

A romantic couple in wedding attire is shown in profile, kissing. The man is on the left, wearing a dark suit, and the woman is on the right, wearing a white wedding dress and veil. They are in a dimly lit setting with blurred lights in the background.

B. LOVE PRESENTS

i could fall
IN LOVE

KIMBERLY BROWN

I COULD FALL IN LOVE

KIMBERLY BROWN

[#BLP](#)

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Mitchell

THIS SHIT WAS WILD.

I had been to New Orleans on several occasions, but this was the first time I had been during Mardi Gras. The street was packed, the clubs were poppin', music was live, and the women were out. Ass and titties were everywhere. In the daylight was a party, but the nightlife... *whew!* It was like a big ass frat mixed with street party vibes, and I had hopped my ass right in the mix of it.

As I made my way through the crowd, I took in the scenery. This shit was vibrant. Lights lit up the sidewalk, flowers of every color adorned the street, jazz music blared in the background, and people were dancing and drinking and just enjoying themselves. I even saw some muthafuckas ziplining above my head. They could have that. I was six feet four, 240 pounds. I wasn't getting my big ass on that shit for the line to break and I fall to my death. My feet were fine on the ground.

I looked down at my timepiece and saw that it was about eleven. I would say shit was about to get poppin', but from the looks of it, I was late to the party. I continued through the crowd, getting looks from a slew of women. In addition to my size and the fact I towered over most people, a nigga was fine as hell, and I had money. Those two things alone offered me

access to pretty much anything I wanted. My father, however, didn't seem to think so.

The man was a billionaire. He made his money in the tech industry. That little dream that started in my grandmother's basement was now a grand reality. My bloodline would never have to work. That was one thing that was different about my me and my father.

I was afforded this life from the beginning, and I was abundantly grateful for it. I lived life to the fullest. My father, not so much. He spent his days volunteering and doing other charities. I spent mine taking trips and living it up. Don't get me wrong; I donated to charities every single month, and I did have a job. The four, luxury car lots I owned made me eight figures a year. I could afford to live a little.

Since I was a kid, my father had always seemed so tight with his money. We didn't live the typical wealthy lifestyle. My parents didn't drive super expensive cars. We didn't live in an outrageously big house in rich neighborhood. We went to public school. We wore the same shit that all the other kids wore. You would never know that we were loaded.

My father wanted to teach us humility. My siblings caught on, but I never did. I wanted him to enjoy the fruits of his labor because back then, I wanted to do the same. He may have controlled how I spent money as a kid, but as soon as I got my trust fund, I did all the things I wanted to do with my money that I couldn't do with his.

He had been telling me for years that I needed to get my shit together. It was frustrating because I felt like I did have my shit together. My businesses were thriving every quarter. I was happy. I was healthy. I made plenty of money. And I wasn't somebody's baby daddy. The only thing he could complain about was my spending habits and the fact that I smoke hella weed.

Still, even with all I had going for me, he wanted more from me. So much more that he threatened to cut me out of his will. He made it seem like he was referring to my behavior, but I knew that it was really because he wanted me to get married. All three of my siblings were married with children. My parents had been married for forty years. He had always stressed the importance of family and had been going extra hard at me the last couple of months.

He had been diagnosed with liver cancer, and at this point, it was terminal. All they could do was make sure he was as comfortable as

possible. That shit really tore me up. I knew it was foolish, but I expected that man to always be around. His revelation was part of the reason I decided to finally appease him. I would get married, but that didn't mean I had to stay married. I would give it at least a year, and after that, it was up in the air.

But that could take a back burner tonight. Tonight I wanted to let loose and have some fun, so I hit the streets. As the night went by, I ventured to several different clubs and bars, each one more lit than the previous. It was around three in the morning, and the shit was still going strong. I decided that this next club was going to be my last. A nigga was way past lit. To add to that, I had lit up a joint a while ago, and it was coursing through my system, making me hungry as shit.

I made my way across the VIP section, toward the stairs. As I approached them, I ran smack into this beautiful, thick, chocolate woman, with braids hanging down to her thick ass. She was dressed in a strapless all-white short romper that stopped below her ass and made her body look like a glass of fucking milk. Ironically, all of a sudden, I felt thirsty.

"I'm sorry!" she said, trying to regain her balance.

"It's okay, baby," I said, grabbing her waist to steady her. She smiled at me, exposing the slight gap between her two front teeth. That shit was sexy as hell.

"I'm good," she said politely, pushing me off her.

She wasn't good. In fact, her ass was good and drunk. Not falling down, sloppy drunk, but definitely lit.

"Are you sure? Are you here alone?"

"What the fuck kind of question is that to ask a stranger? You know how suspect you sound right now?"

"I promise I'm harmless. I was just checking to see if you were okay."

"Like I said, I'm good."

She strutted away from me, and my eyes followed that ass until my feet were going in the same direction. Something in her was drawing me to her, and I was never one to deny my flesh. She was standing at the railing, throwing all that ass in the circle, with a drink in her hand. That thing was dangerous. She had drawn a little bit of a crowd, and they were hyping her up. I had to give her credit; she was doing her thing, so I sat back and watched.

She was on a level I liked to be on when I partied—just feeling the vibe and enjoying myself. The problem with that was there was always somebody around to ruin your fun. This came in the form of some nigga trying to stunt in front of his homeboys by throwing money at her. It was cool until he started touching on her. I saw her slap his hands away several times. When he grabbed her ass, she shoved him, and they started arguing.

“Keep your muthafucking hands off of me!”

“You ain’t had a problem when I was throwing money at all this ass,” he said, grabbing her again. She slapped the shit out of him and threw her drink in his face.

“Bitch, you done lost your fucking mind!” He grabbed her, and in an instant, I was on his ass, snatching him up.

“Didn’t she say not to fucking touch her, nigga,” I said, hanging his ass over the railing. “That’s the problem with you muthafuckas. You can’t let people enjoy themselves without taking shit too far.”

“You acting like that’s yo’ bitch!”

“Touch her again and see if I don’t drop your ass over this shit. Apologize to the lady.”

“Fuck you and the broke ass bitch.”

My fist connected with his face, and I hung him lower over the railing.

“That didn’t sound like an apology.”

“Aight, man, damn. I’m sorry, okay?”

I pulled him back over the railing and shoved him away. “Get the fuck from over here.”

He scowled at me but tucked his tail between his legs and went on about his business. I turned to the chocolate beauty who was staring at me with a frown on her face.

“You okay, baby?” I asked.

“One, I’m not your baby. Two... I’m fine. I’m use to that shit.”

“That doesn’t make it okay though. He was out of pocket.”

“Yeah, well if he had touched me one more time, I was going to throw him over that railing my damn self.” She tossed her braids over her shoulders. “I guess I should say thank you for intervening.” She looked at me with those beautiful brown eyes. “Thank you.”

I smiled. “I’m Mitchell. Mitchell Keonig.” I offered her my hand, and she hesitantly took it.

“Lavish Chamberlain.”

“That’s your name?”

“Yep. I know it sounds like some ghetto aspiration.”

“Nah, it’s actually unique. I like it.”

“I bet.”

“Why don’t you let me replace that drink.”

“No thank you. I can buy my own drinks.”

“I’m sure you can.” I laughed. “Come on.” I walked off to the VIP bar. She stood there for a second then followed me.

“What are you having?” I asked as the bartender came over. I ordered myself a glass of cognac no ice.

“Screaming Orgasm, light ice.”

I looked her up and down. I could definitely give her a few of those.

“My eyes are up here,” she said, glaring at me. “Don’t think because you brought me a drink that you are gonna get some ass tonight.”

“I wasn’t thinking that.”

“So what do you want?”

“How about a few moments of your time?” I licked my lips and smiled at her.

“You do that a lot?”

“Do what?”

“Lick those thick ass lips and have women fall at your whim? Is that your thing?”

“I don’t have to do all that.”

“So women fall for you naturally?”

“I’d like to think so. I mean, I think I’m quite the catch.”

“That remains to be seen. Look, I’m not here to entertain anybody. I just want to have a good time celebrating my freedom, ’cause it’s all going to shit when I get home.” She took the drink the bartender set down and chugged it then motioned for another.

“How so?” I asked curiously.

“I’m not about to tell you my business,” she replied, putting her hands on her hips.

“Fair enough.” I held up my hands in defeat as she chugged the second drink. “Maybe you should slow down before that shit hits you all at once, baby.”

“I told you, I’m not your baby,” she said, standing up straight. The DJ started playing some ratchet shit, and she got excited.

“Whew! That’s my shit!”

She made her way out of the VIP section and back down to the dance floor. I paid for our drinks and stood at the railing watching her. Whatever freedom she was celebrating must have been alleviating enough for her to be drinking like she was. Those two drinks she just added to her system were gonna make their way right back up with all the shaking and gyrating she was doing.

I watched her dance to at least three songs before she started stumbling. At one point, I was sure she was going to hit the ground. I made my way down to the dance floor. She was standing there swaying back and forth, looking like she was about to tip over. I wrapped my arm around her waist and draped one of hers across my shoulders.

“You have had enough,” I said.

“I don’t need you to tell me what to do. I can take care of myself. I’ve been doing that my whole life.” She burped and then giggled. “Excuse me.”

“Come on.” I led her off the dance floor and got her out of the club. The moment she stepped foot on the curb, she ran to the trash can and threw up. I went over and held her hair back.

“I told you those drinks were gonna sneak up on you.” I reached in my pocket and handed her some tissue, and she wiped her mouth and tossed the tissue in the trash.

“Shut up,” she mumbled, stumbling down the street.

“At least let me make sure you get to your hotel okay,” I offered, following her.

“Nigga, I told you twice already that I was fine!”

She took a breath and then ran to the nearest trash can and hurled again.

“Come sit down,” I said, guiding her onto a bench that was outside of a shop on the street. I walked over to one of the vendors and brought her some water.

“Thank you,” she said as I handed it to her. I simply nodded as I watched her take a huge gulp of it. She looked at me and shook her head. “You trying to make it a habit of coming to my rescue?”

“Nah, but you are drunk, and it’s too many niggas out here like the one from inside.”

“So you aren’t like that?”

“Do I look like I need to be that aggressive to get a woman’s attention?” I asked as a group of women walked by, staring me down. I smiled and

nodded then turned my focus back to her.

“Aren’t we arrogant.”

“Not arrogant, confident.” I reached for her hand. “Let me help you back to your room.”

“No. I can take myself. I don’t need your help.”

“Are you always this stubborn?”

“I am not stubborn. And I’m not letting some random man take me back to my room. I don’t need anything from you or anybody else. I’ve had enough life experience to know that niggas don’t do shit without wanting something in return. Everything has a cost. I dealt with that shit for five fucking years, and I finally have my freedom from that son of a bitch.”

She was quiet for a minute, and then I noticed the tears in her eyes. The more she wiped them away, the more she cried.

“I’m so fucking stupid,” she groaned.

“I’m sure you’re not,” I said, taking a seat beside her. I made sure to put some distance between us.

“You know how much money I spent on this trip? Money I didn’t have to spend? I have no business being here when I don’t even know what I’m going home to. Hell, I don’t even have a home to go home to anymore.”

The tears started coming faster, and she started rambling about her ex and how he left her with nothing—not a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of, as she called it. As she spoke, I could see that she was broken, probably the reason she was trying to drown her sorrows in liquor.

I felt bad for her. I empathized with her. That shit was fucked up. I wanted to peel some money from my clip and just give it to her. I wouldn’t miss that shit. She would probably slap the shit out of me like she did ol’ dude, and I wasn’t trying to have that happen. But I did feel compelled to help her. She was having money troubles and I had money... plenty of it. That was when the idea came to me.

I smiled as I looked at her.

“What the fuck are you smiling at? You think this shit is funny?”

“Not at all. In fact, I think that I can help you.”

“I told you—”

“You don’t need anything from me,” I finished for her. “I hear you but hear me out. I have a proposition for you.”

“A proposition?”

“An offer you can’t refuse.”

Lavish

*M*y fucking head was throbbing.

When I decided to book a trip by myself to New Orleans, getting this hung over was not in the books. I couldn't even afford to be here, let alone afford to be drinking as much as I had last night. The sunlight peered into my hotel room like a damn spotlight. Even if I wanted to go back to sleep now, I couldn't. I covered my head with the comforter, trying to will myself to go back sleep so I could shake this shit off. However, my bladder had other plans. I angrily tossed the covers back and tried to sit up, only to realize that my entire body was aching.

"What the fuck," I mumbled, tossing my head back. I fell back into the covers and damn near jumped out of my skin when my head hit something firm but soft. I jumped up at the realization that there was a strange man lying in my bed as if I knew him. He didn't move, even as I yanked the covers off of him. My eyes marveled at this tatted specimen lying in nothing but his boxers.

Damn he was beautiful.

My mystery man was dark chocolate and at least six feet tall, if not more. His hair was cut low with waves so smooth, I could get seasick. He was what I liked to refer to big men as thick—wide chest, broad shoulders,

thick muscular thighs, and that dick print... that shit could very well be the reason why I was so damn sore right now. I shook the thought from my head. There was no way in hell I had fucked this man last night or let him fuck on me, was it?

I didn't have time to think about that at the moment. My bladder was about to explode. I ran into the bathroom and relieved myself. When I was finished, I stood at the sink, washing my hands and staring at myself in the mirror. I had time to reflect on just how fucking stupid I had been to book this trip, but I needed to get away. My life was crashing down all around me anyway. What difference would it have made if I came here or not? When I got back home, I was going to have nothing, maybe even less than that. Why not live while I could?

I opened the bathroom door and once again almost jumped out of my skin. There stood my mystery man in all his glory. Our eyes connected, and a smirk played on his lips. I frowned. What the fuck was funny to him?

"You mind stepping aside so I can piss?" he asked.

Shit, his voice was deep as hell. I looked down at the hardness sticking out like a sore thumb. He had to have been at least nine inches. There was no way *that* penetrated me in any form or fashion.

"Damn," I mumbled.

"That's what you said last night too." He chuckled, easing past me. I stood in the doorway in disbelief as he took a piss in my toilet.

"Who are you, and why are you here?" I asked.

"Mitchell. And obviously, I'm here because you invited me up."

"And why the fuck would I do that?" I asked, crossing my arms as he finished and went to wash his hands.

"You see me?" he asked arrogantly. "Why would you not?"

"Are you always a pompous asshole?" I questioned as he turned around to face me.

"I've been called a lot of things, but pompous is a new one." He laughed.

"Nigga, this isn't a fucking joke! Why are you in my room!"

He sauntered over to me, biting his lip. His frame towered over mine. I swallowed hard as his eyes traveled up and down my body. It dawned on me that I wasn't wearing anything other than my tank top and a thong. My arms instantly went to conceal my breasts as I grabbed my robe from the back of the door. I quickly slipped it on.

“Oh, don’t be shy now.” He chuckled, something that was starting to annoy me. “I saw all you have to offer last night. I must say, I was impressed.”

“We... we had sex?”

“Straight up fucking. Anybody ever told you that brown brings out the freak in you?” he asked.

“Mitchell!” I yelled.

“Oooo, you did that last night too.”

He licked his juicy lips. I could have punched him in his smug ass face. When I drew to swing at him, he grabbed me up in his arms, put me on the counter, and pressed his body up against mine.

“Now is that any way to act toward your husband?” he asked.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I snapped, shoving him off me. He grabbed my hand and lifted it. That’s when I saw it... the most beautiful, elegant, big ass teardrop diamond ring plastered on my finger. My eyes widened.

“What... how... when... you can’t be serious!”

“That’s a ten thousand dollar ring on your finger.”

He held up his hand, producing a matching ring of his own. My mouth hung open in disbelief.

“There is no way this can be legal,” I said.

He laughed and left the bathroom. A few seconds later, he returned with a piece of paper and handed it to me. It was a muthafucking marriage license! I stared in disbelief at my signature... in my handwriting!

“Now,” he said leaning into me. His lips were inches from mine. “Are you gonna swing at me again, Holyfield? ’Cause I can calm that attitude right down.”

His hand inched up my thigh, and I felt a chill run up my spine. It had to be a sin to be this damn fine while being this fucking arrogant. I slapped his hand away.

“I take it you’re gonna let me talk,” he said.

“Fine.”

“Good.” He kissed my lips softly then stood upright and turned on the shower. “Why don’t you shower and get dressed. We can talk while we eat, ’cause you worked a nigga over last night. I’m hungry as hell.”

I rolled my eyes. I was tired of him already.

“Listen,” I said, hopping down from the counter, “if we are gonna have a conversation, I need you not to make everything sexual.”

“Can you really blame me though? I mean, look at you.”

His eyes trailed over my body in a way that undressed me, and I was already in next to nothing. What was he seeing in me? 'Cause when I looked in the mirror, all of my insecurities looked back at me. I hated my body. I hated my smile, with the slight gap in between my teeth. I hated the kinkiness of my hair, so I wore weaves or braids to avoid dealing with it. I just didn't like *me* very much. After spending five years in a marriage with a husband that made you feel like less than shit about all those things and then some, it was easy to feel the way I did.

“What was that?” he asked.

“What was what?”

“That look in your eyes?” His face looked concerned. “Somebody made you feel like you aren't as beautiful as you are, Lavish?”

The way my named rolled off his tongue caused me to look in his eyes. I felt the sincerity in that moment. I nodded slowly as I looked away again. He cupped my chin.

“Look at me,” he said, his voice growing serious. I looked at him. “You are one beautiful, gorgeous, sexy ass woman. Fuck any nigga that tells you or makes you feel anything otherwise. Real talk, you the shit, baby.”

He kissed me softly, letting his lips linger for a few seconds. He was a smooth muthafucka, I would give him that. He made me forget all about wanting to punch him.

“Now, hop your pretty ass in the shower so I can take my *wife* to lunch.”

He slapped my ass and then left me in the bathroom. Just like that, I wanted to swing on him again.

Mitchell

Seeing Lavish looking so damn sexy when she was mad had me wanting to dig up in her guts again. I wasn't lying when I said she wore my ass out last night. Last night, she was wild and carefree. It was crazy how different she was this morning. But then again, we were drunk off our asses last night. She didn't even remember a nigga's name, let alone the fact that she married my ass. I could only imagine her shock when she woke up next to me.

That exchange in the bathroom was starting to turn me on before she asked me not to make everything sexual. The minute I commented on her appearance, it was like she went to a different place. That was how I knew that nigga she was with used to make her feel like everything *but* what she was. I didn't like that shit. If it was one thing I hated was an insecure woman at the hands of another man.

Now I may fuck around. I did that shit. But if Mitchell Keonig appreciated anything in life, it was a beautiful woman, and Lavish Chamberlain was that and then some. If I could convince her to keep going with our little arrangement, she would at least gain some confidence from me.

I looked myself over in the full-length mirror in my suite. I decided that I looked good in my khaki cargo shorts, white muscle shirt, and fresh white

Forces. I shoved my phone and wallet into my pocket and threw on my timepiece and of course my new wedding band. It was insane that I had really gone and married this woman, but I needed her help, and from the shit she told me last night, she could use mine.

I took the elevator down to Lavish's floor. It was a coincidence we were staying at the same hotel. Had we not crossed paths at the club, we might have eventually seen each other here. Maybe our meeting was fate. Stepping off the elevator, I shook off the thought as I made my way to her door and knocked.

When she opened it, I couldn't help but to gaze upon her in admiration. She was dressed in a form fitting maxi dress that hugged her curves in all the right places and a pair of sandals that highlighted her pretty feet and white toes. It was something about white polish that made me want to suck on her toes. She had me reminiscing about those thick ass thighs wrapped around my waist with her screaming my name as I dug her shit out.

She frowned and started tugging at the dress. I guess I was making her uncomfortable. I snapped out of my trance and slapped her hands away.

"Stop that shit," I said. "You look perfect. I don't do that insecure shit, Lavish. When you are with me, you are gonna embrace this body and everything that comes along with it. Do you understand me?"

She nodded, but I didn't believe her. I slipped my arm around her waist and pulled her into my chest. My hand gently went around her throat, and I leaned in to kiss her soft, succulent lips. She tried to pull away, but I shoved my tongue in her mouth, and she quickly submitted to letting me have my way with her. A moan escaped her throat, and it caused me to smile.

"I need to hear it," I said, pulling away. Her eyes were still closed. "Do you understand what I said, Lavish?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Good. Now bring your sexy ass on so we can go eat."

She stood there for a moment, collecting herself, before she grabbed her purse and reluctantly took my outstretched hand. I could see now that she was going to be a full time job.

I ENDED UP TAKING HER TO THIS BISTRO OUT IN THE FRENCH QUARTERS. IT was noon, and the streets were flooded as we walked hand in hand. The sun was shining, but there was a cool breeze which made it the perfect weather to eat outside. The hostess led us to our table. Lavish attempted to pull out her own chair, and again, I had to stop her.

“Three things,” I said as I pulled it out for her. “When we are together, you don’t touch a chair, a door handle, or your wallet.”

“I’m fully capable—”

“I don’t wanna hear that shit. I may be a lot of things, but I do know how to treat a woman.”

I meant that. I fucked around and entertained different women, but no woman that came in contact with me could ever say she wasn’t treated well and fucked even better. Even if this was just pretend with her, she would get the same treatment.

“Fine,” she said, sitting in the chair. I pushed her in and then took a seat for myself. “So are you going to tell me what happened?”

“Can we get some food first? I’m gonna tell you everything. I just need you to relax. I got you, baby.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Are you gonna give me attitude this whole time, Lavish?”

“Why do you keep saying my name like that.”

“Because I like the way it sounds rolling off of my tongue.”

“There you go again with the sexual innuendos.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just the way I speak. I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“You aren’t making me uncomfortable.”

“What am I making you then?”

“Annoyed.”

“Then I’m playing my part as your husband. It ain’t love if I don’t make you want to choke me, right?” I tried to lighten her mood, but she didn’t crack a smile. Maybe I needed to cool it. I didn’t want to scare her off.

“Hey.” I covered her hand with mine and looked at her sincerely. “I’m sorry. I joke a lot. I just like to have fun. But if I’m making you feel some type of way, I’ll stop. I don’t know what you went through with your ex, and if anything I say or do brings you back to that place, I ask that you tell me, okay?”

She nodded.

“I have this thing. I’m big on verbal responses. It makes me feel like you actually understand what I’m saying versus just you hearing what I’m saying.”

“I understand, Mitchell.” She sighed.

She picked up the menu and looked it over. I had looked it up before we came so I knew exactly what I wanted. So while she stared at it, I stared at her. She was so fucking beautiful and didn’t even know it. If I was going to have a fake wife, I was glad I hit the jackpot with her at least as far as looks were concerned.

Our waiter came, and we placed our order. We must have sat in silence until the drinks came, glancing at each other every so often. I could tell that her nerves were all over the place, so I decided to try and make conversation.

“So tell me about yourself,” I said.

“It’s not really much to tell. I grew up in foster care until I aged out at eighteen. Got married to a narcissistic control freak, got divorced, and now here I am with you.”

“How did you end up with your ex?”

