know how he knew this moment needed to be private, but I could see that he was very intuitive. “What’s up?”

“How is he? Really. I mean, he told me he’s fine, but in his eyes, I don’t see that.”

“What do you see? I’ll let you know if you’re right.”

“Anger at dangerous levels. Hurt.”

“Yep, both of those things. Plus, he’s embarrassed about what we all saw. He’s the most lowkey person I know. I didn’t know shit about his past with his family until recently. I knew he was into some shit as a kid and had Shy in that shit too, but that was the extent of it. I had never met his mother or father until today.”

“Thanks. I just needed to know how to approach him. Let’s get back inside before he thinks you’re telling me his business.”

“Wise woman. That nigga is damn near omnipresent and knows every damn thing about every damn body.”

I chuckled because he was right on it. There was nothing you could tell Ali that he didn’t already know, except that Seneca was my brother. At least he acted like he didn’t know, but he probably knew that shit too. We walked in, and Aina smiled up at me. “Mommy, PaPa Sheldon said I can come over any time I want to.”

I smiled at her as I sat then glanced over at Mr. Sheldon. He was smiling as he held one of Shy’s baby girls. There were so many babies around here. One crawled right up to me. I picked him up, and he went straight to my breasts. “Oh, baby boy, I hate to disappoint you, but ain’t nothing in there that can help you.”

Chad walked over and took him from me. “Sorry. My wife still pumps her breast milk, and he definitely knows. He nurses sometimes, but for the most part, he sees her pumping at night and filling bottles.”

I giggled. “What’s his name?”

“Foster.”

“He’s a cutie.”

“Thanks. Just like his dad,” he said then barked.

When he did, Mariena started barking and hopping. It was the cutest thing. I noticed her dad rolling his eyes. “Oh, it’s that time, huh, Riena? Hit the song, Pop.”

When “Atomic Dog” started playing, about five niggas started stepping. Baby girl was having the time of her life. I decided to make a statement of my own. I did my call and held up the Delta sign then joined in with them. “Aww shit! Come on, Riley!” Chad yelled.

I laughed as the bruhs welcomed me into the fold. Ali didn’t tell me that almost everyone here was frat. I fit right the fuck in. I was told that Alexz, Kaysyn, Skyler, and Joyy had also pledged. The Berottes were definitely family. When I went to Southern, it was like I was opened to a different world. However, when I got back home, I stayed to myself and never found anyone that was as into the Greek organizations as me. I was beyond excited now.

When I saw Ali walk in, and he saw me strolling with the guys, he smiled, opening his mouth, allowing his slight fangs to show. He clapped repeatedly. I went to him and danced a bit in front of him before he pulled me in his arms. “Let’s get outta here so you can lick all these tattoos. I ain’t forgot about that shit.”

My body heated up even more than it already had. I went to my baby as she jumped around with the other kids and told her that we would be back to pick her up. Seneca was standing next to Ali when I returned, so I hugged him. “Thank you for watching her.”

“You ain’t gotta thank me. I got her.”

Ali grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the house with the quickness. I already knew that this would be some of the most powerful lovemaking we'd ever made.

CHAPTER 23

ALI

I smoked another blunt while she went inside. My nerves were shot. Camila and Troy had better count their muthafucking days. Jericho and I would be getting together tomorrow about them. I couldn't risk her going to the authorities. She was probably just running her mouth, but unfortunately, she was about to learn to mean what the fuck she said. I didn't do that bluffing shit. I tried to give chances, but all her fucking chances had run the fuck out.

If anybody knew how dangerous I could be, it should have been her. She watched me kill two men with no remorse in sight. I still didn't feel any remorse. I was still confused as to what made her think she would get away with some bullshit like that. She hadn't been to the Berottes' house since I was a teenager, and I'd stayed a couple of nights over there without telling her where I was. That was only because she needed some money.

She would soon find out who the man right chea actually was. Mystikal wasn't him. I was that muthafucka. Jericho and I would be extremely intentional when we got at them. When they left, he followed them to see where they were going. They were staying at the damn Scottish Inn. That dirty muthafucka stayed surrounded by homeless people.

After I put my blunt out, I made my way inside and heard the shower running. I made my way to Riley's bedroom and followed the steam into the bathroom. I disrobed then joined her inside. She was lathered up already, but I took the loofah

from her and washed her again. I loved the sensuality of washing her and her hair.

Her soft moans had my dick standing at attention, and there wasn't a condom in sight. *Fuck!* I continued washing her until she turned to me and began washing me. I had never felt so damn sensitive in my life. Thankfully, she wasn't using that loofah. Her hands on my body were enough. Seeing her red nail polish as her fingers glided over every part of me was a hell of a turn on.