“I was nineteen when I met Keith, and he was thirty. Red flag number one. In the beginning, things were great. He did things just to see me smile, and for the first time, it felt like somebody actually wanted me. He asked me to marry him six months into us dating, and I said yes. I felt like I was finally going to have a family. I thought he was just as much in love with me as I was with him.”

She paused and took a deep breath.

“When we got married, everything changed. Keith didn’t want a wife. He wanted someone to rule over. He broke me down, and then when he got me right where he wanted me, he married me. He thought I wouldn’t leave him because I would be worse off than when I met him. He controlled our finances and gave me what he called an allowance. Unbeknownst to me, that allowance depended on several things.”

“Things like what?”

“His mood, how clean the house was, how quick I responded to his calls and texts. Sometimes it depended on how he felt about my performance in bed. Take your pick.” She took a sip of her drink and continued. “I found out he had a mean jealous streak. If another man even looked at me for a

second too long, he was accusing me of sleeping with them. I have been every whore and triffin' bitch in the book."

She took a deep breath, seemingly trying to calm herself down.

"No matter how unattractive I tried to make myself look when we were around people, he always found fault in something I put on. He started controlling how I looked. If I didn't look good enough, it was a problem. If I looked too good, it was a problem. He actually tried to get me pregnant just so I would get fat because he thought men wouldn't want a fat pregnant bitch. For five years, I was that man's punching bag, his concubine, and the door mat he wiped his shitty feet on."

I could visibly see the hurt and pain in her eyes as she spoke. To be in the system where people treated you like shit then to marry a man of the same caliber had to be a hard pill to swallow.

"When I petitioned for divorce, he harassed me so bad that I was forced to tell the courts I didn't want anything from him. I walked away with whatever clothes, shoes, and other shit I could pack in my car, and my freedom. My name was never on his accounts, so I have no access to his money."

"So you have nothing?"

"All I have is the little bit of money that I had been hiding from him in my own account... half of which I spent on this trip. He put me out of our home, which I also have no legal right to because he purchased it in his name only. Even if I wanted to fight that, I can't afford the taxes on it, so it would end up being sold at an auction anyway. So when I leave here, I'll basically be living in my car. There you have it. Your *wife* is the ultimate fuck up. What a prize you got."

I sat there staring at her, just taking in everything she said. Part of me wanted to find that muthafucka, beat his ass, then put a bullet right between his eyes. The other part of me just wanted to hold her. I reached for her hand, but she withdrew it.

"Don't," she said, fighting back tears. "I don't need you to feel sorry for me."

She wiped her eyes just as the waitress brought out our food.

"Thank you," she said. "Can I actually get a to-go box? I've lost my appetite."

"No problem. Would you like one as well, sir?" she asked.

"Please."

“I’ll be right back with that.”

She walked away, leaving us alone again.

“So, now that you know my story, are you sure that whatever motive you have for marrying me is worth it? I mean, if you can drop what I’m assuming to be at least twenty grand on these wedding rings, I can only guess that you have money. What do you need me for?”

She studied my face and then tilted her head to the side.

“Let me guess. You’re a trust fund baby. Daddy won’t give you your money unless you show up with a wife.”

“Something like that.”

She shook her head.

“I come from a very wealthy family. And while I have been successful in my own right, my father has made billions in the tech business. With all his money, he has remained humble. He lives a modest lifestyle. He donates to churches and charities. He feeds the homeless and provides them with shelters. Not only that, he donates his time.”

I took a sip of my drink.

“I’m not exactly what he had in mind to leave his fortune to. He’s not a fan of my lifestyle. I like to enjoy myself and my money. I don’t look at price tags when I shop. What I think about hopping on a plane and flying anywhere at any time is nothing. I like my liquor, my weed, and my women.”

“So basically you are a rich ass thot?”

“I’m not a thot. I don’t stick my dick in everything that breathes.”

“You fucked me the first night you met me.”

“You let me fuck you *and* fucked me back, so I guess that makes us even.”

She frowned but didn’t have a rebuttal. My face turned serious as I prepared myself to tell her about his declining health.

“Six months ago, we found out that my father is dying from liver cancer. No matter how aggressive treatment is, there is basically nothing they can do. They only gave him maybe a year to live. He told me he was going to cut me out of his will if I didn’t get it together. In other words, he wanted me to settle down.”

“So what is in this for me?”

“Well, you already married me. Judging by the way this conversation went, I’m assuming you haven’t checked your account today.”

“Checked my account?” she asked, confused. She pulled out her phone and went to her banking app. After a few seconds, her eyes widened.

“Are you fucking insane!” she said in a loud whisper.

“Maybe just a little.” I laughed.

“Mitchell, this is five million dollars,” she said in a hushed whisper.

“Which we agreed upon last night. I transferred that right after the ceremony. At the end of all of this, whether you decide that you want to leave or stay, there is an additional twenty million in it for you.”

She sat there with her mouth open, staring at the money in her account. Several times, she looked from me to the screen then back to me.

“You could have any woman you want... I’m sure for free. Why me?”

“Honestly?”

“Yes.”

“Your spirit called out to me last night. You were there alone, drunk off your ass, crying about your divorce and your ex. You didn’t give me as many details as you did a while ago, but I could tell you were in a bad space.”

“So this is pity?” She stood and started walking back in the direction that we came from. I threw a few bills on the table just as the waitress came back with our to-go plates. I quickly boxed up our food and ran to catch her.

“Lavish!” I called after her.

She was damn near sprinting. I finally caught up to her and grabbed her arm. She spun around and swung at me. Luckily, I ducked.

“Don’t fucking touch me!” she snapped.

“Can you wait a minute, damn!”

“I told you, I don’t need you to pity me, Mitchell. I made it when I didn’t have shit before, and I can do it again. I don’t need your money.”

“It’s not pity,” I protested. “Listen to me, will you?”

She crossed her arms and stuck her hip out with all the attitude in the world. I sighed.

“I don’t pity you. In fact, part of me wants to find your ex and murk his ass for the shit he pulled.” I reached for her hands, and she reluctantly didn’t pull away. “I need you. Sure, I could have any woman I want, but I’m choosing you. You’re in a bind, and I am in a position to help you, so let me do that. You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.”

“This isn’t hardly a fair exchange.”

“Contrary to what you may think, I’m not concerned with whether or not this is fair. You’ll be fulfilling a dying man’s final wish, and it will only cost you a sliver of your time. You can start your life over however you want... build the life you always dreamed of.”

She stared at me, and I could see her mind hard at work. She needed this more than she would ever admit. And after hearing her story, I would let her keep the money I already gave her, even if she decided not to go through with it.

“Okay,” she said after a while.

“Okay?”

“What else do I have to lose? At least this time when someone is using me, I’m getting something in return.”

She turned and started walking back toward the hotel we were staying in. This time, I let her go. She clearly needed some time to herself. I was sure she was feeling emotional right now, and the last thing I wanted to do was add to that any more than I already had.

Lavish

I ended up back in my room, pacing the floor. I hadn't shared what I went through with Keith with anyone but my lawyer at the time. She was disappointed when I withdrew my petition for spousal support. She wanted to hit Keith where it hurt. I just wanted to be free of him. If that meant leaving with nothing but my life, my freedom, and what little dignity I had left, so be it.

She empathized with me, but she would never understand. I didn't have many friends I trusted enough to involve in my business like that. I didn't have family to turn to. All I have ever had in this world was me. I couldn't believe the mess that I had gotten myself into once again. How drunk did I have to be last night to agree to something so ruthless as waiting for an old man to die so his son could obtain his inheritance? And exactly how much was he risking to lose?

The fact that he had bought these rings and paid me that much money in advance without blinking, told me that there was so much more where that came from. I needed that money. I swear I did. But I wasn't comfortable not knowing what the full stipulations were. The last thing I wanted to do was jump out of the frying pan and into fire.

There was a knock at my door that interrupted my thoughts. I knew it was him.

“Go away, Mitchell!” I said from my side of the door.

“I just want to make sure you are okay,” he said.

“You hear me. I’m alive and well.”

“Nah, baby. I need to lay eyes on you.”

“You know what I look like.”

“Lavish,” he said firmly. “Open this door, or I swear I will kick this shit in.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me.”

My hand lingered on the door. I didn’t need a scene right now. I sighed angrily and opened the door just enough for him to see my face.

“You’ve seen me. Goodbye.”

I tried to close the door, but he pushed it the rest of the way open with ease and made his way inside.

“I don’t remember inviting you in. You really are fucking entitled. You think you can just walk in here and—”

He cut me off with a kiss so tantalizing it shut my mouth. His hands roamed all over my body. He gripped my hips and then ran his hands along my ass. I pushed him away from me and slapped him. He took that shit like it was nothing. He didn’t even look angry. Instead, he looked like it turned him on.

He pushed me up against the door and pinned my arms above my head with his body pressed against mine.

“Let me go,” I said.

“Not until you can calm all the way down,” he said firmly. “You aren’t going to be hitting me, Lavish. I’m not your enemy here.”

Tears were stinging my eyes, and I fought hard to keep them at bay. But the longer he stared at me, the weaker I felt myself becoming. I collapsed against his chest in a fit of tears. I felt his strong arms come around me. He lifted me as if I weighed nothing and carried me into the bedroom of my suite. After laying me on the bed, he kicked off his shoes then climbed in with me.

His arms came around me, and he pulled me into his chest, cradling me as he stroked my back. He didn’t say a word, just held me until we both fell asleep.

I WOKE UP AROUND FOUR TO FIND MYSELF ALONE IN MY BED. I SAT UP AND looked around, but Mitchell was nowhere in sight. I needed to ease my mind after today's revelations. I wanted a drink, but drinking got me into this shit in the first place, so I settled for a nice hot bath. I got up and went into the bathroom and filled the tub with water, as hot as I could stand it, and bubble bath. When I eased into it, I involuntarily moaned. It was so soothing, and soothing was what I needed right now.

As I soaked in the tub, I thought about Mitchell. He was an arrogant son of a bitch, but he was also caring. He had a heart, though it was sometimes overshadowed when he opened his mouth. Being married to him for however long might not be so bad if I would learn to live with it. Nothing else was ever going to just drop in my lap like this. I was prepared to leave here with less than I came with and go home to nothing.

Maybe running into Mitchell and spilling my guts was a blessing in disguise... as much of a blessing as waiting for a man to die could be. I had never had this much money in my life. I could start over, travel the world and experience things beyond my wildest dreams because I finally had the means to do so.

Even the thought of that made me sad. All the money in the world wasn't going to make me happy. I longed for something that money couldn't buy. I wanted a family. I wanted to believe that love still existed and that it was out there for me somewhere. That just wasn't going to exist with him. I wasn't saying that this would never work out with him... but I knew what it was. I would never fool myself to thinking otherwise in this whole arrangement.

A knock on the bathroom door broke my thoughts. I looked up to see Mitchell standing there with a small duffel bag.

"You mind if I stay with you tonight?" he asked.

"Why?"

"I just want to make sure that you are okay," he said softly.

I searched his eyes, and I could see that he was being honest. I nodded slowly, which caused him to smile.

"Are you hungry? I brought our food. I could warm it up for you."

"Thank you. I'll be out in a minute."

"Okay."

He closed the door, and I let out a deep sigh. *What the fuck am I going to do with him here all night?* I shook the thought from my head and

drained the tub. Then I hopped in the shower and scrubbed myself good. When I was done, I moisturized my skin, wrapped my robe around my body, and went into the bedroom. I could hear the timer go off on the microwave, so I quickly slipped into my pajama bottoms, a sports bra, then a tank top, and made my way into the living area of my suite.

Mitchell was gathering our food, so I sat on the couch and waited for him to bring it over along with two bottles of water. We sat and ate in silence for a while before I finally said something.

“I’m sorry that I put my hands on you.” I looked down at my food. “That won’t happen again.”

“It’s okay. You were emotional, and I shouldn’t have grabbed you.”

“I have a tough time trusting people, Mitchell. You know now where it comes from. My entire life, I have had no one. The person I thought I had was a fucking joke.”

He set his plate down and slid closer.

“You have your freedom now. He can’t control you anymore. That’s more than a lot of women get to say that have been in your position.”

“I may be free physically... but my mind is still caged. I’m damaged. Nobody is ever going to want to actually be with a damaged woman.”

He pulled me in for a hug, and I slid my arms around him, resting in his arms. For a moment, I actually felt safe. I actually felt that the care he was showing me was somewhat genuine. But I had to remember that this was all fake. He was only showing me affection because he needed something from me. I quickly gathered myself and pulled away from him.

“Are you sure you want to stay here tonight? I mean, I’m sure you would rather spend your time doing something fun and not cooped up in a hotel room with me in my feelings.”

“I’m sure,” he said. “You could use a friend.”

“We aren’t friends, Mitchell.”

“We could be. Just because the marriage is fake doesn’t mean we can’t be friends after all this. We are going to be spending a lot of time together. We have to get to go to know each other if this is going to be believable.”

“I guess that’s true,” I said, picking my plate up to finish eating.

“So I figured we could chill out tonight. Maybe have a few drinks, watch some movies, and just talk. I promise I’ll be on my best behavior,” he added with a smirk that brought a smile to my face.

“You mean without you oversexualizing things?”

“Whatever you want to call it.” He laughed. “I just appreciate beautiful women.”

“I’m sure you do,” I said, looking him up and down. I couldn’t deny that he was attractive. The man was fine as hell. His looks were a plus. It was a shame I couldn’t remember shit about last night.

“Are you expecting me to sleep with you throughout this little arrangement?” I asked abruptly.

“Do you want to sleep with me?” he countered. “I mean, that’s a benefit for both of us.”

“You would say that.”

He grinned and shook his head.

“I’m not expecting you to, but should you want to, I won’t oppose.”

“Oh, I’m sure you wouldn’t.”

“You know, they are gonna get stuck like that if you keep rolling your eyes at me.”

“That’s just a natural reaction when you start talking that bullshit.”

“How do you know I’m on some bullshit?”

“Cause you’re a man. Y’all are always on some bullshit.”

“Women be on bullshit too now.”

“Maybe the ones you are used to dealing with, but I am as real as they come. What you see is what you get with me. I’m honest, I’m blunt, and I don’t mind calling you out on your shit.”

“That I have learned so far.” He laughed, spooning the last of his food in his mouth. He reached for my empty plate and went to throw them away. Then he pulled out his duffel bag and dug in it for something. When he produced a bottle of liquor, I instinctively was about to roll my eyes again.

“Don’t you dare!” he said, throwing a pillow at my head.

“Excuse you!” I laughed.

“You were about to roll them damn eyes at me.”

“How do you know!”

“Because you take a deep breath and your head turns slightly before you do it. I pay attention.”

“So you are analyzing me?”

“No. I’m learning my wife.”

When he said that, it left us just staring at each other with smiles on our faces. I shook my head and put my feet up on the couch.

“Bring the bottle, man.” I giggled.

“I thought so. That was nice to hear though,” he said, settling next to me with two glasses.

“What?”

“Your laugh. I don’t think I’ve heard it all day long.”

He handed me a glass of liquor and sank into the couch cushions, pulling my feet into his lap where he massaged them with his free hand. I just stared at him, taking in this man that was changing my life. He was arrogant as hell, but the confidence that showed through it was sexy. He was sure of who he was. He was transparent, and as far as I could see, he was honest and caring to say the least. He could have left me to deal with my feelings alone, but he was right here, forgoing his own fun to make sure that I was okay. I appreciated that.

“What?” he asked, catching my stare.

“Nothing,” I replied, taking a sip of my drink.

“You good?”

“I’m good.”

He smiled and leaned over to kiss my cheek.

“So, what are we watching?”

Mitchell

Lavish and I ended up having a pretty good evening. We spent a lot of time talking and getting to know each other. She told me more about her childhood, and I felt bad sharing my childhood stories with her. I grew up privileged, and to share with her stories from family vacations and all the shit we had done with our money when my father allowed it, made me feel like I was rubbing it in her face. At one point, I told her that, and she assured me that she didn't see it that way and she was okay.

I had changed the subject to telling her about each member of my immediate family, from my siblings to my parents, to my grandparents and a few other close family members. She thought it would be interesting to meet wealthy people who lived a modest lifestyle. She was going to be in for a surprise when I took her home to see just how modest they were.

“So where do we go from here?” she asked. “I mean, when we leave New Orleans, do we go our separate ways and then meet up at some point to meet the family or what?”

“Well, I was thinking I would spend a day or two with you in your city. I'm sure you'll want to get your things.”

“I don't have much, but what I do have has sentimental value.”

“Understandable,” I said. “Listen, I don’t know if you would be interested, but you are free to come home with me once we get your things. I mean, it’s going to be your home, too, for a while. No need to waste money when you don’t have to.”

“Look at you thinking frugally.” She laughed.

It was my turn to roll my eyes.

“Whatever, woman.” I chuckled. “I’m just saying. It would look bad to have my wife living in a whole other state. You should be with me. How else am I going to annoy you like only your husband can?”

“Well you’ve got the annoying part down.”

“Are you not enjoying my company right now?” I asked, swallowing the last of my third glass of liquor. I was feeling good, and she was looking even better. My hands had been on her in some way all night. I couldn’t help but want to touch her beautiful ass. It was gonna be hard as hell keeping my hands to myself with her in my house.

She tempted all five of my senses and didn’t even know it. She looked like she would walk around the house in next to nothing and then shamed me for looking at her. Fuck that. I was going to look at her every chance I got. And if she gave me the opportunity to dig up in her guts while she was there, then dig in them guts I would. There was no need for either of us to be walking around with backed up the whole time.

I looked down at my watch and realized it was damn near one in the morning, and we had been laughing and talking for hours. Everything just seemed so natural between us, almost like our meeting wasn’t coincidental. It was nice.

“I’m gonna go hop in the shower,” I said, standing.

“Okay. I’m just going to clean this up, and I’ll probably head to bed. This liquor has me feeling all warm and shit.”

“Lightweight.” I chuckled.

“I’ll be that!” she said, tossing a pillow at me.

She grabbed the glasses and walked past me into the kitchen, but not before I could smack that ass. It had been looking right in those pajama bottoms all evening. The way that shit jiggled, I knew she didn’t have on a lick of panties in sight.

“Don’t start!” she warned with a smirk.

Yeah, that brown had her ass gone. She wasn’t anywhere near as drunk as she was last night, but she was feeling that shit. I grinned and grabbed up

my duffel bag and headed into the bathroom inside of the bedroom in her suite.

Once inside, I stripped down and turned the hot water on. As I stood there letting it cascade over me, I thought about what Lavish and I were doing. I thought about my father and how he was probably going to see right through this charade of ours. He said I needed to find a wife. He never said I had to love her. Hell, he never said I had to even like her.

But on the contrary, I did like Lavish... at least what I had seen of her.

She was a strong woman and had to be to endure the kind of life she lived. I couldn't imagine growing up the way she had. I may not see eye to eye with my family, but I loved them, and I was grateful to them. My parents had provided me a life of privilege through my father's tireless and unrelenting hard work before my siblings and I were born.

My mother sometimes worked two jobs to help him take care of the house while he threw himself into his work. He said she never complained because she understood the sacrifices that he was making would pay off. And it did... big time.

I didn't have to struggle. I didn't have to worry about where my next meal was coming from, how I would wash my ass, or where I would lay my head at night. I was shown love and affection. I was given encouragement. I never had to search for that in other people.

But Lavish did.

In all of the conversations we had so far, she hadn't told me anything about her parents or how she ended up in the system to begin with. I wondered if she knew who they were, or if they were alive. Had she ever tried to find them? There was so much I didn't know about her, and I guess it could be chopped up to her not knowing about herself.

I hoped my family would like her, though I couldn't understand my desire for them to do so. Even if he did see through me, I was sure my father would love her. She was like the people he devoted his time to helping these days. I was beginning to see why he did what he did.

For years, he had been trying to get me to come with him on what he referred to as missions. I always had some excuse. I had donated plenty money to his cause, but I had yet to donate my time. Maybe I would do that with him before it was too late.

I heard the bedroom door close, and it snapped me back to reality. I had been in here for almost thirty minutes. I quickly rinsed off and got out of the

shower. After drying off, I slipped into my boxers and headed out of the bathroom. Lavish had settled in bed and was reading a book.

She looked up at me, and for a moment, our eyes connected. I walked over to the bed and leaned over to her. I didn't know why I felt compelled to kiss her. She was just so damn beautiful.

I stared at her fresh face and hair tied, trying to imagine what faults a nigga could find in her appearance. She stood about five seven, so of course I stood over her. She had the most beautiful pair of hazel eyes and succulent lips. The slight gap between her two front teeth gave her a different kind of sex appeal. I had learned to look for it any time she opened her mouth.

Her body was home grown, from her big breasts that had nestled perfectly in my hands, to her rounded hips, to that ass that commanded my attention when she walked in front of me, down to her soft, dainty feet. She was breathtaking. If only she could see that.

My finger traced the outline of her jaw, coming to a stop under her chin. I tilted her head back and pressed my lips softly against hers. To my surprise, she didn't pull away. I took a chance and fed her my tongue, deepening the kiss. I could feel my dick getting hard, and before I went to bed with blue balls, I decided it was best to end things where they were and pulled away.

“Goodnight,” I said, flicking her nose.

“Goodnight,” she whispered.

I grabbed my duffel bag and headed back into the living room to get acquainted with the couch I'd be sleeping on.

THOUGH THE COUCH WAS COMFORTABLE FOR SITTING, IT ABSOLUTELY WAS not made for sleeping. I tossed and turned and when I finally got to sleep, about two hours later, I was woken up to the sounds of Lavish whimpering and talking in her sleep. She sounded distressed, so I got up and dragged myself in the room to check on her. When I eased the door open, I could see her squirming, her head thrashing about on the pillow.

“No... no... *stop!*” she groaned.

I walked over to the bed and gently shook her.

“Lavish... Lavish!”

She frantically jumped up and tried to get out of bed, but I held her back.

“It’s just me,” I said softly.

Her hand flew to her chest as she tried to catch her breath. I grabbed the water bottle from beside her bed and handed it to her. She practically chugged it and fell back into the pillows.

“Are you okay?” I asked, taking the empty bottle and tossing it in the trash.

“I’m fine.” She ran her hands down her face. “Sometimes I have these dreams... They just feel all too real.”

“What do you dream about?”

“I don’t want to talk about that,” she said quickly.

“I won’t pry,” I replied, holding my hands up. “I just wanted to make sure you’re okay.” I stood and turned to leave the room, but she grabbed my arm.

“Wait,” she whispered, causing me to turn back. “Could you lay with me? Just ’til I fall back asleep.”

I was surprised that she asked, but I was willing to do that for her.

“Sure,” I said.

She moved over and tossed back the covers. I climbed into bed, and she snuggled close to me. I wrapped my arms around her and lightly stroked her back. For the longest, we lay in silence. From the lights of the city surrounding us, I could see she was staring at me. I didn’t say anything, just continued to hold her. I could feel her hand traveling up my arm as she gently caressed it. She then cupped my cheek, using her thumb to trace my bottom lip.

“Mitchell,” she mumbled.

“What is it?” I asked.

The next thing I felt was her lips on mine. She pressed her body against mine, using her knee to rub up against my dick. The shit had been straining against my boxers since I lay down next to her. She wrapped her arms tightly around me and pulled me on top of her. Her legs came around my waist as she continued to kiss me.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I asked, pulling my body away from hers.

She answered me by sitting up and pulling her tank top off, gracing me with her naked breasts. My mouth instantly went to her nipples as she

caressed the back of my head. My hands found their way to the elastic of her pajama bottoms as I pushed them down. Just as I expected, she wasn't wearing any panties. I slipped my hand between her thighs and felt just how hot and wet she already was.

I teased her clit with my thumb and eased two fingers inside of her. She moaned softly and spread her legs wider, allowing me full access to her. She started grinding her hips against my hand, breathing in deep.

"Mitchell," she moaned, arching her back from the bed.

I took the opportunity to locate her G-spot. When she gasped for air, I knew I had found it. I attacked it ferociously as I alternated between kissing her lips and sucking on both her neck and her nipples.

"Shit!" she hissed, gripping the sheets.

She thrust her hips to meet the strokes of my fingers, and I could feel her legs begin to tremble. As she buried her face between my neck and collarbone, she screamed a sweet release. As she lay, trying to catch her breath, I tossed the covers back and pulled her pajama bottoms the rest of the way down. I then stood and removed my boxers then climbed back in bed with her.

She pulled me down on top of her and kissed me feverishly. My dick poked at her entrance as she wrapped her legs around my waist and pulled me into her wetness.

"Shit." I found myself moaning as I sank into her warm walls.

This felt different than it did last night. Last night, we were drunk and straight up fucking. I wasn't concentrating on how good it felt inside of her. Now that I was sober, I could say that this shit felt amazing. Like this pussy was made for me the way it curved around my dick.

"Fuck," she moaned loudly as she clung to me.

I took my time, hitting her with long, deep strokes. My hand came around the back of her neck as I pulled her into my lips.

"You're so beautiful," I whispered to her as she whimpered.

I sat back and pushed her knees into her chest and dove deeper into her. I maintained a slow deep rhythm that seemed to illicit breathtaking moans from her.

"Yes," she moaned, her hands gripping my ass as she pulled in a few more inches of me.

I was trying to be gentle with her, but if she wanted all of this dick, she was going to get it. I draped both of her legs over my shoulders and pinned

both of her arms above her head. She wasn't going to be able to run from me like this.

I eased out of her just a bit, and in one swift motion, I filled her with every single inch of me.

"Oh God!" she cried out as she squirted that juicy goodness all over my dick. "Oooo shit... shit!"

"You feel so good, baby," I moaned, grinding my hips into her. I could feel my dick kissing her cervix.

"What are you doing to me?" she asked breathlessly.

"Exactly what you wanted."

I proceed to pick up my pace, going from stroking her slowly to fucking her in a slow, torturing rhythm.

"Mitchell!" She cried.

"Cum for me, baby," I commanded.

The moment I did, she erupted with a cry so loud, I knew if her neighbors weren't awake, they damn sure were now. Her body quaked beneath mine as a second orgasm ripped through her. I was right behind her.

"Goddamnit!" I groaned as I released inside of her. I tossed my head back and tried not to lose consciousness, because that nut damn near took me out. She pulled my face to hers and kissed me, with my dick still throbbing inside of her.

I knew right then I wasn't going to be able to keep my hands off of her when she moved into my house.

Lavish

I didn't know what the fuck got into me last night. I had no business inviting this man into my bed... again, especially without a condom! I was vulnerable after that dream, and I clearly wasn't using my best judgment. I should have stopped at kissing him. But when he took the invitation to go further, I couldn't stop him or myself.

I hadn't been touched in so long by a man. My body was literally craving him. Keith and I hadn't had sex in over two years, which was fine because he had long since stopped satisfying me. He used me to cater to his sexual needs, while he never catered to mine. I hadn't had an orgasm that wasn't self-induced in years.

Mitchell just did something to me. He talked big shit, but he could back it all up. My body was steel reeling from the pleasure he had given me in the wee hours of the morning. I could see now that I was going to have to avoid him.

I couldn't fuck around and get dickmatized in a fake ass marriage. I didn't need to be opening myself up to catching real feelings, and I certainly didn't need to be fucking him. But I would be a lying ass bitch if I said my pussy hadn't been calling him.

I looked over at him knocked out in the bed next to me, snoring lightly. I was still trying to wrap my head around the fact that I not only agreed to marry him, but I had actually followed through with it, and to top it off, I agreed to stay married to him to fulfill his dying father's wish. This was some shit straight out of a fucking movie.

The only difference was this wasn't some fairytale. I wasn't some princess who had found her prince and was about to ride off into the sunset to live happily ever after. When this was all over, I was going home alone... and I didn't even know where home would be. But I would have twenty five million dollars in my pocket to help me figure that shit out.

I eased out of bed, grabbed my phone, and headed into the bathroom to relieve myself. I didn't know what I was checking for. I didn't have any friends, and the women I did associate with, I had been introduced to by Keith as wives or girlfriends of his friends. I didn't want any ties to him, so I had blocked them all. I scrolled through the pictures I had been taking since I landed here.

They were mostly of the scenery. Only a few were of me, because I wasn't a huge fan of being photographed. The last several pictures were ones that I didn't even remember taking. All of them were either of me and Mitchell or just him at various moments. I was assuming that this was from our drunken night.

There was one photo that stuck out. It was one of us at the altar of one of those twenty-four-hour chapels. It looked cheap as fuck, but whoever took the photo captured us looking happy as hell, almost like we were in love and decided to get married on a whim. It didn't look like I had married him a few short hours after meeting him.

I stared at the picture, seemingly forgetting where I was until he opened the bathroom door.

"Good morning."

"Is this gonna be a thing where I can't take a shit in peace?" I asked, swiping out of my photos.

He laughed. "We are married. I'm sure you are gonna smell my shit a few times."

"No the fuck I won't," I said, reaching for the tissue. I stared at him, waiting for him to leave.

"What?" he asked.

"Get out!"

He grinned at me but left me to my business. I cleaned myself up and flushed the toilet.

“Don’t forget to spray!” he called from the other side of the door.

“Fuck you!” I called back.

“Already did that!”

I rolled my eyes as I washed my hands and face and then brushed my teeth. I unwrapped my hair and pulled my braids up into a bun. I had redone the front for this trip, but it was about time to take these out and redo them. Doing my own hair was something I had learned to do at ten years old.

I had worn my hair in its natural state up until Keith started making comments about the way it looked. He degraded me to the point where I just wanted to cut it all off. I had taken to wearing braids and weaves just so I didn’t have to hear his mouth. That only gave him something else to pick me apart about. I had been told all my life that I had such long, beautiful, thick hair, and up until him, I loved it most.

“Stop it, Lavish.” I scolded myself.

I was thinking about that bastard way too much when I was supposed to be enjoying my freedom from him. I signed heavily and then made my way out of the bathroom. Mitchell was lying in bed, speaking softly to someone on the phone. It was the same soft voice he used on me, so I assumed it was one of the many females he entertained. That thought kind of bothered me, and it shouldn’t have, because he wasn’t really my man.

I fumbled with my clothes, looking for something to wear for the day as he continued with his conversation.

“How are you feeling?” he asked. “Are you taking it easy like they told you to, Pops?”

I looked over at the sound of the concern in his voice.

“You can’t be doing all that... I know... I know that too... Why are you so stubborn?” He rubbed his temples. “I’m coming home... Yes, I am. I’ll be on the plane in a little while... I love you too, Pop.”

He hung up and dropped the phone on the bed. His hand went to cover his face, and I could see him breathing heavy.

“Mitchell,” I said softly.

He didn’t answer.

When I saw him shaking slightly, I knew he was trying his hardest to fight back tears. I immediately dropped everything in my hands and went to

him. I climbed on top of him and wrapped my body as tightly as I could around him. That only caused his tears to flow.

“I’m here,” I whispered. “I’ve got you.”

I could feel his heart beating a mile a minute as he cried against me. After a minute or so, his arms came around me, and he held me just as tight as I was holding him. I couldn’t produce any other words to comfort him other than that same phrase.

“I’m here. I’ve got you.”

I had never lost anybody that I cared about. I definitely didn’t know how to process going through losing a parent. However, it seemed much easier if they just died in their sleep versus you having to sit around and watch them suffer, not knowing when they would take their last breath.

After a few minutes, Mitchell sat up with me still in his arms.

“I’m sorry,” he said, wiping his face.

“Don’t be sorry for having a moment, Mitchell.”

“My mother had to take him to the hospital this morning,” he said softly. “If something happens to him before I get there...”

“Don’t think like that,” I said, cupping his face.

“I need to go up to my room and pack my things.” He looked at me. “I guess... I’ll see you in a few weeks.”

“I could come with you, you know, for moral support.”

“I appreciate that, but now might not be the best time.”

“Can I at least call and check on you?”

He smiled softly and nodded.

“Thank you, baby,” he said, hugging me.

He softly kissed my lips. It was the way that he had called me that that sent chills down my spine. It was almost like he meant it. I quickly shook the thought from my head and told myself to get it together. This was not the time to be deciphering shit that didn’t need to be deciphered.

Mitchell

When I boarded my private jet, my nerves were in shambles. Checking up on my father this morning, the last thing I was expecting to hear was that he was in the hospital. My mind immediately thought the worst. I was starting to regret leaving home to go on vacation. It wasn't like I really needed the break.

The entire ride back home, I was texting my sister, Kira. She and I were the closest of my siblings. She assured me that my father was fine, but I needed to lay eyes on him. I already had a car on standby at the airport. The moment we landed and my bags were loaded, I made a beeline for the hospital. I was about ten minutes out when I got a text from Lavish.

Hey, I was just checking in on you. Please let me know that you made it safely. My prayers are with you.

It felt good to know she was thinking of me. I almost wished that I had brought her with me. If my family wasn't already aware of our nuptials, they would be soon. Maybe it would have been better to get this out of the way now versus further down the line. I was sure they would have a lot to say, especially my father if he was up to it.

Pulling up to the hospital, I let my driver know I'd give him a call when I was ready to go. Kira had already sent me my father's room number, so I

just made my way up to it. Outside of the door, I could hear the voices of my family. After taking a deep breath, I opened it and let myself inside.

I found my father sitting up in bed, talking with my mother and Elvin.

“I told you that you didn’t have to cut your vacation short, son,” my father said.

“And I told you I was hopping on the plane to see you,” I replied, walking over to kiss my mother and shake my brother’s hand. When it came to my father, I embraced him as tight as his weakening frame would allow. He kissed my forehead as I pulled away.

“I’m happy to see you,” he said. “How was New Orleans?”

“It was good. Very... eventful.”

“How so?”

“I’m sure you don’t want to hear my stories, Pop.” I avoided the question just in case he was fishing for information. “Tell me about you.”

“I’m okay, Mitchell” he answered, sighing heavily. “Just tired.”

“You have to take it easy.”

“I try to take it easy. It’s just hard being slowly but surely confined to a wheelchair. I’m used to being able to get up and go whenever I want. It’s a big adjustment.”

“I know, Pop.”

Over the last couple of months, he had expressed he was starting to feel like a burden to the family, especially my mother. None of us felt like that, least of all my mom. The love she had for this man was beyond this world. She took on caring for him without a complaint and without pause. I fully believed that it was her love that kept him going this whole time. She was his peace, and he was hers.

Over the next couple of hours, I sat talking with them. My other siblings stopped by to see him as well. I checked in with Lavish to find that she was still in New Orleans. Her stay was due to end in about two days, and I hoped she was enjoying herself without getting too damn drunk. I wasn’t there to protect her, though I was sure she could handle herself. I chuckled internally thinking that is was crazy I even wanted to protect her at this point. Even though we had been married for the same amount of time that we knew each other, part of me felt connected to her.

It was the weirdest thing.

I found myself slightly missing her presence. I mean, the woman and I had shared the deepest parts of ourselves with each other. We came from

two different worlds, but the time that I spent with her was emotional, raw, and real. I didn't talk to many people outside of my family about what was going on with my father. To be able to talk to her and be vulnerable was new and kind of refreshing. She comforted me, and somehow, her spirit was soothing.

"What are you smiling about over there?" Kira asked as I was looking at my phone.

I had been scrolling through the pictures I secretly took of Lavish while she was sleeping. She was so damn beautiful and didn't even know it.

"You in my business?" I laughed, locking my phone.

"I mean, you are cheesing pretty hard. Inquiring minds want to know."

She gave me this look like she knew I was up to something. It wouldn't surprise me. Since we were kids, Kira was the sibling that somehow knew everybody's business. Growing up, she never told on us, but she did blackmail our asses plenty of times. That wasn't her endgame these days.

The rest of the family looked at me curiously.

"What are you hiding?" Valarie asked.

"What makes you think I am hiding something?" I retorted.

"Yeah, okay, Mitchell. It'll come out. It always does."

I wasn't worried about them finding out that I had gone off and gotten married. It was bound to come out at some point. I just didn't want to talk about it right now. I stayed at the hospital for another thirty minutes before calling my driver to let him know that I was ready to go. Kira decided to walk out with me.

"When are you going to tell them?" she asked as we hopped on the elevator.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Come on, big brother," she said, playfully pushing me. "You know what I'm talking about."

"How did you find out?"

"I'm Kira Keonig. Did you forget I know everything? So when are you going to tell Mom and Dad you got married in New Orleans?"

"Soon, with your nosy ass."

"She's beautiful."

"She is."

"So what's the deal?"

"What makes you think it's a deal? I could just be in love."

She laughed so loud that I was almost offended.

“You? Mitchell Keonig? Self-proclaimed playboy? That’s funny.”

“It’s sad you have so little faith in me. I could fall in love.”

“Sure you can, Mitchell.”

We stepped off of the elevator and made our way out of the hospital.

“You know Daddy is gonna see right through you,” Kira said as my car pulled around front.

“You let me worry about Pop. I got this.”

“We shall see. I can’t wait to meet my sister in-law!” She beamed.

“I bet you can’t.”

I rolled my eyes and pulled her in for a hug. We said our goodbyes, and I hopped in my car to head home.

SETTLING IN BED, I PULLED OUT MY PHONE TO CALL LAVISH. SHE HAD BEEN on my mind since I got home, but I didn’t want to crowd her. I mean, I had only left her earlier today, yet I still felt the urge to hear her voice. It was around nine, so she could be doing anything—partying, sleeping, hell, she could even be with another man. The thought of that produced a frown on my face. She wouldn’t do that... would she?

Quickly dialing her number, I waited for her to answer. When she did, I could hear the sleep in her voice, and it eased my mind for a moment.

“Hello?”

“Hey, baby.”

“Mitchell? Is everything okay? How’s your dad?”

“He’s fine, just tired. They should be sending him home in a day or so. What are you doing?”

“I was taking a nap. I just came back from dinner.”

“By yourself?”

“Who else would be going with me?”

“Maybe you found a friend.”

“You have a lot to learn about me and friends, Mitchell Keonig.”

“I guess I do.” I shrugged as though she could see me. “So, you miss me?”

“You are so full of yourself,” she answered. I could hear the rolling of her eyes in her voice.

“Answer the question, woman.”

“I miss you like I miss pain in my ass.”

“All that ass back there. Mmm, mmm, mmm. Now that, I miss. You know you have the perfect arch.”

“You’re done. Get off my phone.”

“Wait, baby, I’m playing.” I laughed.

“Did you call just me to harass me?”

“Nah. However, I wouldn’t be your husband if I didn’t annoy you. But for real though, I wanted to hear your voice,” I said, biting my lip. “I missed you.”

“Sure you did.”

“It’s not every day I marry a complete stranger.”

“I’ll give you that. I still can’t believe I agreed to this shit.”

“Hell, I can’t believe it either. Had you been sober, you probably would have swung at me again.”

“I said I was sorry about that. Now you know where my trust issues come in—”

“It’s okay, Lavish. I was just joking. But we are married now, so I don’t expect you to be putting your hands on me like that. I’ll never put my hands on you.”

She was quiet for a moment.

“Do you... do you mean that?” There was a hint of sadness in her voice. Fear even.

“Of course I mean that. I would never hurt you like that.”

Again, there was silence on her end.

“Answer my FaceTime,” I told her.

“Why?”

“Because I want to see my beautiful wife.” Without pause, I sent her a FaceTime call. A few seconds later, her gorgeous face came into view, and I smiled.

“That’s what I’m talking about. Look at you.”

She had her braids pulled into a bun, accentuating her beautiful face. Her makeup was light and natural, different from the bare faced Lavish I met in the club.

“I treated myself.” She shrugged, blushing slightly.

“Oh really? I’m glad to hear that. You deserve to live a little.”

“Well I’m guessing I owe that to you.”

“Nah, baby. That’s your money. However, as my wife, you get to enjoy all of the perks that come along with it. Money is the least of it. You and I are gonna have some fun.”

“I don’t know if I like your idea of fun.”

“Traveling the world is absolutely fun.”

“I’m a simple woman. I don’t need all of that.”

“So you expect to stay home while I’m gone?”

“I expect you to do what you’ve been doing. Don’t let me stop your routine.”

“You wouldn’t be stopping my routine. Traveling is normal for me.”

“Exactly. For *you*. I’m not you. I wasn’t born with a silver spoon in my mouth. I worked for everything I ever had. Having this money now won’t change me. I’ll always be the same Lavish I’ve always been. You have to respect that.”

I sighed. “Okay. Just know you’re always welcome.”

“I appreciate that.”

We stared at each other for a moment. I was insanely attracted to this woman. Watching her lie in this bed without me made me miss her more.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she questioned with a frown.

“I told you I missed you.”

She rolled her eyes.

“What do you think of me coming to see you when you get back?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I mean, I’ll probably grab a hotel room until you decide you are ready for me to put on this facade.”

“Don’t think of it like that. This is your family now too.”

“Don’t use that word. They will probably see me as this gold digger.”

“They won’t. I told you they are humble. They love me, and they will love you too. I promise.”

“If you say so.”

“So can I come see you?”

“Whatever you want to do, Mitchell.”

“It’s not whatever I want to do. I want you to want to see me too... spend time with your husband, show me your city, show me *you*.”

Even if our marriage was fake, I still wanted to put in some kind of effort. I mean, for however long this continued, I didn't want us to stay strangers. We at least needed to be believable in front of other people.

"Okay," she finally answered.

"Okay?"

"I said okay. Don't make this awkward."

"Alright, alright. Just let me know where you are staying when you get back."

"Okay."

"So..." I positioned myself on my back with my hand in my boxers. "What are you wearing?"

"A dress."

"Let me see you."

"You are so aggy!"

She let out an exasperated breath, but I could see her getting up and moving around. After positioning the phone, she took a few steps back.

"Happy?" she asked, throwing her hands on her hips.

She had on this white wrap dress that beautifully exposed one of her thighs and hugged her curves perfectly. I licked my lips as I watched her turn around to give me a full three-sixty view.

"Damn that looks good on you," I moaned.

"Thank you."

"Take it off."

"What?"

"Take it off, Lavish."

She hesitated for a moment, looking around the empty room nervously. Slowly, she pulled at the sash holding it all together. I watched intently as she slipped the dress from her shoulders and let it fall to the floor. Beneath she wore this sexy ass, purple lace bra and panty set.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I moaned, stroking myself. "Take that off too."

"Mitchell—"

"Take. It. Off."

I could see the arousal playing through her face. She reached behind her, unhooked the bra, and tossed it to the floor. Her nipples were deliciously pebbled. She turned around and shimmied out of her thong and

kicked it aside. When she turned to face me, she covered herself up with her hands.

“Move your hands, baby,” I said.

She hesitated for a moment then removed them and came closer to the phone.

“Can I make you feel good, Lavish?” I asked.

“You wanna have phone sex?”

“No. I want you to use your imagination and let me satisfy you. Trust me. Get on the bed.”

I could see the curiosity peak in her. If I couldn't have her physically right now, I would have to do it mentally. The thing about mentally stimulating a woman sexually was she had free reign to explore her body as she pleased, but you still held the control. She was about to learn just that.

Lavish

One. Two. Three. Four. Five.
Five.

That was the number of times I came with only my fingers and Mitchell's voice in my ear. That night and several nights since then, he took me to new heights of pleasure. For so long, my body was used for someone else's gratification. Keith only ever cared about getting his rocks off. It never mattered if I got mine. Mitchell gave me that. Not only did he please me in the physical form, but he was able to please me from miles and miles away.

I learned things about my body that night I never knew could be desired. After five body quaking orgasms, I slept like a baby. Now that I was back in Florida, he plagued my thoughts. Every time I looked down at my hand, I got chills. I was really walking around with a ten-thousand-dollar ring on my finger and married to a millionaire. A man who didn't want for anything but still felt the need to go through with this scheme to appease his dying father.

Through our conversations, I gathered that maybe it wasn't so much about the money as it was about granting his father's wish. I could tell he cared greatly for the man. Growing up without a positive male role model myself, I could understand that. I often wondered about my parents and

where I came from... if I was loved or even wanted before I ended up in the system.

Those thoughts plagued me for years on end, and sometimes, they entered my dreams, giving me nightmares. I had this fantasy growing up that one day they would come and rescue me. Eventually, I grew out of it. I accepted that all I had in this world, all I would ever have in this world was me.

Shaking the thoughts from my head, I stood from my bed and walked out onto the balcony of my hotel. I wanted to be near the beach, so I booked a room at the Marena's Beach Resort in Miami. It was a little expensive, but the place was peaceful and beautiful. I had been enjoying my stay for the last two weeks, indulging in the amenities, food, and a little shopping to pass the time. Today, I was going out to get my hair done, which meant that I would be back in my old neck of the woods.

I wasn't too keen on that because there was a chance I would run into Keith, and he was the last person I wanted to see. After showering and dressing myself in a pair of jeans, a graphic tee, sneakers, and a fitted cap over my mass of hair, I grabbed my things and made my way to the door. When I opened it, I was surprised to see Mitchell standing there with a suitcase.

"Mitchell!"

"Hey, beautiful." He smiled and leaned against the door frame.

"What are you doing here?"

"You forgot you said I could come see you?"

"No, I didn't. I just thought you would have called first."

"I wanted to surprise you. Come here."

He reached for me, and before I could protest, he pulled me into his strong embrace. His massive size practically engulfed me. He smelled divine, and he was looking fine as hell. When he let me go, he didn't miss the opportunity to kiss me before he did. That kiss damn near caused my knees to buckle. He kissed me like he missed me.

"I came all this way just for that," he said, stroking my cheek.

"I bet you did."

"Where are you off to?"

"To get my hair braided."

"Let me see what's under this cap."

“No!” He tried to take off my hat, and I slapped his hand away. “I don’t want you seeing this mess on my head.”

“I’m gonna see you in your natural element eventually, Lavish.”

“Well it won’t be today. Just stay here... or go explore the city or something. I’ll be back in a few hours.”

“I could come with you—”

“No, no. I’m going to the hood, and they would eat you alive.”

“Girl, please.”

“I’m serious, Mitchell. They will take one look at you and start plotting. Besides, the last thing I need is somebody running back to my ex and telling him they saw me with you.”

“Who gives a fuck about that nigga?” He frowned.

I sighed heavily.

“I will be back.”