When she stooped to wash my dick, I jutted my hips forward a bit as she washed him excruciatingly slow. As I stared down at her, she looked up at me then stood. She brought her soapy hands to the back of my neck and pulled my face to hers. Her tongue slid into my mouth, and she kissed me with all the intensity that I knew had built between us on the way here.

When she pulled away, she said, "I didn't notice you had your grill in at the bottom earlier."

"Oh, you like that shit?"

"Mm hmm. Not the whole thing like Seneca wears, but that bottom row just drives me crazy."

"Show me how crazy it drives you. We ain't got nothing but space and opportunity right now, but we don't have all day. So hop to it."

I slapped her ass, and the flame in her eyes only shone brighter as I rinsed the soap off my body. She joined me under the spray and kissed me again as her hand made its way to her heart's desire. She began stroking my shit with so much passion I had to move her hand. "You ain't careful, I'm gon' waste a nut in the palm of your hand that could have been in your mouth."

She licked her lips and pulled me from the spray then went to her knees. "No more excuses, papi. Give it to me."

I grabbed her curly hair at the top of her head and fucked her mouth until every inch of me felt like it was about to orgasm. Feeling her throat tighten around me was the ultimate

prize. However, when I opened my eyes and looked down at her, I quickly figured out the ultimate prize was the way she stared at me as she gagged and how tears rolled down her cheeks. When I tried to slow my assault, she slapped my ass and released all that foamy saliva all over my dick.

She released it and wiped her hand over it and went right back to work. The way she devoured my shit was enough to make me forget my fucking name, let alone all the bullshit that happened earlier. “I’m about to nut, Riley.”

She released me and said, “Not yet. Don’t fucking nut yet.”

She sucked my hairless balls as she began stroking me with her hand. The woman was thorough, and clearly, she was enjoying this shit as much as I was if she didn’t want it to be over. “I think you just like having control, Riley. Next time your lips cover my shit, I’m nutting. Let it land wherever the fuck it may.”

She gave me a half smile and said, “Okay. When it’s my turn, don’t be telling me to fucking hold mine then.”

She put her mouth over my shit and sucked every ounce of fluid in my body out through my dick. It felt like I came for fucking minutes. I had to brace myself against the wall of the shower. I grabbed her by the neck and arm and yanked her from the floor. Her eyes were wide as I slid my hands down her body, lifting her to lower her on my raw dick. At this point, I didn’t give a fuck about no damn condom.

“I ain’t gon’ tell you to hold shit, because I’m gon’ make you cum so much yo’ ass gon’ be dehydrated when I finish.”

She moaned loudly as I put her in the corner and went to work on the best pussy God ever created. “Talk that fucking noise now, Riley. I don’t hear you.”

“Shut the fuck up and fuck me.”

My eyes lifted to hers, and her body shivered. “I don’t know if that shiver was fear or deep desire, but both feelings are warranted.”

I dug in her shit like I never had. I loved a woman that could get back at me, and she had proven that she could more than once, but never during sex. That shit only catapulted me into savage mode. The more she screamed, the harder I went until she nudded all over my dick. The way her pussy tightened and spasmed around me threatened to have me spewing my feelings deep in her guts.

“Ali! Oh my God! Fuck!”

“Mm hmm.”

Her nails had dug into my skin, then she quickly grabbed my braids, pulling them from the ponytail I had them in. I lowered my face to her breast and took her nipple into my mouth as my fingertips dug into her hips. I’d slowed my pace while I sucked her nipples, alternating from one to the other, but as soon as I lifted my head, I lit into her again. Her soft moans once again turned into screams until she came again.

I quickly lowered her as I held my dick in my hand. She got on her knees and closed her eyes, and I shot my shit all over her pretty ass face and hair. After seeing that, my dick couldn’t lose any steam. He was begging to be back inside of her, but I had to get us to a bed. I helped her up and pushed her under the spray, washing her face, then turned the water off.

“Come on, Riley. I’m finna go to Taiwan and eat all this cat you serving.”

A slow smile appeared on her face as she got out of the shower. “You make sure you clean me out then since that shit is banned out there now.”

I smacked her ass, noticing she went to her bed soaking wet. I grabbed a towel and dried her off then had her lay in the bed. When she spread her legs and slid her fingers in her pussy and sucked them, I licked my lips and went to her. She was so fucking hood classy, and I loved that shit. I slid next to her and said, “I need you up on your pedestal, baby.”

She quickly got up and straddled my face. Just as she was about to go to the state fair on my shit, I grabbed her ass and

held her in place. “Let me take my time eating this shit since it’s getting banned.”