Without another word, I squeezed past him and made a beeline for the elevator. It wasn’t so much that I didn’t want him to come with me. I just didn’t need the attention he tended to garner. My world was nothing like his. This wasn’t his turf. He was fully exposed out here, and that made him vulnerable. No. The best thing for him to do would be to stay his ass in this hotel.

“THANKS AGAIN FOR FITTING ME IN, JOHNNIE,” I SAID TO MY STYLIST AS she applied the mousse to my hair.

Four hours later, I was finally done.

She had braided my hair into a ponytail, but for now, I was wearing it in a bun. I should have gotten box braids, but that would have taken all day, and with Mitchell popping up, it would have been rude to just leave him alone for hours on end. Besides, I was fully capable of braiding my hair myself. I just went to Johnnie when I didn’t feel like doing it.

“No problem, girl.”

Johnnie was a twenty-two-year-old stripper who did hair from her kitchen, sold clothes, and babysat on the side. I wasn’t mad at her hustle. I remember the days I used to work two to three jobs before I met my ex-husband, a lifestyle I was prepared to return to until Mitchell came along.

“How much do I owe you?” I inquired as I stood.

“Sixty-five.”

Reaching into my purse, I pulled out my wallet to fish the money out.

“Bitch, where did you get that!” she squealed, grabbing my hand and bringing it to her face.

“Shit!” I hissed, realizing that I left my wedding ring on. I’d become so accustomed to wearing it that I forgot to take it off.

“Girl, what nigga gave you that? You moved on already?”

“It’s not what you think.”

“It ain’t my business,” she said, holding up her hands. “I’m just saying, that is a serious upgrade. Whoever he is, I hope he’s making you happy. You deserved better than Keith long ago.”

It was no secret that Keith had done me dirty. I was sure he was spinning the story of our divorce to make himself look good. I didn’t care. He could say what he wanted, call me whatever he wanted. But one thing was for certain, and two things were for sure: He could never call me his wife again, and I was free of being bound to him.

“I appreciate that, Johnnie.”

I handed her the cash, and after saying goodbye, I left the house. The trip back to my hotel took about thirty minutes with traffic. I parked my car and headed up to my room. The funny thing was my key wasn’t working. I called Mitchell for him to open the door, but he never answered. Sighing heavily, I made my way back down to the lobby to find a receptionist.

“How can I help you?” a cheery white woman asked me.

“My key isn’t working, and I can’t get back in my room.”

“I apologize for the inconvenience. May I see the key?”

I handed it to her, and she began typing away on her computer. After about a minute or so, she spoke.

“It looks like your room has been upgraded to the penthouse suite.”

“What? How much is that?”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry. Your husband took care of everything.”

“My husband?”

“Mitchell Keonig... I’m sorry, is that not your husband?”

“Yeah, it is.” I shook my head to myself, angrily biting my lips.

“Would you like an extra key?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

She got me situated with getting a key and the room number before I stormed toward the elevator and made my way up to the penthouse. The moment I entered, I was in so in awe that I almost forgot that I was angry... almost.

“Mitchell!” I yelled.

A few seconds later, he appeared dressed in swim trunks with a glass in his hand.

“Hey, baby, I like your—”

“Where do you get off upgrading my room?”

“Listen, that room was small for what you are paying for it—”

“It wasn’t your room, Mitchell! That room was perfectly fine for me. You don’t get to come here and upgrade shit to your liking.”

“Lavish, you can afford to live a little. I don’t understand—”

“You’re right, you don’t understand. You come from a world where whatever you want is laid at your feet. You can write a check or swipe your card wherever and whenever you want, and life is good. I understand why your father won’t leave you his money to spend foolishly. You have no respect for the way other people choose to live. I told you before that this money will not change me. I know who and what I am. I don’t need this much space because, at the end of the day, when you leave, it’s just me. Me, by myself. It doesn’t matter what I can afford. I chose that room. I paid for that room, and you just pushed me out of it because you feel the need to control shit.”

“Wait a minute, baby. I don’t need to control a thing.”

“Oh, you absolutely do. Is that why you married me, Mitchell? You figured that I didn’t have shit and you could use your money to control me with this deal? Turn me into the perfect fake wife? Make me good enough?”

He looked genuinely hurt that I said that. Setting his drink down, he came over and stood in front of me. I didn’t realize that I was shaking until he rested his hands on my shoulders.

“Talk to me, Lavish,” he said.

“I don’t like having my choices taken away. Someone has been making choices for me my entire life. I won’t let you do the same.”

“I don’t want to control you,” he said gently as he took my hands. “I just wanted to treat you to something nice... surprise you. It wasn’t my intent to infringe upon your freedom, Lavish.”

He led me over to the couch and pulled me onto his lap.

“I apologize.”

“I just want you to respect my feelings.”

“I understand. I’m learning you, baby. Give me some time to get it right.”

Pulling my head to his, he kissed my lips softly.

“Can I make it up to you tonight?” he asked.

“I don’t know...”

“I came all this way because I missed your mean ass. Let me spend time with my wife. We have to get use to each other if this marriage is going to be believable, Lavish. I hope you don’t think you’re staying in Florida.”

I raised an eyebrow at him.

“I meant... I would like for you to come back to North Carolina with me... live at my house, our house.”

“What would I do in North Carolina?”

“What would you do here?”

I pondered that question. There really wasn’t much that I did here that I couldn’t do from anywhere. I didn’t work, and now that I didn’t really have to, I would probably spend my days doing much of nothing until I decided what I wanted to do.

“Can I think about it?” I asked.

“Sure. Are you hungry?”

I nodded.

“Wanna order some service and watch movies?”

“Can you order me a burger with all the trimmings and fries with extra ranch dressing?”

The food here was amazing, and I was overindulging in it whenever I could.

“Anything else?”

“A bottle.”

“Of?”

“Pick something.”

“You don’t want me to do that. You know how I feel about you on brown liquor.”

He grinned, and I was reminded of our time in New Orleans. That was when it hit me that he was going to be staying here. I instantly became nervous. I hadn’t had him since then, and that phone sex only served as a

reminder of what he was capable of doing to me. Was I ready for him to invade my walls again? That was the question that I asked myself. But with him being here in his swim shorts, dick pressing against my ass, I found myself thinking, *Where else do I want him to be?*

Mitchell

I guess upgrading Lavish's room was the wrong move, even on my dime. I expected her to be surprised, but I never expected her to come at me like that. She went from zero to a hundred in seconds. Maybe it was a blessing in disguise. I said I needed to know her. So far as yet, I'd seen plenty of her moods. I'd seen her sad, angry, shocked, and annoyed. The one mood I had yet to see her in was happy.

Not drunk happy, genuinely happy.

I wanted to change that.

It had been three days since I touched down in Miami, and I was enjoying the city. The skies were bright. The weather was nice. It was the perfect temperature to be sailing on a yacht somewhere on the water, but I was trying to think outside of my pockets. This trip, I had allowed Lavish to show me a different side of herself. We did things that were fun to her, and I actually enjoyed myself.

"So I was thinking..." She stood at the bathroom door wrapped in a towel as I brushed my teeth.

"Thinking what?"

"That I might hand over the reins today... let you take over finding us something to do. I guess if you are willing to indulge in things I like, I should be willing to indulge in yours."

I looked at her through the mirror, grinning hard. “Bet.”

“Just don’t have me in the middle of nowhere fighting for my life, okay?”

“I got you, baby,” I said, wiping my mouth clean.

I reached for her, pulling her into my chest. Picking her up, I set her on the counter with me standing between her legs.

“Now, I’ve been here three days, and you haven’t offered me any of this,” I said, rubbing her thighs as I kissed on her neck. “You gon’ make me beg, Lavish?”

“N-no,” she stuttered.

“Then can I taste you?”

My hand slipped beneath her towel and between her thighs. A low moan fell from her lips as my finger grazed her swollen nub. As I stroked her clit, I pulled the towel away, revealing her beautiful nakedness. My lips moved from her neck to her pebbled nipples.

“Answer my question, Lavish,” I commanded, resting her feet flat on the counter and spreading her legs. “Can I taste you?”

“Yes...” she moaned.

Without missing a beat, my head settled between her thighs. The bathroom was soon filled with pleased cries and helpless whimpers as she was pushed to the brink. My fingers darted in and out of her wetness as I feasted on her clit. Before long, there was a puddle of her juices growing beneath her. My face was soaked when I emerged and stood at my full height. I dropped my own towel, and at that moment, she had this look on her face that said, *Oh, you brought dick too?*

I motioned for her to get down from the counter and turn her around.

“You’re so sexy, Lavish.” I whispered in her ear as I kissed her neck.

My hands moved to cup her breast with one hand and her pussy with the other.

“I’ve been waiting to get back to you,” I moaned, propping her leg up on the counter. “To slide up in this good shit.” I eased my length inside of her from behind, gently gripping her neck as I did.

“Mitchell!” She moaned breathlessly as I hit her with slow deep strokes all while staring at her in the mirror.

“That’s it, baby. Say my name while you take this dick.”

She took that shit like a pro, throwing her ass back on me to catch every stroke. I watched her expressions change over and over. She went from a

look of unequivocal pleasure to pure, undeniable ecstasy. Her eyes locked on mine as we came, a tear slipping down her cheek. She whimpered as I dropped feathery kisses on her shoulders and back. Pulling out of her, I helped her to her feet. Wetting a washcloth, I cleaned both of us up.

“Get dressed. I want to take you somewhere.”

She nodded and headed out of the bathroom, my eyes watching her ass jiggle along the way. Damn, my wife was fine. We might have been pretending to be married, but nothing about my attraction and desire for her was fake. All I could think right now was I might have gotten myself into something that I was going to catch hell letting go of.

I DECIDED TO TAKE LAVISH ON THIS DOLPHIN TOUR. SINCE SHE COULDN'T swim, I made sure to book the non-swimmers session. She was a little nervous, but once she got comfortable with the dolphin, she fell in love. Watching her was like watching someone healing their inner child. Her eyes were wide and bright with excitement. She spoke with such love and care to this animal as she told it how beautiful it was.

It was almost like the dolphin understood her. The entire time we were in the water, that particular one stayed close to her. It was the sweetest thing to watch, and if I could have, I would have bought the damn thing for her.

Once we left the swim tour, we went back to the hotel to shower and change to go grab some food. She was smiling more than I had ever seen her smile, and it made me feel good that I played a part in that. Once we got dressed, she willingly and without a word from me, slipped her hand into mine as we walked toward the elevator. Inside, she rested her head on my shoulder, and I leaned in to kiss her forehead.

“You two make a beautiful couple,” said this older woman in the elevator.

“Thank you,” Lavish and I both answered

“Newlyweds?”

“Something like that.” I looked at Lavish with a smile. “I’m getting to know all of her.”

“Well I see the love in your eyes. I pray you have a strong, healthy marriage.”

She smiled at us and then hopped off of the elevator when it came to a stop.

“If only she knew,” Lavish said as we walked to where my car was waiting.

“Maybe it’s a good thing for other people to see. At least we’ll look convincing.”

“I guess.”

After opening her door and ensuring that she was locked in, I rounded the car and climbed into the back seat with her. Our driver waited until I strapped myself in before cranking up and exiting the parking lot. We ended up at Zuma Miami, a Japanese cuisine restaurant. Lavish shared with me that this was somewhere she used to come by herself quite often when she was married. Not wanting to stir up any ill feelings, I offered to take her somewhere else.

She assured me that she was fine and that this place held happy memories for her. We were seated, and once we ordered, we discussed her coming back to North Carolina with me. She wanted me to tell my family before she made the trip, saying it was already a surprise, but at least they would be prepared to meet her. I think she was trying to buy her time.

“What’s keeping you here?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...” I paused for a moment to gather my words so that I didn’t offend her. “You don’t have any family here. And you said you don’t have any friends. What is there to hold on to?”

“It’s the only place I’ve ever known, Mitchell. I mean, there may be nobody here for me, but there is nobody in North Carolina for me either. Either way, I’m alone. Why not be alone in a familiar location?”

“I’m a little offended by that.”

“Why?”

“Because you won’t be alone. You’ll have me. We’ll be sharing a home. You’ll be a part of my family.”

“You really think that when we divorce, your family will want anything more to do with me?”

“Who’s talking about divorce right now?”

“Mitchell, we both know what this is. Okay, so we had sex a few times. But at the end of the day, this was a business transaction for you. Divorce is evident once you are free of your need of me.”

I stared at her for a moment.

Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe it wasn't smart to propose this kind of deal with an emotionally sensitive woman. There were plenty of women I could have brought this to that were perfectly fine being a trophy wife, plenty who didn't mind putting on a show in exchange for the perks of my lifestyle. To be honest, the idea to fake a marriage never even crossed my mind until I met her.

I didn't know what possessed me to do it. Maybe it was her spirit calling out to me that night. Maybe I was riding her emotional wave and making drastic and foolish decisions. But whatever it was, we were in it now.

"I need to use the bathroom," she said, standing.

I nodded as she walked away. While she was gone, I called my mother to check on Pops and let her know that I would be back in town soon and needed to talk to her. I spoke with my father for a few minutes, and he sounded like he was in slightly better spirits. I was just finishing up the call when Lavish returned to the table. There was a look of disgust and anger on her face.

"What's wrong?"

"Keith is here," she said.

"We can leave if you want."

"No," she said firmly. "He doesn't get to run me out of my favorite spot without getting my favorite dessert. We are not leaving."

"I got you, baby," I said, covering my hand with hers. "Just so you know... I ain't above beating this nigga ass in here."

"Neither am I," she said as our waitress brought over our dessert. She tried to concentrate on her chocolate chip cookie and ice cream sundae, but she kept looking around like she could feel his eyes on her. A few seconds later, Keith approached our table with a smug look on his face.

"Lavish," he said.

"Get the fuck away from me, Keith."

"Now is that any way to talk to the man that took care of your ass for five years?"

"You call controlling me taking care of me? You belittled and degraded me. You made me feel like I wasn't worthy of being loved correctly. You made me hate myself. Are you so quick to forget how you used to violate me, Keith?"

“You are gonna stop telling that fucking lie,” he snapped.

“You better watch your fucking mouth,” I said, sliding my chair away from the table.

Keith looked at me and laughed.

“Who’s gonna check me?” he asked. “You?”

“You must not value your life coming over here,” I said, standing. “Let me make this clear to you. You don’t talk to my wife.”

“Your wife?” He laughed, looking at Lavish. “The ink ain’t even dry on our divorce, and your ass is married? To this clown ass nigga nonetheless?”

He looked down at my ring. “Got you a nigga with some money I see.”

“Aren’t you here with a woman, Keith? Why are you in my fucking face right now?”

“Because I smelled the familiar stench of weakness when I stepped through the door.”

He didn’t get a chance to say anything else before I shoved him away from the table.

“If you know like I know, you’d think twice before talking out the side of your neck at my woman.”

“Nigga, fuck you. You realize where you are at? This is my city, nigga. All the money you have won’t save you out here. Think wisely. Besides... this bitch ain’t worth it.”

In an instant, my hands went to his throat, and I had him pinned to the table with his arm twisted behind his back. People were staring at us, and I could see the workers running around, looking for help.

“I gave you a chance to walk away, and you took my kindness for weakness,” I said in a low voice.

I could see the manager walking over. I forced Keith to look at Lavish.

“You see that woman right there? The same one you treated like shit... the same one you abused? That’s *my* wife. So whenever you see her, nigga, you gon’ see me. I play about a lot of things, but I’m not about to play with you about her. Get this through your thick ass skull. You don’t run shit over here anymore. Whatever control you *thought* you had over her, that shit is dead. The way you used to get away with talking to her like you fucking crazy, dead. And if you come anywhere near her while we are here, you’ll be dead too.”

I lifted him from the table and pushed him away forcefully.

“What’s the problem?” the manager asked.

“This man was harassing my wife,” I said. My eyes locked on Keith’s who was fuming. “She told him to leave her alone, and he started being disrespectful. Now I don’t know how you handle that with your wife, but I don’t play about mine.”

“Sir, I’m gonna have to ask you to leave,” the manager said, turning to Keith who stood glaring at Lavish, his jaw clenched.

“Avert yo’ fucking eyes, my nigga,” I said, staking a step toward him.

“Leave, sir,” the manager said. “I don’t want to have to call the police.”

Keith glared at us as he backed away.

“You will never be done with me, Lavish,” he said. “I’m inside your head. Remember that, bitch.”

I damn near jumped over everyone to get to him. If it wasn’t for the manager, a few waiters, and a handful of customers holding me back, I would have really fucked him up. Lavish sat there, tears streaming down her face from the embarrassment I was sure she felt.

“Can we please just go!” She cried, grabbing her phone.

She didn’t wait for me to follow.

Muttering a curse, I apologized for the disturbance. Most people applauded me for sticking up for my wife. After paying our bill and speaking with the manger for a few minutes, I went to find her. She was sitting in the back seat of our car which was waiting at the curb. The driver stood outside the door, holding it open for me.

Once inside, I closed the partition and looked over at Lavish. I could tell she was fuming. I didn’t know what to say, but I wouldn’t apologize for defending her. That just wasn’t going to happen.

Lavish

“*I*’m sorry, baby,” Mitchell said. “But that muthafucka—”
“Just don’t,” I said, holding up my hands. “Can we just go back to the hotel? I need a drink.”

He nodded and then tapped the partition to let the driver know we were ready. For the duration of this painfully silent ride, I kept thinking about what Keith had said to me... that I would never be free of him... that he was inside my head. He was right. As much as I tried not to give him control back there, he took it anyway.

The ride back to the hotel seemed to take forever. I was practically sitting on the door with as far as I had separated myself from Mitchell. I wasn’t upset with him. I was embarrassed that, once again, my past was coming back to haunt me. When we pulled up to our hotel, I didn’t wait for him to get out and open my door. I got out of the car and hurried inside.

I didn’t wait for him at the elevator either. I got to the room and let myself in then locked myself in the bathroom. A few minutes later, I could hear Mitchell coming through the door. He called my name, but I didn’t answer. The bathroom door began to rattle.

“Baby, open the door,” he said softly. I was quiet. “I know you’re in there, Lavish.”

I sighed and got up to unlock the door. I sat on the toilet with my head in my hands as he came in. He squatted in front of me and pulled my hands away.

“Stop that,” he said, reading me. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about. That nigga was out of line, and I’m not about to let him or anybody else disrespect you like that.”

“I’m so tired of him, Mitchell.” I groaned. “We were having such a good day, and he managed to ruin it.”

“Fuck him. He won’t ruin shit. We are gonna enjoy the rest of our night. You know why?”

“Why?”

He cupped my face. “Because you’ve got me, and I’ve got you.”

I stared at him. In just short of three weeks we had been married, he managed to infiltrate my feelings against my will. Every time we shared a moment, I found myself feeling increasingly like this was becoming real. How could I have allowed myself to even think about being invested in this when it was all for show?

“I need some space,” I said, standing.

“Lavish—”

“Please, Mitchell. I just need to breathe and to have time alone with my thoughts. I’m asking you nicely... please give me some space.”

He sighed and stood. “Fine, Lavish.”

He walked away, and a few seconds later, the door of the bedroom slammed slightly. I stripped down to nothing and ran myself a hot bath to soak in. Times like this, I wish that I had someone to talk to. Maybe someone could have talked me out of agreeing to this shit to begin with.

I didn’t even want to be married again, at least not so soon. Five years with Keith was more than enough to get my fix and decide that this shit wasn’t for me at this time. The only upside I found to this whole sure fire fiasco was the fact that I was being paid. If Mitchell was willing to shell out a total of twenty-five million dollars for a fake wife, I knew his money was long and this was nothing for him.

Before all of this, I never even heard of Mitchell Keonig or his father. I did a little research during my time back in Florida. His father really was a billionaire. What stuck out to me was his philanthropy within the black community. I read about everything he has been doing for years, and I must

admit that I admired him. Most people with his kind of money didn't care about those less fortunate.

Mitchell was right about one thing.

He was a humble man. He spoke passionately about what he was doing in interviews. There were several pictures of him getting down and dirty to help clean up neighborhoods. He was front and center of food and toy drives. The community seemed to love him, and I knew Mitchell loved him as well. Though they had their differences with their views of the world, I could tell he respected the man immensely.

I found myself wondering what would happen if I decided to venture off to North Carolina with him. Would his family really accept me as their own? What about when they found out our marriage was fake? Would they expose me? Shun me? I found myself thinking about all of this shit.

Thirty minutes later, I emerged from the bathroom, feeling slightly less tense. Dressed in a pair of biker shorts and a tank top, I left the bedroom of the penthouse and went to find Mitchell. He was sitting on the balcony smoking and on FaceTime with a woman. At first, I found myself frowning, thinking he was bold as hell. But when he looked up and saw me, he didn't try to end the call or hide her face.

"Baby, I want you to meet somebody," he said, reaching for me.

I was hesitant.

"Don't be shy. Come on." He chuckled.

Reluctantly, I took his hand and allowed him to guide me onto his lap.

"Lavish, this is my baby sister, Kira. Kira, this is Lavish, my wife."

My eyes widened. Kira was absolutely gorgeous. She looked like she radiated positive energy. The smile on her face felt genuine, and when she spoke to me, I could tell she was filled with love.

"It's so nice to meet you!" She squealed in excitement. "I've literally been dying for this moment!"

"You knew?"

"Since it happened," Mitchell answered. "Kira is one of these people that knows everybody's damn business."

That made me a little uneasy. If she knew about the marriage, what else did she know?

"I don't know everybody's business!" she protested.

"Bullshit. Baby, she blackmailed us as kids."

"I have grown from that, thank you very much. I have evolved."

“You have. Not so much a pain in my ass anymore.”

“Whatever. You love me anyway, big head.”

“You a’ight.”

I smiled at their interaction. He did tell me that they were close.

“Anyway!” Kira said, holding up a perfectly manicured hand in Mitchell’s direction. “Lavish, you are absolutely beautiful. My brother did good!”

“Thank you. You’re so beautiful yourself. Good looks run in the family.”

“Oh girl, there are a few booger wolves thrown in there. Speaking of family, Mitchell. You are gonna have to come clean and do some damage control.”

“I told Ma and Pop I wanted to talk to them when I get back.”

“You plan on bringing wifey when you come, because you will have to explain why there are photos and videos of you assaulting a man in a Miami restaurant.”

“Shit!” Mitchell hissed. “Already? That was almost two hours ago.”

“You’re surprised?” Kira laughed.

“What are you gonna do?” I asked.

“What else can I do but confirm it?”

“You guys can spin this,” Kira said. I looked at her with raised eyebrows.

“How?”

“I mean, you’re faking this anyway, so it should be nothing to keep that up. Rich white folk get married on a whim all the damn time. If they can have an insta-love story, you can too. How long do y’all plan to stay married?”

“Awhile.”

“I don’t know.” Mitchell and I answered in unison.

“How long do you expect to keep this up?” I asked. “Eventually, this will all be over.”

“Who knows. Maybe you’ll mess around and fall in love,” Kira said.

We looked at each other. I had avoided the thought of that at all costs. The last thing I needed was to fall in love with this man, especially when there was no guarantee that he would fall back.

“I know where we stand,” I said quietly. “I’m sure your brother does as well.”