She giggled for a second then gasped as I swallowed that kitty whole. I only said I would take my time to throw her off. I’d never noticed a nigga playing with food that he liked. He ate that shit quickly. I wasn’t about to play with this delectable, decadent delicacy. Her taste was rich in flavor and consistency.

Her juices flowed through my beard, and I just couldn’t keep up with her output. As I slowly eased my grip on her, she began subtly grinding her hips on my lips. When my lips pinched her clit and I began sucking it, that was it. She came all over my face. There was no way I could keep eating after that shit. I flipped her to the bed and hastily entered her.

“Riley, fuck!”

I slow fucked her until she came again, then fell to the bed and had her sit sideways on my dick. One of her legs was between mine, and the other was outside my right one. Her ride began slow as she got adjusted and found her groove, but when she did, I nearly screamed. She was fucking my dick like she was trying to convince that nigga to stay. She didn’t have that to worry about. I wasn’t going no got damn where.

After a few minutes, she straddled me completely and bent over and began licking my body as I fucked her from below. She went from one tattoo to the next as she released moans of satisfaction in between. I slowed my assault as I stared at her. “Riley, look at me.”

She lifted her head, and I began slowly winding my dick to her cervix, begging it to let me get at that uterus and lay my seed. My heart had attached to this woman in three fucking weeks, and I refused to deny her the knowledge of that. “I done fell for you... fast as fuck.”

She lowered her face to mine and kissed my lips, resting her nose against mine as her warm breath coated my face. “I’m glad I’m not alone. I love you, Ali... so much already.”

I wrapped my arms around her waist tightly and closed my eyes. *Love*. I hadn't felt this shit from a woman in a long time, and I refused to let anyone or anything come between what we were building. "I love you, Riley. I wanna nut inside of you. You gon' tell me no?"

She began circling her hips and said, "I couldn't possibly... fuuuuck!"

Her pussy clenched me, and I unloaded in her depths. She began shedding tears, audibly crying. "I didn't think I would ever feel this level of love again."

"Me either. I'm sorry about earlier."

My dick slid out of her and went into hiding as soon as I even acted like I wanted to have a conversation about earlier. She lifted her head. "You have nothing to be sorry or embarrassed about. I'm sorry you had to endure that."

"I do need to apologize. You witnessed me handle a woman in a way I shouldn't have. Had you not talked me down, I would have killed her right there. The hatred that infiltrated my soul at that moment made me hard and cold. That was why I had to leave. I wasn't worthy of you in that state. I still feel like I've crossed the threshold of hell, and I don't know how to come out."

She gently stroked my cheek. "It's not my job to make you see things differently right now. We'll talk about it in a day or two. Feel however you wanna feel about this. The venom she spewed at you was too much for me to bear, so I can imagine how it affected you. I'm just happy I could be there for you, along with the Berottes and your other friends."

"Yeah, but those niggas was gon' let me do it right there... even Mr. Sheldon. You were the only one that tried to stop me. I owe you my life."

"I think they all were in shock, just as I was at first. However, you said that you weren't reckless. While I don't believe for a second that you will let this ride, I knew you were acting off emotions, which is reckless. I just told you

how I feel. You know how Aina feels. We can't be without you."

I pulled her close and hugged her tightly. "I can't be without y'all either."

I SAT AT THE OFFICE, WAITING FOR JERICHO TO SHOW UP. HE wasn't answering his phone, so I was just waiting for him to meet me here at the time we designated. As I waited, I thought about my evening with Riley. That shit was so powerful. Just that quickly, she had all of me. No one had ever penetrated my exterior like that. Well... kids always did. I had to make my rounds today to play with the twins. I was their godfather, and Alexz was their godmother.

After we'd gone back to get Aina from the Berottes', they clowned us from the time we got there until the time we left, saying how satisfied we looked, asking stupid ass questions that the kids were confused about. Before we left, I had to be sure to apologize to Mr. Sheldon for disrespecting his house. He waved me off, then hugged me like he would one of his sons.

We only stayed about twenty minutes before heading home, so Riley and Aina could be in bed to get ready for work and preschool. I had to pick her up this week so Riley wouldn't have to leave work. She was pretty sure that she would have a lot to catch up on.

Checking the time, I saw that Jericho was ten minutes late. That wasn't like him. I tried calling him again, and he didn't answer. A chill went up my spine. I pulled up the Scottish Inn on my phone, and all I saw were pictures of caution tape. I clicked on the news and listened to them say the hotel manager discovered two dead bodies, a man and a woman. Their identity was concealed right now.

They didn't have to say who they were. Jericho had done that shit without me. He probably felt like I was gon' nut up. I couldn't afford to nut up this time. My life was on the line. I

closed my eyes for a moment, allowing myself to feel, and nothing penetrated my sense of relief. I wanted to think I would feel at least a little sadness or regret, but I didn't. Jericho was in the wind like he used to do whenever he had to kill someone. The taste for blood had reached his soul, especially after having Talisha as an appetizer. I just hoped he didn't get caught.

I backed out of my parking spot and headed to Shy's house. He had a late day today, so he still had the girls. When I got there, I went to the back door and used my key. There was no sense in knocking. I could hear the girls screaming from outside the door. I chuckled as I made my way inside. "Shy! It's me!"

When I found him, he was watching the news with the volume turned off. The smile left my face as he turned to me. "Did you do this? They're saying Camila's neck was broken, and Troy was choked to death."

"No, but I think Jericho might have. We were supposed to meet this morning, but he didn't show up."

He stared at me as I went to the swing and picked up Kaylee, holding her close to me. When I got her settled, I got Kinsley. These little girls loved me. They always quieted down whenever I held them, and Shy couldn't figure that shit out. Once I sat on the couch next to him, he said, "I don't know if I should be happy for you or say I'm sorry."

"I'm not sorry. I just hope Jericho is okay. That's my nigga, and this is the second time in less than a month that he's gotten me out of a jam. I'm not a trained killer like him, and he knows that I will only go so far unless I'm pushed. I was prepared to take them both the fuck out of here. I finally have something meaningful. Ain't no muthafucka gon' come in and take that away from me. Not even Camila."

He nodded as he watched me cradle the girls together. They were literally trying to suck each other's fingers. I grabbed the bottles from the table and gave Kaylee hers, then held it with my chin as I gave Kinsley hers. "Fucking Superman and shit."

I chuckled as he started cleaning up and mumbling to himself. “Let me find out you they real daddy.”

I almost choked and ended up dropping both bottles. I shot him the finger as I picked them up while the girls screamed bloody murder. “I mean, Brittany fine and all, but since I halfway like yo’ ass, I didn’t pursue her.”

I got the girls situated once again, and they calmed down. “Starving these babies. Wait ’til I tell her.”

When he was done picking up around the house, he washed his hands and grabbed Kinsley from me. “Real shit, I’m proud of you, man. I’ve seen you love that woman with everything in you. And don’t say you don’t love her, because I can tell.”

“I wasn’t.”

His eyebrows lifted as I pulled my phone from my pocket to check a message. *I’m in Miami. I’ll hit you when I’m on my way back with Jenetta.*

I slid my hand over my face and looked at Shy. “Jericho is in Florida.”

EPILOGUE

RILEY

A COUPLE OF WEEKS LATER...

When I saw the news, I just knew Ali had done it. After he informed me that he hadn't, I was relieved. I just knew that he would regret it if he had. The past two weeks had been uneventful. Surprisingly, Ali had buried his parents. He didn't shed a single tear. There was no service. He had the funeral home do what they needed to do and transport them to the cemetery.

He went to see that everything was handled correctly at the burial grounds and that was it. He didn't want anyone to be there. I'd like to think that he made his peace with God and didn't want anyone to witness his sensitivity. Whether he finally released forgiveness and the hatred in his heart or not was between him and God. I could only hope that he had for his sanity.

Things between us had been great. He'd put his two-bedroom home up for sale and was in the process of moving in with us. Aina couldn't be happier. When Ali met her preschool teachers, they'd sworn that he was her biological father, and we didn't tell them any differently. He'd been spending nearly every night with us, and on the nights he couldn't, he still stayed until Aina had gone to sleep.

Ali had been perfect. Our love was crazy as hell, especially since it happened so quickly, but time wasn't important. What was important was how he made me feel. With Ali, I felt loved, cherished, sexy, and safe. Did I say safe? God, the man was a vigilante. I knew without a doubt that our safety was one thing I would never have to worry about. He took care of Aina and me to the best of his abilities, and we came before everything.

This past week, I'd gotten to know Seneca and Kaysyn quite a bit. Kaysyn always called to check on us, and I appreciated that. Seneca was a fool and a half... just how I remembered my dad to be. It was great to feel connected to

him again in a sense. While Seneca and I still hadn't spoken about him, our relationship seemed to flow effortlessly. Whenever he decided to talk about him, I would be ready. He seemed to be more worried about Kaysyn's ex-husband not showing up for the visitation with the kids, a couple of weeks ago, and doing damage control.