He looked at me, and I couldn't read his face. There seemed to be many different feelings etched in his features, and I couldn't decipher which was accurate.

"I'm gonna go lay down," I said.

He nodded.

"It was nice meeting you, Kira."

"I can't wait to see you." She smiled.

I returned the smile and went to stand. As I did, Mitchell held me back.

"What—"

His hand came around the back of my neck, and he pulled my head to his, kissing me passionately. It wasn't until Kira cleared her throat did he pull away.

"I'll be in shortly," he said.

The impact of that kiss left me speechless. It wasn't like any kiss we shared before. I didn't know what to make of it, so I simply nodded and made my way back inside.

ALONE WITH MY THOUGHTS, I SAT IN THE PENTHOUSE, NURSING A DRINK.

Then scene at the restaurant played in my head over and over. I was finally able to come to grips with how I felt watching Mitchell handle Keith's ass. Nobody, let alone a man, had ever stood up for me like that. The way he emphasized that I was his wife made me feel like he meant that shit.

I couldn't lie and say it didn't turn me on. I was too drunk to be turned on by it in New Orleans. But tonight, I was fully sober. Not saying that I expected him to allow me to be disrespected. It was clear the night I met him that he wouldn't allow that to happen. I could honestly say I felt protected with him in that moment. It was a foreign feeling.

By the time Mitchell came back in, I was well on my way to being drunk. Four shots and two drinks in, I felt myself loosening up. He went into the kitchen and made himself a drink before joining me on the couch and pulling my feet into his lap. For the longest time, he just stared at me, massaging my feet. It was feeling so good that I tossed my head back and closed my eyes, letting out a low moan.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me Lavish.”

“What do I have to lie about?”

“You tell me.”

I sighed. “What your sister said... about us maybe falling in love... you ever factored that into this?”

He scratched the back of his head. “Honestly, I didn’t think about that.”

“Did you ever want to get married? Like ever?”

“I don’t know. I mean, it’s not that I don’t. I’ve been joying life. I’ve never met a woman who made me want to settle down, so I figured it wasn’t for me.”

He looked at me and sank into the cushions, his hand gently rubbing my thigh.

“What about you?”

“What about me?” I chuckled. “I wanted a family, husband, couple of kids, to be somewhere with people I belong to. That’s what I wanted for my life, and first, I got Keith and now you. Doesn’t look like that is going to happen any time soon.”

We sat there in an awkward silence for a while before I pulled my feet from his hands.

“I’m going to bed,” I announced, standing.

He nodded. “You go ahead. I’m just gonna sit out there and smoke for a bit. Relax.”

“Okay.”

Without another word, I headed off to the bedroom. While part of me was dying to break this off now, another part was telling me to just patiently wait it out. I just wasn’t sure if I was prepared to go with the latter.

Mitchell

The time had come for me to head back home, and I wasn't sure if Lavish was leaving with me or not. Two days ago, she had moved all of her things into the guest bedroom of the penthouse, and that was where she had been sleeping. The only time I really saw her during that time was during meals. Even those were eaten in silence. No matter how hard I tried to communicate with her, she didn't budge.

It was as though a switch had flipped in her head. She had shut me out completely, and oddly enough, that just didn't sit right with me. We had a few hiccups on this visit, but the days in between were some of the best I had in a long time. That was largely in part to her, and she just took it away. I could admit, I didn't like that shit.

As I rolled the last of my suitcases to the door, I heard her coming down the hall. Looking up, I noticed she had her things packed as well.

"You're coming?" I asked.

"I might as well. I guess as your wife, I shouldn't leave you to handle inquisition by yourself. We're already in this now."

"I guess we should go then."

I opened the door and made my way out. I could tell she was waiting for me to say something more, but honestly, right now, I didn't have much

more to say. We needed to talk about a few things, but the conversation would be tabled for the time being. We had a few hours in between our arrival, and I would take that time to think about what I really wanted to say and anticipate her response.

AFTER AN ARGUMENT ABOUT DRIVING OR FLYING BACK, LAVISH AND I settled on taking my jet and having her car shipped to my house. It wasn't that I didn't want to drive all the way home, but tensions were thick, and honestly, I didn't want to make an already long drive unbearable. Not only that, her car had absolutely no leg room for me. I wasn't trying to be cramped up for that long.

When we stepped on the plane, her eyes marveled.

Inside of the jet was a home away from home and the main reason I refused to fly commercial. There were huge reclining seats, full-sized couches, a huge television with surround sound, a bar with a mini fridge, a full bathroom, and a decent sized bedroom. As much as I traveled, I liked to be comfortable.

"This is beautiful," Lavish said, running her hands down the smooth leather fabric of the chairs.

"Thank you," I said quietly as Thomas, my pilot, approached us.

"Mr. Keonig, good evening." He greeted us with a smile and shook my hand.

"Hey, Thomas. This is Lavish, my wife."

Thomas's eyes widened at the revelation.

"Well it is very nice to meet you, Mrs. Keonig." He reached for her hand, and when she gave it to him, he kissed it. "She is very beautiful, sir. Congratulations."

"Thank you," we both said.

"I'm Thomas, your pilot. We'll be taking off shortly. If there is anything you need, just radio the front, and I'm sure Kelsea, your stewardess, will be happy to assist you."

Just as he said that, Kelsea appeared. I silently cursed myself, forgetting that she was scheduled to fly back with us. Kelsea and I fooled around occasionally when I flew. I hadn't seen her since before my trip to New

Orleans. Though she had flown to Florida with us, I hadn't paid her any attention on my flight down here. All I was concerned with was getting to my wife.

She had a smile on her face until she looked over at Lavish. When she frowned, I could tell from the look on Lavish's face that she knew what was up. The glare she held as she looked at her spoke volumes. Kelsea wasn't getting any dick on this flight and Lavish would ensure it.

"Kelsea, this is Mrs. Keonig," Thomas said.

"Missus?" she repeated.

"Missus," Lavish said, showing off her ring finger.

The shock on her face was quickly recovered with a fake ass smile.

"Well, congratulations," she choked out. "I didn't know you were looking to get married, Mitch... Mr. Keonig." She glared at me as Thomas headed back up front.

"Do you need something, Kelsea?" I asked, clearly annoyed with her.

"Actually—"

"Can you leave my wife and I alone, please? If we need anything, we'll call you."

She frowned and huffed away angrily.

"I'm sorry," I said, turning to Lavish.

"Is she one of the many?" she asked.

"She's an occasional."

"Hmmm."

"If it bothers you, I can make sure she isn't scheduled if we ever fly out again."

"Why would it bother me?" she asked with a hint of sarcasm.

"*Missus.*" I mocked her, holding up my ring finger.

"Well she acted like she didn't hear that shit the first time." She crossed her arms.

"Look at you being jealous."

"I am not jealous. But what I won't be is disrespected again, fake marriage or not."

We settled into our seats and prepared for take-off.

The flight was seemingly longer with the silence between us. Eventually, Lavish disappeared into the cabin. When I noticed she wasn't coming back, I went to check on her, only to find her sleeping peacefully.

For a moment, I stared at her. Kira's words had been on repeat in my mind as well.

What if I fell for her? What if I fell in love with her and this wasn't just for show anymore? The time that I spent with her was quickly becoming something I looked forward to. As weird as it was, being away from her those two weeks bothered me. I felt like I left part of me in New Orleans with her when I left to go home. Coming to Florida to see her had me feeling whole and shit.

She had qualities that reminded me so much of my mother and father, two of the people I loved most in the world. She wasn't afraid to call me out on my shit, and if I was being honest, a nigga needed that at times. Even with no mother figure, she was nurturing when I needed her, and I felt like I could be vulnerable around her.

She was a strong woman, yet she was fragile in some aspects. Watching her with her ex gave me a glimpse of just how he broke her down. Thinking about that shit pissed me off again.

"You deserve more than that nigga could ever give you," I whispered. "Hell, you deserve more than I could ever give you."

Shaking my head, I turned to walk away.

"You've given me a chance to start over," she said quietly. "I don't need anything else from you. Maybe we should just play our roles and leave it at that. We both know how this will end."

I stared at her until there was a knock at the bedroom door.

"Come in," I said, my eyes still on her.

It was Kelsea.

"We are about to land, so come take your seats," she said as she stared at Lavish.

"Do you need something else?" Lavish snapped.

"No."

"Then get the fuck out. And if you keep staring at me like you have a fucking problem, I'm gonna solve that shit for you."

Kelsea quickly closed the door. Lavish got up from the bed and tried to ease past me, but I gently took her arm.

"Lavish."

"Let's not do this right now," she said, her hand lingering on the doorknob. "There's no point."

She left the room and I followed her. When I sat down next to her, she turned away from me. A tear slipped from her eyes involuntarily, and she quickly wiped it away. Maybe I had made a mistake. Maybe this was all a huge mistake.

LAVISH HAD BEEN QUIET FROM THE TIME THE PLANE LANDED, TO US loading my truck, to us pulling up at my parents' house. Everyone was already there. I could see the nervousness in her eyes as we got out. She looked up at the house and swallowed hard.

"You ready?" I asked.

"I might as well be," she mumbled.

I reached for her hand, and she surprisingly took it, allowing me to lead her to the front porch. As I expected, the door was unlocked, so we headed inside, finding everyone in the family room, except my father who was probably in the room sleeping.

"Come on in here, 'cause you have a lot of explaining to do, Mitchell," my oldest sister Valarie said.

I walked further into the room, pulling Lavish behind me. I offered my mother, Valarie, Kira, and my sister in-law a hug. After dapping my brother and brother in-law, I moved to stand behind Lavish, resting my hands on her shoulders. She was trembling. I gave her a light squeeze, causing her to inhale sharply.

"Aren't you going to introduce us?" my mother asked, standing and coming over to where we were.

"Of course. Lavish, this is my mother, Margret, my sister, Valarie, and you already met Kira."

Kira smiled brightly, and I could see her itching to hug her newfound sister-in-law.

"This is my brother, Elvin, my sister in-law, Lena, and my brothers-in-law, Jacob and Stephen."

"Hi," Lavish said nervously with a light smile. They all returned the smile and spoke to her.

"Everyone, this is Lavish... my wife."

"So the blogs are true?" Valarie asked, crossing her arms.

“Do you see that rock on her finger?” Kira asked. They all looked down at Lavish’s wedding ring.

“Oh my!” my mother said. “Mitchell, what are you up to?”

“Huh?” I said, pretending to not know what she was talking about.

“Don’t you ‘huh’ me, Mitchell Xavier Keonig!” She slapped my arm. “What have you dragged this girl into?”

“Nothing, Mama.”

“Don’t you lie to me,” she said.

She grabbed me by my ear and pulled me through the living room and into the kitchen. I could hear my siblings snickering behind us. I saw Kira immediately make a beeline for Lavish, and I knew she would be okay.

“Ouch, Ma,” I said when she finally let go.

“Explain how you left here a single man, well, as single as *you* could be, considering all the women you juggle... and come back with a whole ass wife? Not to mention, we had to find out through the blogs, Mitchell. You are out here assaulting people in public?”

“I can explain that.”

“Explain the marriage, son.”

“I fell in love, Ma,” I joked.

“Mitchell,” she said, holding her hand up. “Now is not the time for your jokes. Why are you standing here, married?” She lifted my hand to look at my wedding ring. “How long?”

“A little couple of weeks.”

“A couple of weeks!” she exclaimed, slapping my arm again. “Is this about your father threatening to cut you out of his will? Is that why you did this?”

“Partially...”

“Partially?” she scoffed, shaking her head. “How could you be selfish enough to marry that girl for money and deceive your father?”

“Ma, if you got to know her, I know you would like her,” I said, turning serious. “I know it’s not a good look—”

“Oh, you’re damn right this isn’t a good look.” She frowned. “You don’t even know her. She doesn’t know you.”

“We’ve been getting to know each other. I like her. I care about her.”

“But you don’t love her. Marriage is not a game, Mitchell. It takes practice and years and years of hard work and dedication. Even then, you

don't always get it right. It's not something that should be bought, and I know money was involved, so spare me that lie."

"It's not so much about the money."

She shook her head. "Ha! I know you, Mitchell. You have no desire to be married, and you have just put that woman in a position to dog her out. If you couldn't offer her love, that wasn't the move, Mitchell."

"Why do y'all think I'm incapable of love? I could fall in love with her. I'm just choosing not to."

"The fact that you think you have a choice is laughable."

"Even if it ain't love, I can offer her friendship. Ma... her spirit called out to me. I don't know why her of all people. It just did. I feel... I feel things for her."

"You want me to believe that? In a couple of weeks, you want me to believe you genuinely care about her?"

I placed her hand over my heart. "You've always known my heart, Ma. This isn't just about me. Pops is dying. Sometimes I feel like I failed him. I wanted to give him at least one thing he's asked of me all these years."

"Your father is very proud of you... all of you. When he expressed wanting you to get married, he never said get married to a stranger."

"My spirit feels like it knows her, Mama."

She looked at me skeptically. "Have you slept with her, Mitchell?"

"Well..."

"Mitchell!"

"Technically, she was my wife at that point."

"You are unbelievable, do you know that?" She laughed, but I knew she found nothing funny. She looked at me. "You better be good to her, Mitchell. For however long you carry on this charade, you better be good to that girl."

"I will, Ma," I said truthfully. I playfully jabbed her arm. "Ain't she beautiful?"

"She's very beautiful," she said, slapping my hands away. "You know I called Benjamin about this."

Benjamin was a long-time friend of my father. He was this super smart, super diligent detective that could find out anything about anybody.

"I'm sure you have, Ma."

"Her upbringing saddens me. No mother or father..."

“Come on, Ma. Don’t go in there bringing that up. And don’t get emotional.”

“I won’t, I won’t. You know how I am, Mitchell. You brought me a woman I’m going to get attached to.”

“Well, hopefully she will get attached to you too.”

Lavish

I felt like I was being thrown to the wolves.

When Mitchell's mother dragged him from the living room, everyone stared at me like the stranger I was. I nervously ran my fingers up my arm.

"Maybe I should wait outside?" I offered.

"Nonsense!" Kira said, jumping to her feet. That was when I noticed the slight baby bump on her. She walked over and looped her arm through mine. "You are family now, and we are going to welcome you with open arms... aren't we?"

She looked at everyone else as they looked on.

"You really wanna deal with Mitchell?" Valarie asked with a light smile.

"He's not... terrible," I said.

"He's annoying as shit. You have the patience of a saint for even agreeing to marry him."

"I had something alright," I mumbled, scratching my head.

Just then, a little girl came running into the room and jumped into Kira's arms. She was absolutely precious and was the perfect blend of her mother and father.

"Jacey, I want you to meet someone. This is Uncle Mitchell's wife. She's your new auntie."

“Hi!” Jacey smiled brightly.

“Hey, beautiful,” I said, returning her smile.

The rest of the kids piled into the room and were introduced to me. They were all so well mannered, and it was refreshing. By that time, Mitchell and his mother had migrated back into the living room. She came and sat next to me, pulling my hands into hers.

“I apologize for leaving abruptly,” she said sincerely. “This was just a lot to take in.”

“I understand. It’s a lot for me too. A few weeks ago, I never imagined being here. Things happened so fast. I apologize that you all are just finding out about this, especially in the manner of which you found out.”

“So the man in Florida?”

“That was my ex-husband. I got married young. It was stupid, and he was someone I should have never been with. When we saw him at the restaurant, he was very condescending and disrespectful. I asked him to leave us alone, and he started acting belligerent. Mitchell was only trying to protect me. Please don’t hold that against him.”

She sighed and looked at him. “That’s what happened?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, I can’t fault a man for protecting his wife. I hope if the tables were turned, you’d do this same.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I answered honestly. “Mitchell has been good to me the last couple of weeks. Truthfully, he’s treated me like no one has in my life, and that says a lot. We’re still getting to know each other, but he’s really trying. I know I’m not always the easiest person, but he’s patient with me. And he’s kind and generous.”

I wasn’t just saying that for her benefit. Mitchell really had tried the last couple of weeks. I couldn’t take the credit from him there.

“This nigga?” Valarie asked, pointing at Mitchell. “My brother?”

“See how you trying to play me?” He laughed.

“I’m just saying. If she can make you think about someone other than yourself, she might just be the one.”

“I’m kinda with Val on this one,” Elvin said.

“Don’t do my brother like that!” Kira defended.

“We all know Mitchell is your favorite, Kira.” Valarie rolled her eyes.

Their back-and-forth bantering was amusing. I could tell that even through their differences, they really loved each other.

“Children, children!” Mrs. Keonig said, clapping her hands. “I swear you sound like a bunch of ten-year-olds verses people in their twenties and thirties.”

She turned to me. “You still have to meet my husband, but welcome to the family, sweetheart.”

She pulled me into a hug, and my entire body froze. The amount of love radiating through this woman was powerful. Her spirit was so nurturing and comforting. I didn’t know what came over me. When she tried to pull away, I held on tighter, feeling the tears slipping from my eyes. I could feel all eyes on me, but nobody said anything to make the awkward moment more awkward.

When I was finally able to release her, I apologized.

“I’m sorry,” I said, wiping my face. “I’ve just never—”

“You don’t have to explain,” she said, cupping my face. She looked at me knowingly. “I understand. You’re here now. Whenever you need that, you come to me, okay?”

She knew. I didn’t know how she knew, but she did. She wiped the tears from my face with the pads of her thumbs. All I could do was nod.

“Now,” she said, standing and pulling me to my feet, “let’s go meet your father-in-law. He should be awake.”

XAVIER KEONIG WAS EVERY BIT AS HANDSOME AS HIS SON, EVEN IN HIS failing health. Just like his wife, he radiated love and a good spirit. His eyes were kind. He smiled at me when we entered the room.

“So this is her?” he asked Mitchell.

“This is my wife, Pop.” He pulled me close, gently rubbing my back in a soothing manner.

“Well you are just one of the most beautiful women I’ve had the pleasure of meeting.” He reached for my hand. “Come sit.”

I nervously stepped forward and took a seat next to him on the bed. He looked at his son.

“Sit your ass down,” he said.

Mitchell did as he was told and sat his ass in the chair next to his father’s bed. For the longest time, he looked at his son with a blank look on

his face. I didn't know what to expect from him.

"Now, I'm going to say this because I feel both of you need to hear it. This is nothing personal against you, young lady. This is about my son."

I nodded and kept quiet.

"I'm disappointed in you, Mitchell," he said. "You thought you could just marry some random woman and that would idle my threats to cut you out of my will if you didn't get your shit together?"

"Pop—"

"I'm not finished talking," he said. Mitchell remained quiet. "Your whole life, you have wanted to be spoiled. As hard as I tried to get you to see that there was more to life than money and chasing ass, you haven't learned a thing, have you? You are twenty-nine years old. You have a successful career that you don't even want. You are selfish, materialistic, and you think you can buy your happiness. When are you going to grow up? When are you going to see that you aren't owed a damn thing, especially money that your mother and I worked our asses off to make?"

Mitchell just sat there looking down at his feet as he was chastised. What could he possibly say in return?

"Now you've gone and married a woman you don't even care for and drug her into your mess."

"I do care about her. I can admit that when the idea first popped in my head, I didn't have the best intentions. But Lavish is just... she's different." He looked at me.

"How?" his father inquired.

"She makes me think about someone other than myself. When I saw her that night, her spirit called out to me. She has made me see things you have been trying to beat into my brains over the years."

That caused him to raise an eyebrow.

"So you care for her?"

"I do."

"And you want me to believe that this marriage isn't just about money?"

"Honestly, I can't convince you, not with my track record. But I'm committed her."

"I wanted you to marry for love. I wanted you to share your life with someone you couldn't imagine living without. Not only that, you could be keeping this girl from real love." He pointed at me. "Look at her. What if

she falls for you, and you aren't able to love her the way she needs to be loved? You're okay with breaking her heart?"

"No."

"Are you okay with having your heart broken, Lavish?"

"No, sir," I answered.

"Do you care for my son?"

I looked at Mitchell with tears in my eyes. "Yes," I answered truthfully. Mr. Keonig looked from me to Mitchell.

"I'm not sold on this marriage. But what is done is done. The truth will come out."

He reached for my hand, and I hesitantly gave it to him.

"I sense you have a good spirit wrapped up in a lot of pain," he said, gently rubbing my hand with the pad of his thumb. "Maybe one day soon, you and I can have a talk... just the two of us."

I nodded, fighting back the tears threatening to spill.

"Come here," he said.

"I don't want to hurt you," I said, shaking my head.

"Come here," he repeated.

He opened his arms, and I went into them, ensuring not to put too much of my weight on him. His embrace was warm and inviting, causing me to release a sigh of relief. He chuckled lowly as he pulled away and kissed my forehead.

"I think I'm going to like you." He smiled.

I couldn't help but to grin right along with him.

"At least for the time being, you are my daughter, and I will treat you as such."

That surprised me. I looked at Mitchell, and he smiled faintly. He told me his family would accept me because they loved him. I didn't believe him. Even now, I was still afraid. I knew they would have questions. They would want answers. I just didn't know how truthful Mitchell and I could be.

Mitchell

Watching Lavish with my family was a feeling I couldn't explain. Proud? Was I the proud husband? She helped my mother in the kitchen with dinner, and it was a beautiful interaction to watch. Mom taught her how to make one of my favorite desserts, and I could see the excitement in her eyes. She was gentle and loving with her, and I knew Lavish needed that.

My sisters and sister-in-law pulled her aside for some girl talk, and the way they were laughing and joking seemed like they had known each other for years. As I stood on the back patio watching them through the window while I smoked, I found myself thinking that she fit in so well with everyone... almost like this was where she was supposed to be.

Once we left my parents', we headed to my house. I was nervous as hell to have her in my space. The energy she displayed before we got on the plane had disappeared. She allowed me to love on her in front of my people. I figured it was just part of the act, but I wouldn't miss an opportunity to be next to her. Kira even commented on how natural we looked together.

When I pulled up to the gated community, her eyes widened, and she sat up in her seat to look around as we drove through the neighborhood. As I pulled into my driveway, she gasped.

“This is your house?”

“Yep.”

“This is too big for just you.”

“Six bedrooms, four and a half baths.”

“What were you thinking buying something so big?”

“Honestly... the backyard sold me.” I chuckled. “Let’s get everything inside, and I’ll show you around.”

We got out of the car and grabbed our suitcases and made our way to the front door. When I unlocked it and we stepped inside, she remained in the doorframe, looking around.

“Come on. This is your home now too.”

“This is gorgeous.”

“Thank you.” I reached for her hand, and she reluctantly gave it to me, closing the door behind her.

I gave her a grand tour, which ended in her picking which room she wanted to stay in. I didn’t even offer her to stay in my room, out of respect. She ended up picking the room at the farthest end of the house. It had a relaxing view of the lake that resided behind the property, with a spacious balcony.

“Who decorated?” she asked as we ascended the stairs. “Cause I know it wasn’t you.”

“So you really wanna play me like that?” I laughed. “That’s how you do me? Just no faith in my interior decorating skills?”

“Not to this extent.”

I rolled my eyes. “Kira actually hooked me up. She does interior design. She designs custom pieces too.”

“Wow, she is talented.”

“She is. Art has always been her thing.”

“What do your other siblings do?”