Aina and I had just gotten dressed to go to the Berottes' for Sunday dinner. Ali had gone to his office this morning to make sure things were lined up for a job he had to start tomorrow. Last Sunday, I'd gone to the pole dancing class. I had no idea that Sandrene used to be a stripper. Once we stepped inside that studio, she went by Obsession. I loved that! All the women had chosen stripper names, and I would reveal mine today.

My first choice was Seduction, but Alexz had already gotten that one. Lynn had gotten my second choice, which was Desire. So I had to dig a little deeper and told them I would have one today. I started thinking about who I was to Ali... what qualities he loved about me. So I chose a liquor to describe me. Smooth, intoxicating, and classy... Chardonnay.

After today, I would reveal what I'd learned so far to Ali. I had a stripper pole installed in my home office to give him a show. It was a room he nor Aina ever went in. There wasn't much I could keep from him, but hopefully he didn't know about this. The man had cameras installed everywhere. He'd said what type of private investigator would he be if he didn't even know what was going on at home.

I could only shake my head. Surprising him would be a challenge, but it was one I was up for. My skills would surprise him. When I climbed that pole, the ladies were shocked. I was thick, but I was fit. I'd worked hard at that shit. I lifted weights, too, so I wasn't lacking the muscle. I hadn't been able to go to the gym as often as I wanted to the past couple of months, but this pole dancing class was a workout in itself.

"Yo, yo! I'm back, ladies! Y'all ready?" Ali called out from the front.

Aina and I left our rooms nearly at the same time, and I saw Ali frowning at his phone. “What’s wrong?”

“Jericho is finally back.”

“Good. Right?”

“Yeah. I was worried for a minute.”

“Do you need to go meet him?”

“Not until later. Let’s go eat. I’m starving. Then when we get back, you can show me your skills on that pole you had installed in your office.”

My eyes went to the ceiling. I should have known better. Aina hopped in his arms, and he carried her to the car, then looked back at me, giving me a smile that made my knees weak. When he winked, I couldn’t help but smile back. I locked the door and headed to the door he had opened for me. As I got close, he said, “You know you can’t get nothing by me.”

“I know. But I do know something you don’t know.”

“What’s that, Chardonnay?”

“Nigga! Damn! Ugh!”

He laughed and pulled me in his arms. “That’s okay though. One day I won’t be so cocky and forthcoming with what I know, and I’ll actually let you think you surprised me.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. He kissed my cheek then my ear. “I love you, girl. Just know that you and Aina aren’t priority number one. Y’all are *thee* priority. Nothing else matters if y’all aren’t straight. I’d give my life for you and mi princesa.”

“I know. I love you too. And one day, I’m gon’ shock yo’ drawz. I can’t wait to dance in victory.”

“Hmm. I can’t wait either. I’ll probably have one foot in the grave by then. That’ll be the only way you catch me slipping, and even then, it’ll be a slim chance. Now get your fine ass in this car before my baby see more than she needs to.”

I licked my lips and slid inside as he added, “I’m glad you went ahead and got you a pregnancy test on deck, too, because I ain’t ever pulling out again.”

The End

If you did not read the [author’s note](#) at the beginning, please go back and do so before leaving a review. 😊

FROM THE AUTHOR...

There is so much I could say about this book, and I don't know where to begin. SMH. I'm happy that Ali met Shy, because there is no telling how he would have ended up. He went through so much trauma as a kid and was still going through it as an adult. Over the books in the series, you could see the torment progress. In Seneca's book, you knew something was terribly wrong. However, I was more than sure y'all thought this revolved around Talisha. She was a nonfactor, but she *was* a bump along the way.

Ali's parents were trash. Although his mother had a backstory worth exploring, and Ali had planned on doing as much whenever he talked to her, the latest stunt pushed him over the edge. I usually pride myself on weaving forgiveness into every story and having the characters move on, but Ali was so stubborn about that. He wouldn't budge, and in reality, that sometimes happens. People can be so hurt that they can't fathom loving or forgiving a person that hurt them. It was the same with Seneca and his dad, although the man is dead.

Riley was everything Ali needed. She provided the love and family he was so desperately craving. It almost seemed as if Aina replaced the role JuJu had once played in his life. While Riley had some things to overcome, her issues with finding out Seneca was her brother and just moving on in love in general, they weren't nearly as severe as Ali's. I was glad she was there to help him along the way.

Jericho has an interesting story, and I can't wait for you to get it. I've already started writing it. He wasn't the lover

you've gotten to know in book six. He's cold and heartless right now. However, you will find out more about him next month, hopefully. His story will be just as heavy as Ali's was... if not heavier.

I truly hope that you enjoyed this drama filled ride that probably had your feelings all over the place. 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.

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