“Well, since my dad stepped down, Elvin took over his business. He’s been training for that his entire life, so if there was any one of us to keep my father’s dream alive, it would be him. The nigga is like a smooth ass super nerd. I used to tease him about his dirty talk consisting of scientific theories and mathematic equations.”

“No you didn’t.” She giggled.

“I did. It didn’t help that they named him Elvin. He was destined to be a big ass nerd. But for real, I teased him, but I’ll brag about his smarts to

anyone. My brother is a fucking genius. Now Val...Val does her own thing. She runs a successful mommy video blog. It's crazy how much money she makes just being with her kids. She does product reviews for toys and all kinds of shit people buy for their kids. You should see all the free shit companies send her."

"Sounds like all of you have pretty much have your lives together."

"What about you?" I asked, sitting next to her. "Is there anything that you've always wanted to do?"

"I had a lot of dreams growing up. I wanted to be a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher. But those dreams were short lived. Once I was out on my own, all I wanted to do was survive."

"What about now? You have the freedom to do whatever you want. What do you want to do?"

"I don't know. I really love the work your parents are doing in the black community. It's so beautiful. Maybe I could do something like that... give back to other kids in foster care. Maybe teach a life skills class or something... something to help them deal with being in the system and services to help them survive even before they age out.

"So many of these kids get kicked out of the system and have no life skills. They don't know the first thing about living on their own. They can't cook, they can't clean, do laundry. They don't have jobs, they don't know how to budget when they do get jobs, and they end up on the street, selling their bodies or drugs, in jail, or in the morgue as somebody's Jane or John Doe. The system fails them repeatedly, and it's not right."

"You sound like my father," I said, looking down. "He always said that he loved the business because it allowed him to take care of us. But he felt his true calling was to help those less fortunate. He said it was a blessing in itself to be able to bless someone else. I can't tell you how many times he has begged me to go on one of his 'missions' as he likes to call them. I always thought it was his way of trying to humble me, but I get it now. If you want to help those kids, I think you should go for it. Do something that is going to make you happy and gives you satisfaction. I'd support that."

"You would?"

"What kind of husband would I be if I didn't support my..."

"Fake wife?" she finished.

"Fake or not... I want you to feel like you at least have a friend in me, Lavish, someone you can count on when you can't count on anybody else."

We stared at each other for a moment before I stood.

“Do you want to see the backyard?” I asked.

“Sure. Let me see what compelled you to buy this big ass house.”

I grinned and grabbed her hand, leading her toward the back of the house. When we reached the double doors leading outside, I opened them dramatically.

“Really? All of that?” She giggled.

“Baby, you don’t just walk out here... you make a grand entrance.”

We stepped onto the cobblestone pathway and took in the beauty that was in front of us. My backyard was the shit. A huge inground pool with a pool house just off to the side, a jacuzzi, a covered outdoor entertainment area equipped with a kitchen area, a huge television surround sound, and huge comfortable couches and chairs—the ultimate party spot.

“What’s that?” she asked, pointing to the large shed in the far-left corner.

“Let me show you,” I said, pulling her behind me.

I unlocked the door and ushered her inside. It was a bar. Yes, I had a fucking bar in my backyard. She looked around at the setup—the wall-to-wall liquor that lined the shelves, the barstools, the jukebox, the classic bar wall décor... it was authentic.

“This was the selling point for you, wasn’t it?” She giggled.

“Damn right. How many niggas can say they have a full-service bar in their backyard? The previous owner had this shit built. He wanted to disassemble it and take it with him, but I paid him a pretty penny extra to let me have it.”

“The things money can buy,” she mumbled.

I studied her face for a moment. I could feel her slipping back into this shell.

“Lavish,” I said, stepping closer to where she stood. My hand found its way to her face as I caressed her cheek. “Please don’t pull away from me.”

“Don’t start, Mitchell.”

“I meant what I told my father. I care about you.”

I pressed my lips against hers, and surprisingly, she didn’t pull away. I took it a step further and pulled her into my arms, deepening the kiss by slipping her some tongue. The moment my hands migrated to her ass, she gently pushed me away.

“You are making it difficult to play this role,” she said, looking down.

“It doesn’t have to be difficult. What’s the problem with—”

“The problem is I can’t pretend to be your wife and have moments like this with you. I can’t allow myself to keep being vulnerable with you, and I can’t keep fucking you. It has to stop. All of it. We can play our roles in front of your family and the public, but behind these doors, there is no us. There is you and there is me.”

I took a step back and looked at her. I wasn’t sure playing my role would be enough for me. I was feeling too much already to just play my role. The shit was crazy. The fact that I was so bothered by the suggestion let me know that I was deeper in this shit than I expected to be and so soon.

I couldn’t do shit to convince her that I cared about her—that I was developing real feelings for her. Maybe three weeks wasn’t a long time, definitely not long enough to catch feelings, but in those three weeks, I got to know this woman better than some people who had been together for years.

The two days we spent together before I flew home, we developed an emotional connection. The two weeks we were apart, every free moment I had when I wasn’t with my father, I spent talking to her, whether through text, by phone, or FaceTime. I felt like a teenager again playing twenty-one questions and shit, but I loved it.

The week I spent with her in Florida, I really felt a shift between us. She allowed me to be openly affectionate with her, to indulge in almost every part of her. Now she wanted to take that away from me. I found myself frowning hard.

“Maybe you’re right.” I shoved my hands into my pockets. “Maybe you’re wrong. I don’t know. I meant what I said. I care about you. But I can’t make you see that. I’ll play my role. In front of everyone, I can be everything you need me to be. But here... here, I’ll leave you alone. I won’t touch you. I won’t joke around with you. I won’t try to be friendly. I’ll just leave you be.”

Without another word, I left her in the bar and headed back inside.

Lavish

*R*ejecting Mitchell was harder than I expected it to be. I couldn't deny that I cared for him, but our future was highly uncertain. The more time I spent with him and his family, the sadder that reality became. A month had passed since I moved in with him. His father and I had sat down to have that talk, and if I did nothing else, I bared my soul to that man. In the end, he simply thanked me for sharing and reassured me that I was among family now.

I was adjusting to Mitchell's lifestyle, but I couldn't say that I liked it. With his father being who he was and Mitchell seemingly staying in the spotlight, I found myself being photographed without permission when I went out. Who was this mystery woman that took one of the most eligible bachelors off the market?

The day after I moved in, I was introduced to the family publicist, Veronica Townsend. She came to do damage control over the situation with Keith in Florida. She had Mitchell and I go on record to tell our side of the story, and after that, it was like fuck my privacy. The whole ordeal was becoming overwhelming, so much so that I stayed in the house unless I absolutely had to go out or I was out with Mitchell or Kira.

She and I had gotten pretty close over the last couple of weeks, and it was refreshing to have someone to talk to. She seemed like a genuine

person, and she was understanding of my position on Mitchell's and my relationship. While she was encouraging us to try and make it work, she never overstepped her boundaries.

Sitting up in my bed, I stretched slightly before going to brush my teeth and take a shower. It was Friday, and I didn't have plans except to lounge around the house. Maybe make use of the amenities. The jacuzzi was calling my name, and I felt like answering. After my shower, I stepped into my walk-in closet in search of a bathing suit. I settled on this pink one piece that had the sides and back cut out.

Grabbing a towel from the bathroom, I tossed it over my shoulder, plugged my headphones into my ear, and made my way downstairs toward the pool area. I was just strolling along when I passed by the dining room to see Mitchell and three other men sitting there with papers all over the table.

It didn't hit me until I realized they were staring because I was half naked.

"Shit!" I quickly scrambled to cover myself with the towel as Mitchell stood to come over to me.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you were home," I said.

"Yeah, I decided to work from home today," he said, looking down at me. "I'm sorry, y'all. I forgot to tell my wife we would be here."

"Well, we certainly see why you kept this one locked away." One of the men laughed.

"What the fuck did you just say?" Mitchell snapped, spinning around.

"I was just..." the guy stammered.

"You just what? Disrespected my wife that's what you did."

"It was a joke—"

"Does she look like she's laughing? Am I laughing?" His voice was raising, and I could see his jaw clenching.

"Mitchell, it's okay," I said quietly, grabbing his arm.

"No, it's not. As a matter of fact, all of you can go. We will reconvene in the office on Monday."

He grabbed my hand and stood in front of me until the men were all out the front door.

"You didn't have to do that," I said.

He turned to me. "Yeah I did. Because that's the type of nigga that would take it too far, and I'd have to pop him dead in his shit."

He stepped back and looked me over. “You look good,” he said, running this tongue over his thick bottom lip.

“Thank you.”

“Pool?”

“Jacuzzi.”

I suddenly felt more exposed than when this colleagues were looking at me. We hadn’t had sex since before we left Florida, and I couldn’t lie and say that I didn’t miss his touch. I missed the fuck out of it. Even pleasing myself to thoughts of him didn’t satisfy my craving for him. It didn’t make it any easier that he liked to walk around the house in his boxers with no shirt on, showing off all his glory.

Even now, he was fully dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, but he still looked fine as shit. My walls were craving him. It was a sin and a shame how I was looking at him lustfully right now. What would happen if I threw caution to the wind and indulged in him just this once?

“You could join me,” I found myself saying.

He raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

I reached for his hand and pulled him through the house to the backyard. Once we made it to the jacuzzi, I set my phone, ear buds, and towel on the deck beside it and climbed in after turning the jets on. I sat back and watched Mitchell undress down to his boxers before he joined me.

My hormones decided to make a move. I slid close to him, swallowing hard and inhaling the scent of his body wash. It had grown to be one of my favorite smells on him. Whenever he used it, his scent lingered for hours after he left a room. I found myself straddling his hips.

“Lavish—”

“Shhh! Relax.” I whispered against his mouth as I grinded on him. My lips met his, and a soft moan left my throat. I grabbed his hands and placed them on my ass. I could tell he wanted to do more, but his willpower was impressive. He pulled his hands away and crossed his arms.

“Why did you invite me in here?” he asked.

“A change of routine.”

“You mean a change from you ignoring me?”

“I’m not ignoring you, Mitchell.”

“Then what the hell do you call it? Because the moment we are alone, you give me the cold shoulder. You will literally sit in this house and barely speak to me. You leave the room when I walk in. You know how that makes

me feel? As a man, as your husband, that my wife doesn't want to be around me?"

"Mitchell, we know that this is—"

"Well it's not like that anymore, Lavish!" His voice rose a couple of octaves, causing me to jump. "You're so damn stubborn you can't even see what's right in front of you. If I knew it was going to be like this, I would have just left your ass in Florida."

I frowned. "I'm sorry your plan to finesse your father came with hitches."

"That is not fair. Why would you even go there?"

"You want me to take it lower?" I asked, standing. "I despise being here. I hate the tabloids and the paparazzi. I hate everybody in my fucking business because my 'husband' loves the spotlight. I hate having to pretend to be someone I'm not! All the money in the world could never buy my happiness. This house is not my home..."

"Then where is home, Lavish? Please tell me, because the last time I checked—"

"Don't you fucking dare!" I screamed at him. "Don't you fucking fix your lips to say that shit to me!"

I moved to climb out of the jacuzzi, and he grabbed my arm a little too firmly. My immediate instinct was to fight. Spinning around, I slapped the shit out of him. He instantly let me go, a deep, angry frown forming on his face. He towered over me, and for a moment, I was afraid. I wrapped my arms around myself and closed my eyes tightly.

As I braced myself for what might happen, I was only met with the sound of sloshing water as he climbed out of the jacuzzi and grabbed his clothes. I watched as he silently walked back into the house without another word.

I DECIDED TO LEAVE THE HOUSE FOR A LITTLE WHILE TO EASE MY frustrations.

I found myself at Mr. and Mrs. Keonig's house. I loved spending time with these two. This past month, they had been amazing and treated me like

their own. While I loved our relationship, it also served as reminder that I didn't have that on my own.

At this point in life, I felt like I should have been able to let go of my past. But how did you let go of something that was such a huge part of you. I was my only tie to my identity. Beyond me, I didn't know where I came from. That was the biggest pill to swallow.

Pulling up in front of the Keonig's house, I shut off the car and got out, heading to the front door. I rang the doorbell and waited.

"Baby, I've told you, you don't have to ring the doorbell," Mrs. Keonig said as soon as she opened the door. "You have a key."

"I know. I just don't like entering without permission."

"The key is permission." She giggled, pulling me in for a hug. "How are you, baby?"

"I'm okay."

"No you aren't. Come on in and tell mama what's wrong."

She grabbed my hand and led me into the living room to her couch. We sat, and she motioned for me to come closer. When I did, she wrapped her arms around me and rested my head on her chest.

"Talk to me."

"Mitchell and I had a fight."

"That's it?"

"We both said some hurtful things." I could feel the tears pooling in my eyes. "I don't know what to do. Sometimes I feel like this was a mistake. I came out of a five-year abusive relationship and met a man that just... Mitchell makes me feel so much, and it's scary. I'm terrified of fully feeling what I do for him."

"Love is scary, sweetheart. Let's be honest. You two are still getting to know each other. And the way you got together was impulsive. Neither of you really thought this through."

"I know. To go from a man who acted like he hated me to one that just wants to be around me... He's so affectionate and loving and caring. Even when he gets it wrong, he tries his hardest to make things right. I know you all think he's selfish, but he's been nothing but selfless with me. He's given me more in two months than I've ever had in my life. It's not about his money. He's given me him, and I've foolishly pushed him away because I'm scared to fall completely for him."

“Aww, sweetheart,” Mrs. Keonig cooed, squeezing me. “Fear of the unknown is not foreign. I’ve seen my son with many women. I never thought he’d settle down, and then he brought you home. Whether it was planned or not, the way that I see him with you... how he cares for you, that’s something I’ve never seen. He’s falling for you, baby. You two could have a real shot at a loving marriage. You just have to admit that you want to be with him as much as he wants to be with you.”

I let her words sink in.

Could Mitchell and I truly be happy? Could we fall in love?

In two months’ time, he’d shown me everything I thought I had in the beginning with Keith. That was the terrifying thing. I was so sure with him, and I got way more than I bargained for. I suffered years of abuse from a man who actively pursued me until he had me. He tapped into my vulnerabilities and capitalized on them in the worst way.

Mitchell didn’t make me feel like that.

If anything, he spoke life into me. He was always telling me how beautiful I was. The way he loved on me in front of his family was the way he would love on me in private if I allowed it, and I knew that. His kisses made me weak. And when he touched me... God, my body felt like it was on fire with desire for him.

I wanted him. I wanted to be with him, and I was so tired of fighting myself for him. I decided that when I got back to his place I would gather myself and present my apology. If it was meant to be, we would work it out.

Mitchell

I lay in my bed, staring up at the ceiling, trying to figure out what the fuck I had been thinking concocting this whole situation. This shit wasn't anywhere near as easy as I thought it was going to be. I thought I was getting off easy by not being required to feel anything for her, but all I had was a muthafucking headache. I meant what I said when I told her and my father that her spirit called out to me that night in the club. Now I was thinking maybe it was more like a fucking warning.

Lavish had been with me for a month now. Since that first night, we had barely spoken a word to each other when we were alone. Sure, we put on a good show in front of my family, but the minute we stepped out of their presence, it was silence. It was killing me. No matter how much we had bonded in New Orleans and during my visit, none of it seemed to matter. We felt like strangers now more than ever.

My father was right, as usual. I had finally genuinely cared about someone, and this was how it was. We had connected through our own separate pain, and now it was going to shit. I couldn't stand being all loving with her in front of people and then not being able to have her when we were alone. It wasn't even the fucking that I missed the most. I missed talking to her... getting to know more about her. It was crazy because the chemistry we had when we were faking it was anything but fake.

I felt like I was walking on eggshells in my own house. I was irritated, I was mad as fuck, and I was horny. I needed some pussy. I had been going back and forth in my mind about what I was thinking about doing. Right now, I was still fuming from the fight Lavish and I had earlier, and I was on some fuck her type of shit.

Picking up my phone, I scrolled until I found the number I was looking for. *Chevy*. I hadn't hit her up in a while, and I knew she would be down to fuck. I hit the call button, and like I suspected, she answered on the first ring.

"Hello?"

"What's up, baby?" I said in my smooth voice.

"Mitchell Keonig." I could hear the smirk in her voice. "Long time no hear from you."

"I take it you missed me."

"I missed that dick."

"Why don't you let me slide through and tighten you up?"

"Say less."

"Bet."

I hung up and checked the time. It was about ten thirty at night. I got up and took a shower and then slipped into a pair of joggers, a tank top, socks, and some slides. I slipped a couple of condoms in my pocket, along with my phone and wallet, and headed out of my bedroom. To my surprise, when I opened the door, Lavish was standing there, preparing to knock.

We stared at each other as I waited for her to say something. When she didn't, I sighed.

"Did you need something?" I asked.

"I can see that you are going out, so I won't bother you."

"What is it?" I asked, visibly frustrated.

"Nothing."

"Fine."

She stood there for a second. "Where are you going?"

"Out." That was all I offered.

She looked me up and down and shook her head.

"Hmmm."

"Goodnight, Lavish."

I closed the bedroom door and brushed past her, heading for the stairs.

“So you’re about to go fuck somebody, I guess?” she called after me, causing me to stop midway down the stairs. “You don’t have to deny it.”

“What’s it to you? You ain’t fucking me. Or do you just wanna fuck me when you feel like it? Is that why you pulled that shit in the jacuzzi?”

“Seriously, Mitchell?” She rolled her eyes.

“Seriously, Lavish? I may be a lot of things, but a nigga has feelings too. You made it clear that you don’t want anything to do with me inside of this house. I’m just giving you what you want. So whatever I do and whoever I do it with should be of no concern of yours. You’re just my wife for show, remember?”

I could tell that stung a little. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

“Fuck you,” she said and stormed off to her bedroom. She slammed the door so hard that I wouldn’t be surprised if it came off the hinges. Part of me wanted to go to her, but this was what she wanted. She wanted to keep this strictly as a role play, so that’s what I would do... no matter how much didn’t want it to be just that.

I left the house and got in my truck. After finding some music to ease my mind, I backed out of the driveway and headed to Chevy’s. After a good twenty minutes, I pulled in her driveway. Chevy lived in a neighborhood similar to mine. Her father was a judge, and her mother just happened to be my lawyer.

That was how we met. She had invited me over for dinner one night to go over some paperwork for the new dealership I had opened a while back. When I laid eyes on that sexy, tall, brown-skinned beauty, I knew I had to dig up in her guts. We had practically eye fucked each other throughout that entire dinner.

When I got ready to leave, she did too. She sashayed her fine ass out of the house and stopped at my car.

“Follow me,” she said.

I didn’t ask questions because we both knew what time it was. My dick had been ready for action. I followed her to her house, and the minute we stepped inside, she was on her knees, sucking me off. We didn’t even make it to the bedroom. I fucked her right there in the entryway of her house, and we had been fucking ever since.

When I pulled up in her driveway, I could see her peeking out of her bedroom window. I got out and made my way up to the front door. My

phone chimed, and it was her letting me know that it was open. I went inside, locked the door behind me, and headed up to her bedroom. She was ready and waiting for me.

“Hey, daddy,” she purred as I stepped into the room. She was dressed in this sexy ass pink lace lingerie set. I could see her pierced nipples peeking through the fabric.

“Hey, Chevy.”

I took everything out of my pockets and placed it on the dresser. I kicked off my slides and pulled my shirt over my head. Then I took off my joggers and climbed in the bed with her.

“Why the long face?” she asked, straddling me.

“It’s nothing,” I said, gripping her hips.

“You sure it ain’t that new wife? I saw you got married.”

“That ain’t what it seems to be.”

“How so?”

“Listen, I don’t wanna talk about that shit. You want this dick or not?”

“No need to be hostile. I was just making conversation.”

She maneuvered my boxers down over my hips, and my dick sprang forward. She licked those juicy ass lips, and I could see how wet her mouth was.

“How about letting my dick make conversation with the back of your throat.”

She smirked then spit on my dick and proceeded to swallow my shit whole. Now, I wasn’t a small nigga by any means. My shit was long in inches and thick in girth. The fact that she could take it all and not even gag was impressive. She massaged my balls as she deep throat me.

“Shit...” I moaned. I remembered why I liked fucking with Chevy. That throat was a beast.

She went from sucking my dick to sucking my balls as she jacked me off. Then she took me back into her mouth as she double hand twisted my shit as she sucked me. That shit felt amazing... almost like her pussy was gripping my shit. It was like getting sucked and fucked at the same time.

“You gon’ take this shit?” I asked, feeling my nut rising.

In true Chevy fashion, she deep throat me once more and allowed my nut to coat the walls of her throat. She swallowed my load and popped my dick out of her mouth with a loud smacking noise, wiping the corners of her mouth.

“Damn I missed tasting you,” she said, climbing to her feet. “My pussy got wet as hell from that.”

“Nasty ass.” I slapped her ass as I stood to go grab a condom from the dresser. Chevy was the only bitch I knew that could bust a nut from sucking dick. She didn’t even need to touch herself to do it. That shit was a talent.

“I don’t hear you complaining.” She smirked as she climbed on the bed. “I bet your little wife doesn’t suck your dick like that.”

“Didn’t I say not to bring her up, Chevy? Damn.”

“You are being really sensitive right now, Mitch.”

“No, you are about to piss me off. I came over here to fuck, not to talk about my wife.”

“She must not be fucking you then if you had to call me.”

At this point, I was over this shit. I grabbed my boxers and put them back on then followed suit with the rest of my clothing.

“Where the fuck are you going?” she snapped.

“Someplace where I can get some pussy without all this fucking talking. You know I don’t discuss my personal life with you, Chevy. I come over here, we bust a few nuts together, and then I dip. You are being mad disrespectful right now, and I ain’t with that shit.”

“Fuck you, Mitchell!”

“That’s what you should have been doing instead of bringing up my wife. I told you that shit ain’t what it seems like. You should have left it the fuck alone.”

I shoved my shit back in my pockets, condoms and all, because I was never stupid enough to leave them shits with bitches for the next time. Nobody was about to poke holes in my shit and have a come-up baby. I snatched my keys from the dresser and marched out of her bedroom and down the stairs. I could hear her feet behind me.

“So you are really gonna just leave me looking like this?” she asked, standing at the bottom of the stairs with her hands on her hips. I turned around. As good as she looked in that shit, I wasn’t even turned on anymore.

“Bye, Chevy.”

“Fuck you, Mitchell!” she screamed at me. “Go back to your bitch then! She couldn’t even hold a candle to me on my worst fucking day. You are out of your fucking mind to choose that homely looking, broke ass bitch over me—”

In an instant, I was on her ass and in her face.

“Watch your fucking mouth,” I said firmly. I was nose to nose with her. I could practically smell my dick on her breath.

“Or what? You touch me and my father will have the fucking cops on your ass before you reach home. How would that look? I can see the headlines now. *Newly Married THOT Mitchell Keonig Arrested for Beating Up His Mistress.*” She smirked at me. “What would your wife have to say about that?”

She was trying me. She was really trying me. And I didn’t even understand why, because all we ever did was fuck. There were no intimate conversations. No cuddling and shit afterwards. We would literally fuck and go our separate ways. The way she was acting right now was blowing me. Chevy wasn’t an insecure woman, so the way she was taking jabs at Lavish was out of her character.

“This between us, is *done*,” I said. Her eyes widened. She wasn’t expecting that.

“You really care about her, don’t you?” she asked.

I didn’t say anything as she laughed in my face.

“You care about her, and she doesn’t give a fuck about you, does she?”

I felt my jaw clench. I knew I needed to get out of here before I fucked her ass up. Without another word, I walked out of that house, her laughter echoing in my ear. I was so fucking mad that I drove home in silence. When I got there, the house was pitch black dark. I walked inside and headed up to my room. My hand lingered on the doorknob as I looked toward Lavish’s room. I sighed heavily and slowly made my way there. From outside, I could hear her crying softly. I felt like shit. I wanted to go in and comfort her, but she wasn’t going to have that. I at least wanted to make sure that she was okay.

As I raised my hand to knock, she screamed at me.

“Get the fuck away from my door!”

I hesitated for a moment and then left. I wasn’t up for a fight tonight. I retreated to my room and took another shower to wash Chevy’s scent off of me. The last thing I wanted was to smell like that bitch. After my shower, I climbed in my bed.

It wasn’t even twelve yet. I wasn’t sleepy. I was just mentally tired. I reached into my nightstand and pulled out the jar of joints I had already pre

rolled. If I couldn't make our problems go away, I was going to at least smoke until I could forget that they existed.

This shit with Lavish was bugging the fuck out of me. I went and caught feelings for her. Hell, I might as well say I caught feelings from the moment I laid eyes on her. I hadn't been able to shake her from my system, and at this point, I didn't want to. I wanted to be with her, and it was killing me that I couldn't. It wasn't even so much about the sex. It was just her as a whole that I missed when we were alone.

Lavish

I felt triggered. I was emotional, and I was fucking pissed. Seeing Mitchell dressed to go fuck one of his bitches had me ready to swing on his ass. I told myself that I didn't have a right to be upset. He was right. I wasn't fucking him. But I was his wife... sort of. It may have been for show, but deep down, what I was feeling for Mitchell was anything but a façade. I hated myself for going through with this shit. The more we put on for his family, the realer it became for me. So when we were alone, I couldn't bring myself to be around him.

I had stuck my foot in my mouth by telling him that we should just stick to playing our roles and not take it beyond that. But every time we were affectionate in front of people, or he kissed me, held my hand, or looked at me with those beautiful brown eyes of his, I felt something spark between us. There was only so long you could go on pretending to be something until you really felt that shit.

I was terrified of feeling exactly what I was feeling. I had just gotten out of one marriage and jumped right into another one for the sake of security. I told myself that I wouldn't go into this feeling a muthafucking thing, but our time spent together in New Orleans and Florida... the connection we made... it wasn't something I could pretend didn't happen.

When I went to his room that night and saw him coming out in typical, “I’m about to go smash” attire, I was so angry with him. Here I was about to apologize and pour my heart out, and he was out here fucking other bitches. I felt so disrespected. I wanted nothing more than to go upside his fucking head. But I gathered myself and let him walk out that door while I lay in my bed and cried the entire time he was gone.

That was a week ago.

I hadn’t spoken to him. I hadn’t seen him. I left my room when he left for work, and by the time he came home, I was quietly locked behind doors. He had been texting and calling me, and both went unanswered. I didn’t have anything to say to him right now. I was hurt, and even if I didn’t have the right to be, the fact remained that I was.

I sighed heavily and looked over at my phone. It was around twelve. I had a message from Kira, inviting me to go eat lunch with her. We had been spending time together outside of family gatherings, and I found that I really liked her. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust Valarie; I just felt closer to Kira for some reason.

I quickly responded that I would, and she told me she would be over at two. After responding to her, I set the phone down and got up to go shower. I needed to ask her to swing me by a beauty supply store so that I could get what I needed to do my hair. I had taken my braids out last night. It gave me something else to focus on other than crying over Mitchell’s ass.

I thoroughly washed and conditioned my hair in preparation for my wash and go. After I got out the shower, I applied the oils and gel to my hair, and my curls sprang back to life. I decided to diffuse it a little to give it the big curly look I used to love. Once my hair was done, I applied very little make up, just some mascara, eye shadow, and lip oil. I was satisfied with my look, so I went to my closet and searched for something to wear.

I had done a little shopping since I’d been here. It felt good to be able to go in the store and buy the shit I really wanted without worrying about if I would be chastised for wearing it. I had spent about five thousand dollars on clothes, jewelry, and accessories for myself. I settled on the beautiful royal blue, knee-length halter top dress with the back out. That bitch hugged my curves in all the right places. I paired it with a pair of nude pumps with the matching purse and settled on a white gold necklace and bracelet set that complemented my ring perfectly.

As I looked myself over in the mirror, I had never felt more beautiful or confident. I sprayed on my favorite perfume right as Kira texted me that she was outside. After snapping a picture of myself, I headed out of my room and downstairs.

When I got to the bottom of the stairs, Mitchell was coming out of the kitchen. I smelled him before I saw him. When he saw me, he stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes slowly trailed over me from head to toe several times. He bit his lip. Our eyes connected, and I took the time to look him over too. He was dressed in a charcoal-colored vest with matching pants, and a crisp powder blue button-up underneath. On his feet were a pair of black loafers. His wrist glistened with that expensive ass time piece, and the diamonds in his wedding band shined as well.

This muthafucka was too damn fine, and my mouth damn near watered. I quickly gathered myself and made my way to the door.

“Lavish?” He took a step toward me.

“What?”

“You look... amazing,” he said softly. “I love your hair.” He came over and gently touched my hair. “And this dress.”

He circled me slowly. I closed my eyes and inhaled his scent. He ran his fingers through my hair, and I damn near moaned. It was the first time in years that a man hand complimented my natural tresses. I wanted to smile, but I was still upset with him.

“Hmmm.”

“Don’t start that shit,” he said frowning. I rolled my eyes and opened the door.

“Where are you going?”

I turned and looked him right in the eye and answered with the same line he had given me the other night.

“Out.”

I slammed the door behind me and strutted out to Kira’s car with a little extra umph in my step. She flung her door open and hopped out of the car.

“Oh my *God!*” she squealed, doing a little dance. She came and twirled me around then hugged me.

“You are so fucking gorgeous!” she complimented, holding me away from her. “And this hair! Don’t you ever cover up this beautiful hair again, Lavish! I mean that shit. You look good enough to put you on a plate and sop you up with a biscuit, girl!”

I had to laugh. I could tell she had been with her husband for a long time. She had started picking up on his vernacular and country ass habits.

“Thank you, Kira,” I said as we got in the car and drove off. “You sure it’s not too much?”

“Girl, with your body and looks, you could do the most, and it still wouldn’t be too much. How did Mitchie let you leave the house in one piece!”

“I walked right past his ass and out the front door,” I said truthfully.

“I know that’s right. He’s definitely gonna try you when you get home,” she said as her phone chimed. We had just made it to the front gate. She looked down to check her messages and let out a loud laugh.

“What?” I asked, curiously.

“My brother said, and I quote ‘*Don’t be responsible for getting my wife fucked up out here looking that damn good.*’”

I smiled lightly. At least I had gotten his attention. It wasn’t the type of energy that Keith had when he said some shit like that to me. He meant that. Mitchell said it in a way that basically said I looked fine as a muthafucka, a fact he would have said just like that had we not been beefing. I was prepared to argue with him when I got home because he was going to make it his mission to be in my face tonight. But after that night... knowing what he did... he could kiss my whole ass right now.

Kira and I pulled up to this beautiful restaurant in the city call Bella’s. The wait to get in was going to be ridiculous because the line was outside of the building. That was how you knew the food was good.

“You don’t mind waiting in this line?” I asked Kira as we got out of the car.

“Oh girl, please. I don’t wait in line for food, especially not now,” she said, rubbing her stomach. “Come on.”

I followed her up to the hostess stand.

“Kira!” the feminine gentleman exclaimed. They exchanged hugs and air kisses. “How are you my lovely?”

“I am wonderful, Andreas. Lavish, this is Andreas. Andreas this is my sister-in-law, Lavish.”

“So you are Mitchell’s mystery woman!” He smiled, looking me over. “He did good, girl! You are beautiful, honey! And that hair! You *must* let me get my fingers in those tresses of yours!”

“Andreas also does my hair. He’s a magician, girl. If you ever want to feel like a bad bitch, this is your guy. He does it all—hair, nails, makeup, and lashes.”

“And I am fully licensed and certified.” He handed me a business card, and I tucked it away in my purse.

“Thank you. Because I’ve been doing my hair for so long, it would be nice to get a break.”

“Just hit my line when you are ready, boo. Your table is ready. Follow me.”

We followed him, as I heard people groaning and complaining about us being seated ahead of them. I guess that was the benefit of having money and knowing people. Everyone was at your disposal.

“You must come here often,” I said after the waitress left with our drink order.

“Something like that. I did the interior design for the restaurant. This table is specifically reserved for me, so it’s ready whenever I show up.”

“Girl, I don’t know how many times I wish I had pull like that,” I said.

“Well you are a Keonig now. You have access to pretty much whatever you want.”

“I don’t know about that now. I’m still regular old Lavish Chamberlain. There’s nothing special about me.”

“Stop doing that.” She grabbed my hand. “You are a strong, beautiful, resilient woman, Lavish. You are one of a kind, and there is definitely something special in that. Stop selling yourself short. I know my brother thinks you’re special.”

“I bet...” I mumbled.

Kira was the only one I talked to about me and Mitchell. We were the same age, but she had her life together so much more than I did. She understood me and never judged me.

“He does, girl. I’m not just saying that because I’m his little sister. Mitchell has always been a what you see is what you get type of guy. He’ll show you what he’s feeling before he has to tell you.”

“Well, last week, he was speaking loud and clear.”

“What happened?”

“He went and fucked some bitch.”

Her mouth dropped.

“How do you know?”

“I went to his room to apologize for how I’ve been treating him, and he was coming out dressed in typical thot wear.”

“Thot wear?”

“Tank top, joggers, socks with slides.”

“Oh! I’m sorry, girl. My man is country as hell. When he is trying to get some, he’ll come in the bedroom in his boxers, cowboy boots, and a Stetson, and start giving me a lap dance. That’s all it takes to get me going.”

We shared a laugh. “But for real,” she continued, “are you sure that’s where he was going?”

“Yes, because I asked him where he was going, and he simply said out. So I confronted him about going to fuck another female, and he was like, ‘what’s it to you? You ain’t fucking me.’”

“Damn, he was mad.”

“It triggered something in me. Even before I stopped having sex with Keith, he would leave at all hours of the night and come home smelling like another woman. At one point, he didn’t even hide that shit. He had even gone as far as bringing a bitch into our home... in our bed.”

“I know you fucking lying!”

“Hand to God. When I stopped having sex with him, he would bring women home out of spite. Some of them didn’t care that I was his wife. A few looked mortified, then they watched him put me out of our bedroom so he could entertain them. There were even a few who left when he started coming at me so disrespectfully. Of course, I had to wear the punishment of that.”

“What do you mean?”

“He forced himself on me.”

“Lavish... that’s rape, baby.”

“I know. But we were married, and it would have been hard to prove.”

“Did you say no?”

“Yes.”

“Then that is rape. I don’t care if you were married, dating, or just met him that night. No is no. He took advantage of you. He mentally, physically, psychologically, and sexually abused you, baby. There is no excuse for that. Have you shared this with Mitchell?”

“Yes. He’s already threatened to kill him if he ever comes at me again.” I was quiet for a moment. Then I asked her, “Was I wrong to ask him to just play the roles we agreed to?”

“Not necessarily. I know you’re afraid of getting hurt. You were protecting your heart. But you were wrong to completely cut him off at home. I’m not saying that you had to sleep with him, but you two share a home now. It’s disrespectful. Even if you just wanted to play your roles, he was still open to a friendship with you.”

“I can’t... I can’t just play his wife anymore, Kira,” I said quietly.

She stared at me, and a grin broke out across her face.

“You’re falling for him, aren’t you?”

I immediately started crying, and she slid over in the booth to hug me.

“Aww, baby, it’s okay!” she said, rubbing my back. “Mitchell really cares about you, Lavish. We can all see it. That’s why my father isn’t tripping. Every time we see you guys together, he says the same thing. You two are bound to fall in love.” She held me away from her. “That day you guys came to the house, it was all over his face. The way he’s so gentle with you, how he loves on you... my brother doesn’t show his soft side to everybody. I’m sure you know he can be an arrogant asshole at times.”

“Oh, I know,” I said, wiping my face. She smiled and held my hands.

“This doesn’t have to be a fake marriage,” she said. “You two could be really happy together.”

“I’m terrified, Kira. I spent five years with a man that acted like he hated me after we got married. He controlled me. He bitched about what I wore because he didn’t want other men looking at me. He degraded me to the point where I hated everything about myself—”

“Let me ask you something. Does Mitchell make you feel safe?”

“Yes.”

“Does he make you feel anything like your ex?”

“He makes me feel beautiful... secure... confident. He encourages me. He told me from the beginning that he was going to make me secure in my body and everything that came along with it. Hell, it’s because of him that I felt comfortable enough to put this on. Keith would have told me that I looked fat. That it was too tight or too revealing. He would have made fun of my hair or called me a nappy headed bitch. When Mitchell saw me as I was leaving... Kira, his eyes lit up.” I thought about that moment briefly. “He literally stared at me like he wanted to devour me right there in the entryway.”

“And I’m sure had you not been upset with him, you would have let him do just that.” She giggled.

“I miss him. I miss talking to him and laughing with him. I miss him turning everything into a sexual innuendo. I know that’s your brother, but dammit, Kira, I miss the dick.”

She covered her mouth to stifle a laugh.

“I’m serious! Kira, the things he does to my body, the way he makes me feel... I’ve never felt that before.”

“Then talk to him, Lavish. Talk to him about that night and why it made you upset. Talk about your feelings. Marriage without open communication and listening to understand rather than respond is no marriage. It’s dysfunction. Jacob and I talk about everything, no matter how painful it is. He’s not only my husband, but he is my best friend, my partner, the one who will have my back even if the world turns theirs on me. Let Mitchell be that for you. Hell, he already married you to make sure you never had to struggle again. If that ain’t an act of love, I don’t know what to tell you.”

I was grateful for Kira. I never met a woman like her before. Her spirit and passion quickly drew me to her. She had such a calming spirit.

“You are a great friend, Kira.” I said.

“Aww, honey!” She kissed my cheek and squeezed my hand. “I’m happy you see me as a friend, but I would be happier if you saw me as a sister. But I can wait on that. Just know, I’m already claiming your beautiful ass.”

We shared a hug, and the rest of our lunch date went by without a hiccup. We laughed, joked, and got to know each other a lot more. When it was time to pay the bill, the waiter brought us over a receipt showing our balance had already been paid.

“Who paid the bill?” Kira asked.

“Your brother did, ma’am. He called in and had us charge his account.”

“Thank you,” Kira said with a smile.

“How did he know we were here?” I asked.

“I might have told him where we were going.”

She took out her phone and called Mitchell on speaker.

“What’s up?” he answered.

“You know, we are capable of paying our own tab,” she said with a chuckle.

“Run me my money back then.”

“Not a chance, big bro. Thank you. We appreciate it.”

“It’s nothing. Where is Lavish?”

“She went to the bathroom,” Kira lied.

“Did she enjoy herself?”

“She did.”

“Can you send me a picture of her?” he asked in a whisper. Kira let out a laugh.

“Why the fuck are you whispering, Mitchie?”

“Cause I’m in a meeting, and these white folks are giving me dirty looks. I just want to see my wife. She looked so beautiful today, Kira.”

My heart smiled. Was this how he talked about me when I wasn’t around? Kira looked at me and winked.

“She was stunning,” she responded. “I’ll see what I can do about that picture.”

“I appreciate it. Let me go before I have to curse one of these old muthafuckas out in here.”

“Behave, Mitchell. I love you.”

“I love you too, sis.”

She hung up the phone and smiled at me.

“See, he’s thinking about you. Now pose for this picture for your man.”

She laughed. I rolled my eyes but posed for the picture, and she sent it to him. We sat chatting a little while longer. As we walked back out to the car, my phone chimed with a notification from my Instagram account. I rarely posted anything. I mostly liked pictures or caught up on the latest celebrity gossip and scandals, but if I did, it was a meme or an inspirational quote. So imagine my surprise when I saw that Mitchell had posted my picture and tagged me in it with the caption, “*My beautiful WIFE. It doesn’t get any better than this.*”

I showed the post to Kira, and she was giddy with excitement.

“I’m calling it!” she said as we climbed into her car. “When you two get married for real, yours truly better be the matron of honor.”

This girl was a fool. I stared at the picture, watching the likes and comments go up. So many people were complimenting me, and it was a little overwhelming. Whether they were genuine or just agreeing because it was Mitchell, it felt good to be shown off for once. I needed to talk to him. I was tired of fighting. I wanted my man.

AFTER OUR LUNCH, KIRA AND I HEADED TO PICK UP HER DAUGHTER JACEY from daycare. This little girl had taken to me, and I would be lying if I said I hadn't taken to her. I always wanted a big family, and being around Mitchell's, with so much love, was intensifying that feeling. They all treated me with so much care and respect, even the kids.

When Jacey got in the car, she beamed with excitement.

"Hey, Auntie!" she said.

"Hey, baby! How was your day?"

"Good! I drew you a picture!" She dug in her bookbag for her folder and produced a piece of paper and handed it to me. She had drawn a picture of Mitchell and me, respectively, labeled with our names in her cute little handwriting.

"This is beautiful, baby." I smiled. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Mommy, I wanna see Grandpa."

"Okay, baby. I was about to head over that way anyway." Kira put the car in drive and looked over at me as I stared at the picture. "See, even my baby knows you two belong together."

I rolled my eyes but couldn't contain the smirk on my face. As we drove to my father-in-law's house, the car was filled with the sounds of Jacey telling us all about her day. She was such a well-spoken child to be four. She could articulate better than some adults.

We pulled into her grandparents' yard, and she excitedly unbuckled herself, hopped out of the car, and ran inside. When we got inside, Mrs. Keonig was in the kitchen fixing Jacey a snack, and she was sitting on her grandfather's lap as he sat in his wheelchair.

"Jacey, get up," Kira said, concerningly. "We don't want to hurt Grandpa."

"Leave my grandbaby alone," Mr. Keonig said hoarsely. I could tell that he was getting worse, but he was trying to push through it. "She can sit on my lap whenever she wants." He kissed her forehead, and Jacey smiled.

"Are you sure, Daddy?" Kira asked, walking over to rub his shoulders.

"I'm fine, baby." He took her hand and kissed it. "How is my baby girl?"

"I'm good, Daddy. I booked another client today. You know that new spa they are building downtown?" He nodded. "Well, they contracted me to do the interior once it's all done."

"That's wonderful, baby. I'm so proud of you, Kira."

“Thank you, Daddy.”

Mr. Keonig turned to me and smiled brightly.

“Well look at you!” he said, reaching for my hand. I walked over and gave it to him, and he kissed it. I couldn’t help but blush a little. He was such a sweet man.

“You look beautiful, Lavish. Who knew all that hair was under those braids? Please tell me you are going to keep gracing us with this natural beauty?”

“I’m thinking about it.” I smiled, touching my hair.

“How are you doing today, baby?”

“I’m okay. I’m happy to see you up.”

“Can’t keep me down too long. Besides, I can’t stay away from this beautiful woman,” he said as Mrs. Keonig brought over Jacey’s snack. She hopped off his lap and sat on the bench at the table.

“Oh, stop it.” His wife blushed, waving her hand at him. She stooped down and kissed him sweetly. I loved how she took care of him and how loving and affectionate they were with each other.

“That right there is all I need to feel better,” he said, staring into her eyes when she pulled away. He gently smacked her ass when she walked past him, and she giggled.

“Xavier, the children.”

“They are grown. I’m sure they are both use to a little ass grabbing.” He winked at me and Kira, and we both laughed.

I enjoyed spending time with Mitchell’s parents. It was something that I had taken to doing to get out of the house some days while he was at work. Days with them were filled with lots of stories and lots of laughter. They made an active effort to get to know every aspect of who I was, and I was so appreciative of that.

We spent about two hours at their house. Kira and her pregnant self had fallen asleep on the couch, and Jacey was busy helping her grandmother change the linens on the bed. That just left Mr. Keonig and I alone.

“Do you mind taking me outside for some fresh air, baby?” he asked.

“Not at all,” I replied. I rolled him out the backdoor and down the ramp that they had installed a few weeks ago, to his favorite spot under the oak tree. I helped him into the swing and sat beside him, rocking us back and forth.

“So I see my son hasn’t driven you crazy yet?” he asked with a smile.

“Not yet.” I giggled.

“I don’t believe that.” He chuckled. “Mitchell is my most hard-headed child. Sometimes you want to wring his neck, sometimes you just want to hug him.”

“I know that feeling,” I said.

“I’m happy that he found you, Lavish.” He took my hand. “Even if it’s not how I imagined him finding a wife, you are a good girl. I can see that he cares for you very much.”

“You can?”

“Mitchell isn’t as cunning as he likes to think that he is. I know why he married you. I know why you married him.”

I hung my head.

“I’m sorry.”

“No need to be sorry, baby. The joke is on him,” he said proudly.

“How so?”

“Because I’m watching him fall in love with you right before my eyes. That’s all I wanted for him—to love something more than he loves himself.”

“You think he loves me?”

“I know he does. He may not say it, but it shows in the way he cares for you. He’s different with you, Lavish. He’s gentle and considerate. He talks to and about you with respect. Now he’s always been a gentleman, even with all the women I’ve seen him juggle over the years. And trust me, there have been a lot.”

“I know,” I said, thinking about last week.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“I think I may have pushed him away.”

“How?”

“I was afraid to fall for him, knowing that this was supposed to be temporary. I pulled away from him at home. We feel like strangers in that house by ourselves. I think that pushed him to do something.”

“Talk to him. Tell him how you feel. Make him come clean about whatever you suspect that he’s done and decide if you can work through it. I know your past has left you scarred, baby. But you hold the power to your happiness now. Don’t let anybody take that from you. Nobody.”

He put his arm around me, and I rested my head on his shoulder. These were the moments I wished I had growing up, being able to come to my

father about anything. I was grateful for this man's position in my life right now.

"Can I ask you something?" he questioned.

"Anything?"

"Have you even tried to locate your family?"

"Not really. I've asked a thousand times if there was any information about them, but I never got any leads. I just gave up after I got out of the system. I guess I'll never know that part of me."

"Well," he said taking a deep breath, "I've been looking."

"What?" I sat up and looked at him.

"Pardon me for being intrusive, but since the day Mitchell introduced us and you told me your story, I've felt compelled to help you. I have a team working diligently to locate your mother at least. I can't share anything just yet, but just know, it looks promising."

"You... you're looking for my family?" My lips began to tremble.

"Make no mistake, you are among family when you are here. I just want you to have some closure. The findings will be presented to you when they are done. What you choose to do with them is up to you."

I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him tightly as I cried on his shoulder. He simply held me, lightly patting my back.

"Thank you," I whispered.

"No need to thank me, baby," he said. "Just promise me that no matter where life takes you from here, that you are open to receiving all of the blessings that are sure to come your way."

"I promise," I said, kissing his cheek. I rested my head back on his shoulder, and we sat there in silence, just basking in each other's company until Kira was ready to go.

Mitchell

*M*y phone had been blowing up all day long. Since I posted the picture of Lavish to my Instagram account, my notifications had been sounding off like crazy. Her picture got thousands of likes and comments. Of course, Kira came commenting, “*That’s my sissy!*” with a ton of emojis behind it. Even some of my old flings commented how happy they were for me. Of course, Chevy’s hating ass had some slick shit to say. Before I could block her, my followers ripped her ass to shreds.

I hoped that my gesture made Lavish smile. I had scrolled through her posts a while back and saw that she rarely posted pictures of herself. Most of her posts were positive quotes. I had learned that her love language was words of affirmation and acts of kindness. I wanted to make her feel good about herself, and hopefully showing her off to the world did that.

I had damn near nudded on myself when I came around the corner and saw her all dolled up. She looked absolutely beautiful. If she hadn’t been so mad at me, I would have had my hands all over her. She was a natural beauty, and her hair just set everything off. I secretly hoped that she would never put those damn braids back in again.

I finished up my last meeting and headed back to my office to send of a couple of emails. Then I packed up for the day and headed home. I stopped

at the florists and bought Lavish a bouquet of sunflowers, her favorite. I also picked up a bottle of wine and rented her favorite movie. Hopefully, she would be willing to talk to me tonight.

I called to check on my father, and my mother told me that he was feeling okay; still a little weak, but he was taking it easy. I made a mental note to go see him tomorrow. When I got home, Kira's car was in my driveway. She and Lavish must have been having a good time for her to still be here. I was happy that the two of them were getting along so well. Kira had the kind of spirit that just made you like her. She was a great person if I had to say so myself.

I gathered all my things and went into the house. I could hear the television playing some kind of kiddy show, so I knew Kira had Jacey with her. I dropped my work bag on the bench along with the things I bought for Lavish, kicked off my shoes, and headed in to greet them.

"Evening," I said.

"Hey, big head." Kira smiled. She was stretched out on my chaise, looking pregnant and comfortable. I kissed her cheek and turned to greet my wife.

"Hey, baby," I said.

"Hey," she replied quietly.

"Uncle Mitchie!" Jacey squealed, running over to jump in my arms. She was the only person allowed to call me that in any setting and get away with it.

"How's my favorite girl?" I asked, hugging her and kissing her little face. Val and Elvin both had all boys, and Jacey was my only niece. While I spoiled them all, I especially spoiled her, being the only girl. She had me wrapped around her finger, and she knew it.

"I'm good. Uncle Mitchie, I want a new dollhouse." She pouted, playing with my collar.

"A new dollhouse, huh?"

"She doesn't need a new dollhouse, Mitchell," Kira said, rolling her eyes. "Her old one is perfectly fine."

"But all my dollies won't fit in that one, Mommy."

"Then stop putting fifty dollies in one room, baby," Kira said, mocking her tone.

Jacey crossed her arms and poked out her lip.

I chuckled. "I'll see what I can do, princess," I whispered in her ear. She smiled brightly.

"Thank you, Uncle Mitchie!" She kissed my cheek.

"I heard that!" Kira said, standing up. "Come on, Jacey, because Uncle Mitchie is about to become your full-time pappy if he buys you one more thing you don't need."

She slipped her heels back on as I stood Jacey back to her feet. She ran to say goodbye to Lavish.

"Bye, Auntie!" she said, throwing her little arms around Lavish's neck to hug her. That made me smile and so did she.

"Bye, baby. Be a good girl."

"I will."

"I'm gonna call you later, boo." Kira winked at her.

"Okay."

I walked her and my niece out and buckled Jacey in. Kira leaned against her car with a smirk on her face.

"What?" I asked.

"You better make this up to my girl," she said.

"Make what up?"

She looked at me and twisted her lips.

"She told you about my fuck up?"

"Yes, she told me." She punched me in the arm. "I can't believe you, Mitchell."

"I made a poor judgment call, Kira," I said, closing the door so that Jacey couldn't hear us talking. "All she did was suck my dick, and that was bad enough. I didn't even fuck the girl. I mean, I was gonna, but she kept bringing up Lavish, and it pissed me off. The she started talking shit, and I had to leave before I caught a case."

"Why would you even go over there?"

"I was in my feelings. Kira, we have been feeling like strangers in this house since the first night. Since then, whenever we are alone, she barely says two words to me. I was lonely. All I wanted was her, and she just shut me out."

"She is afraid, Mitchell. That woman has been through more in one lifetime than all of us combined. She's terrified of being hurt again. Neither of you could have known coming into this marriage the way you did that you would catch real feelings."

“What am I supposed to do?”

I couldn't believe I was standing here asking my little sister for romance advice. Kira and I had always had the closer bond of my siblings. Maybe because we were the youngest. She was my best friend. She kept it real with me, and I needed that, now more than ever.

“Do you want to pursue a *real* relationship with her?”

“Yes. I can't pretend with y'all anymore.”

“First of all, we all see right through you, Mitchell Keonig. You aren't as good at hiding your feelings as you think. Second” —she took my hands in hers— “talk to her. Be honest with her. She may wanna to swing on you, but she will listen.” She kissed my cheek. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Kira.”

We shared an embrace, and I opened her car door. After blowing kisses to my niece, I watched them drive away. I walked back up the driveway, nervously rubbing my hands together, trying to practice what I wanted to say to Lavish. I took a deep breath and walked back into my house. I grabbed the sunflowers and went to find my wife. She was still in the living room, straightening up.

She had pulled her hair up into a bun, and my eyes instantly went to her neckline where I wanted to rest my lips against her skin.

“Lavish,” I said as I approached her. She looked up at me and then at the flowers. I could see her mouth twitch to smile at the sight of them, but she refrained. “These are for you.” I nervously handed them to her.

She took the flowers and set them on the table. Then she stood and folded her arms under her breasts and stared at me... waiting.

“I'm sorry, baby,” I said. She turned to walk off, but I grabbed her arm, hoping she wouldn't swing on me like the first time that happened. She didn't hit me, but she jerked away.

“Don't touch me.” She glared at me.

“Can I please talk to you? Baby, I'm dying here.”

“What happened that night? Did you fuck her?”

“No. I will admit that I was going to. She sucked me off, but that was as far as I let it go.”

Tears formed in her eyes, but she refused to let them fall.

“So that's how you operate, Mitchell? I guess I shouldn't be upset because this is all supposed to be fake right?”

“Nothing about how I feel for you is fake.”

“Says the man who looked me in my face and then went and let another bitch suck his dick.”

“That was a mistake. I felt bad about it as soon as I left there...”

“Is that why you were at my door? ’Cause you felt bad? You thought I was just gonna fall into your arms and forgive you for that shit?”

“No, not at all.”

“That was fucked up. I would never disrespect you like that. For all of that, you might as well have brought the bitch home!”

“I wouldn’t take it that far...”

“You took it far enough!” she screamed. “You are no different than Keith. He used to cheat on me too. Go out and fuck bitches. Bring them back to the house and fuck them in our bed after he practically dragged me out of the fucking room! You know what he would do when they wouldn’t fuck him after seeing that, Mitchell? He would punish me. He would hold me down and force me to have sex with him to make up for it.”

“I would never do that to you, Lavish.”

She scoffed. She started pacing and cracking her knuckles. I just knew she was about to hit me, so I prepared myself for it. I deserved it.

“After you left, I laid in that bed, and I cried my fucking eyes out. I cried because I was stupid enough to let my feelings get involved in something that I knew was only temporary. I fooled myself into thinking that you could actually care about me.”

“I do care about you, baby...”

“Stop fucking calling me that!” she screamed. She tried to walk off, but I grabbed her arm. She spun around and slapped the shit out of me.

“I said don’t fucking touch me!”

I needed to remember that that shit was a trigger. The way that my face was stinging right now, I wouldn’t forget that again. I put some space between us.

“Please don’t walk away from me.”

“Like you walked away from me that night?”

“I was upset, Lavish. You have been ignoring me in this house for weeks. I didn’t think that you would care, and I was wrong.”

“You were dead ass wrong. But that’s what I get, right? It’s my fault, right? Go ahead and blame me. I’m used to being the cause of everything that fucking goes wrong.”

She fell back on the couch and started crying hysterically. I didn't see it until now, but life had completely damaged her, and her ex just came in and finished the job. Now here I was, just adding the cherry on top.

"You hurt me, Mitchell." She cried. "You hurt me, and you didn't even care. I have had a lifetime of people hurting me and not giving a fuck about me or my feelings. I won't take that shit again. Not from anybody, and especially not from you."

I dropped to my knees in front of her, preparing to bare my damn soul.

"I'm sorry. I know it doesn't make up for what I did, but I mean it. I am not Keith or any of the other people that have hurt you. I would never hurt you the way that they did."

I moved so that I was kneeling between her legs. She allowed me to gently rest my hands on her knees.

"I'm so sorry, Lavish. You mean more to me than you know. I was fucked up about the way things were going between us. That's not an excuse, but it's the truth. I couldn't handle you not wanting to be with me the way I wanted to be with you. We have something, Lavish. This may have started out as something different, but the way I feel about you... baby, that's real. We connected in New Orleans. I know you felt that. I can see it in the way you look at me. I know it hasn't been long, but I care for you, Lavish... so much so that I am willing to give this marriage a real try. I can't promise that I won't fuck up, because I'm not perfect. But I want you, baby. I want you to be mine, exclusively and wholeheartedly."

She stared at me with tears running down her face. I stood and reached for her, and she came into my arms. I held her tightly as she cried against my chest. I kissed her head and caressed her, trying to get her to feel the sincerity in my words.

"I'm scared," she said as she continued to cry.

"I know," I said, cupping her face. "But you don't have to be afraid of me. Let me show you that. Let me show you that I can be everything you need." I leaned in to kiss her, but she held back slightly. "It's okay."

I leaned in again, and she allowed me to kiss her lips. I kissed her with as much passion as I could muster, and she finally kissed me back. Our tongues danced wildly with each other. I needed her, and I could feel that she needed me, too, so I picked her up and carried her up to my bedroom.

There, she allowed me to undress her as she undressed me. She stared at me passionately as I unclasped the dress from around her neck, and she

unbuttoned my vest and then my shirt. She pushed both from my shoulders and started for my belt. I peeled the dress from her body, leaving her standing in her bra and panties as it pooled at her feet.

When she finally got my belt off, she undid my pants and pushed them and my boxers down. I stepped out of them and turned her around to unhook her bra. I planted soft kisses on her back as I pulled the straps from her shoulders. As I stood behind her, I slipped my hand down the front of her panties, and she shivered. A moan escaped her throat as my finger grazed her clit. She was already so damn wet.

“Mitchell...” she moaned.

“Tell me what you need,” I said, dipping my fingers inside of her wetness.

“I just need you.”

I pulled my hand away and pulled her panties down. She stood in front of me naked. I picked her up and carried her over to the bed and laid her down. Snaking my way up her body, I gently kissed her feet, her legs, her thighs, and her stomach. I paused briefly to toy with her nipples with my tongue. Her breathing was shallow, and I could see the anticipation in her beautiful face. I continued my way up, kissing and sucking on her neck before I made it to my final resting spot, at her soft, juicy lips.

She lifted her legs and wrapped them around me as she hungrily sucked on my bottom lip. The head of my dick slid up and down her slick lips.

“Mitchell,” she moaned. “I need you, baby.”

She clung to me as I buried my piece deep inside of her. I wanted to nut as soon as my shit graced those walls.

“Fuck...” I moaned, gently biting her neck. I wanted to savor her. I wanted to memorize every single feature in her beautiful face as I slowly fed her these long, deep strokes. I wanted her to spell out her name as her nails clawed at my back.

“I’m falling for you, Lavish,” I moaned.

“I’m falling for you too,” she responded. “Please don’t hurt me again, Mitchell... My heart can’t take it.”

“You are safe with me, baby...” I said, pinning her arms above her head and lacing my fingers through hers. I lowered my body onto hers, causing her legs to spread wider, giving me full access to her. I started stroking her a little harder as she thrust her hips forward to meet me. Her breathing increased, and with every stroke, it sounded like it got caught in her throat.

“Shit!” she hissed. “Don’t stop. Don’t stop!”

She buried her face in my neck and started kissing and sucking on it. She clenched her muscles around my dick, and I felt my toes curl.

“You ain’t playing fair.” I chuckled.

She licked the side of my face and started sucking on my earlobe as she did it again.

“Fuck...” I groaned.

She was definitely trying to pull this nut out of me. I wasn’t about to tap out just yet. I rolled over onto my back with her on top of me. She didn’t miss a beat in starting to ride me. I reached up and palmed her breasts, grazing her nipples with my thumb as she grinded her hips into mine.

She pulled her hair from its bun, and it fell wildly down her back. She was so fucking perfect. The way that the sunlight radiated off her skin made her look like she was glowing.

“You are so beautiful,” I moaned, pulling her closer to me. My lips found hers again, and I hungrily devoured them. I positioned my legs so that I could fuck her back as she fucked me slowly. Her pussy was so damn wet, I could feel her juices leaking down my balls.

“Oh God, Mitchell!” she moaned, throwing her head back. I gripped her hips and thrust harder and faster into her. “I’ve missed you so much.”

“I’ve missed you, too, baby... fuck!”

“Oh shit!” she cried out, grabbing one of her breasts. She began riding me faster as the room filled with the sounds of our moans and our skin slapping against each other.

“Fuck, Lavish! I’m ’bout to nut, baby!”

“Me too!”

She leaned in and kissed me madly as our orgasms collided with the sounds of us calling each other’s names. She collapsed on top of me as I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her forehead. Within a few seconds, she was out, with me still throbbing inside of her.

Lavish

*M*itchell and I consummated our makeup throughout that night.

While we both knew that sex wasn't going to fix anything or erase what happened, I needed him, and he needed me. In the weeks that followed, we spent a lot of time together, allowing our growing love for one another to flourish.

We set time aside each day to have one-on-one talks with each other about life and our feelings and really get to know each other. With his father's health steadily declining, he was home more, leaving his businesses in the hands of his most trusted managers. He was so emotional during this time. Many nights, I woke up to find him sitting somewhere in the dark, crying his eyes out.

Grief and impending loss was taking a toll on him.

He wasn't eating as much. He barely slept at times, and worry was etched into his face. Knowing that he was going to have to bury his father soon didn't make coming to terms with losing him any easier. I was thankful that he had such a loving and supportive family to help him through this time.

I never lost anyone close to me, so I wasn't sure how to handle him during this time. There were no comforting words that I could say. All I

could offer him was my affection. Hold him when he cried. Wipe his tears away and listen when he needed to talk. He understood that and told me my presence alone was enough.

Today, we were heading over to spend time with the family.

I had been up since around eight, in my thoughts. While I was thinking, it dawned on me that I hadn't had a period in months. I chopped it up to stress. As I stood in the bathroom mirror after my shower, I noticed the minor changes that had taken place in my body recently.

My titties were getting bigger, and they were tender.

My stomach was firmer.

My face was starting to look fuller.

Yesterday, Kira joked with me that with all of the making up Mitchell and I had done during our reconciliation, I might be pregnant soon. I brushed it off. I mean, in all the years with Keith, I had never gotten pregnant, even through his many attempts. I accepted that maybe a child wasn't in the cards for me and thanked God it wasn't with him.

But now as I looked at myself, I was doubting that.

Leaving the bathroom, I silently dressed myself while Mitchell slept. Ensuring not to wake him, I grabbed my purse and keys and headed out of the house to my car. The drive to the pharmacy was a quiet one. What if I was pregnant? What if there was a life growing inside of me? With everything going on, were we ready for a baby right now?

As I pulled my shades down over my eyes, I entered the store, making a beeline to the family planning aisle and grabbed the first test that I saw. Actually, I grabbed a couple. I needed to be sure before I got my hopes up. After paying for the tests expeditiously, I made my way back to the house. I prayed that Mitchell was asleep when I got there so I could take the test. I had no such luck, because when I walked into the house, he was coming down the stairs rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

"Good morning, baby." He greeted me with a hug and a kiss to the lips as it had become our normal thing these days.

"Good morning. How did you sleep?"

"I slept okay. Better than I have been. What's in the bag?"

"Tampons. I was cramping, so I wanted to be prepared."

"Oh. Are you hungry?"

"I had some toast and cereal, but if you wanna go ahead and shower, I'll fix you something to eat."

“Thank you, baby.”

He turned to walk back up the stairs then stopped.

“Lavish?” He turned to me.

“Yes.”

“Thank you for being here. I know shit ain’t been roses between us, but I appreciate you sticking with me. I need you. I never knew how much until recently. What I’m trying to say is... I love you.”

“You love me?”

“I do.”

“You mean that?”

“Of course I mean that.” He chuckled.

I found my way into his arms, tears streaming down my face. He embraced me tightly, gently stroking my back.

“I love you too,” I whispered.

WE HAD BEEN AT MITCHELL’S PARENTS’ FOR A FEW HOURS, AND I WAS anxiously waiting to take this pregnancy test. My nerves were on ten. I had never anticipated something so much in my life. Could I be pregnant? Was I really about to be somebody’s mama? Mitchell a father? As I sat on the couch, bouncing my leg, I could see Mrs. Keonig watching me from her spot in the recliner.

She smiled and motioned me over.

“What’s wrong, baby girl?” she asked.

“What makes you think something is wrong?”

“You look like you are about to panic.”

“Is it obvious?”

“When you are observant, yes.” She chuckled as she took my hand.
“What’s on your mind?”

Looking around to make sure no one was paying attention, I reached for her hand. She took it and stood, following me onto the front porch.

“I think I might be pregnant,” I blurted out.

Her eyes danced wildly with excitement. “Are you serious?”

“Yes, ma’am. I haven’t had my period in a while. At first, I thought I was stressed. You know, all of the different changes. Now I’m not so sure.”

“So you haven’t taken a test?”

“I bought a few this morning, but I haven’t had a chance to take it.”

“Well what are you waiting for? You can take it now.”

“I’m afraid.” I nervously rubbed my hands together. “What if it’s too soon? What if we aren’t ready? I don’t know how to be a mother. Until I met you, nobody ever showed me what a good mother looks like. What if I screw this child up?”

She cupped my face and wiped away the tears streaming down my face.

“I have faith that if you are carrying my grandbaby, you will be an excellent mother, Lavish. You have so much love to give, baby. You can’t let your past define your future. I feel for you with how you were brought up. And because of that, I know that you will give this baby all the love you have rooted inside of you.”

“What if Mitchell—”

“Mitchell will be happy.”

“He told me he loves me this morning for the first time.”

“And that is why I know he will be more than excited. He talked to me about you, about how much he loves you and how grateful he is that you are his wife. You came into his life at a time where he needed to grow up and realize that there was more to life than money and women. You gave us exactly what my husband and I always wanted for him. We are grateful to you for that. I know we may not be yours biologically, but we are your family. You will always have a spot here.”

I was in full blown tears at this point. She pulled me into her arms and embraced me as I cried on her shoulder. I had grown to love this woman, this family, so much, and I didn’t think I would have. At this very moment, I was grateful for her and for them.

“What do you say we go take this test?” She smiled as she pulled away from me.

“Okay.” I nodded, wiping my face.

She took my hand, and we headed back inside. I grabbed my purse as we made our way to the stairs.

“Where y’all going?” Mitchell asked, looking back over the couch.

“We are minding our business,” his mother responded, not missing a step. I giggled as she pulled me along behind her. She led me to the guest bathroom and ushered me inside.

“I’ll be right here, baby,” she said. “Cups are under the sink.”

I nodded and closed the door behind me. This was it, the moment of truth. As I peed in this damn cup, I thought about how much my life was about to change. Should this test be positive, I was really about to have a baby. I had been wanting a family of my own for so long that this moment felt unreal. These next five minutes would determine the rest of my life.

As the timer went off on my phone, I closed my eyes.

I couldn't look.

Opening the door, I felt around for my mother-in-law. When she slipped me her hand, I pulled her inside.

"I can't look," I said.

"We can look together—"

"No, no. You look."

I felt myself hyperventilating.

"Lavish! Breathe, baby." She offered me a warm smile as she held my hands. "We'll look together, okay? I'm right here with you."

I nodded and took a deep breath.

"Ready?"

"I'm ready."

When we looked down, my hands flew to my mouth. All five of the tests I purchased were positive.

"Congratulations!" Mrs. Keonig beamed. "We're having a baby!"

Outside, I was happy, but inside, my heart felt so full. The confirmation released something within me that I knew had to be nothing but a mother's love. My child would be better than me. They would have the life I wish I had. They would have a family who would go to bat for them every single time.

I would love this baby until my final breath.

"I want to tell Mr. Keonig," I said, wiping my face free of tears. "I know he won't be here for the birth, but I want him to know. Only him."

She nodded. "You take care of this, and I'll go prepare him."

She kissed my cheek and then left me to take care of cleaning up. After discretely discarding the pregnancy tests, I grabbed my purse and head back downstairs.

"Everything okay?" Mitchell asked.

"Everything is perfect." I smiled. After setting my purse down, I walked over and cupped his face, planting a kiss on his lips in front of everyone.

"I love you," I whispered.

“I love you too, baby.”

“Y’all are too cute!” Kira cooed with her hand over her heart as she teared up.

“Don’t make it awkward, baby,” Jacob told her.

I giggled as I left the room to go speak with my father-in-law. When I entered, he was lying on his side. As his eyes met mine, he smiled weakly. My heart broke. He didn’t have much longer, and it was showing. Moving a chair up close to him, I took his hands in mine and kissed them.

“Hey, baby girl,” he whispered.

“Hey.” I smiled, kissing his forehead. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m tired, Lavish... so tired.”

“I’m so sorry this happened to you.”

“Don’t be sorry. I lived a full happy life with the people I love. I have my wife, my children... my bonus children, and my grands. I got to help people who couldn’t help themselves. I say I lived a life worth living.”

“You are an amazing man, and I am so grateful for the time I had with you. I wanted you to know that I love and respect you, and I will carry you in my heart for the rest of my life.”

“Thank you, baby. I love you too.”

“I have something to tell you.”

“What is it?”

“You’re going to be a grandpa... I’m pregnant.”

For a moment, I saw the life flash in his eyes. He reached a shaky hand up to caress my cheek before pulling my head to his and kissing my forehead.

“You have a family for life now,” he whispered. “I’m so happy for you, baby. Even though I won’t be here, my spirit will be around. I can’t wait to watch you all grow into your own little family.”

He wiped the tears from my cheek. “Now I have something to tell you.”

“What is it?”

“We found your mother. If you are willing, she wants to meet you.”

My hand flew to my mouth, and I sat straight up, in disbelief. When he told me he was looking and that it was promising, I never thought that just a short while later there would be results. He had found my mother... In all the years I had been asking social workers about my family, no one had been able to tell me a thing.

For twenty-five years... twenty-five years I had roamed this Earth feeling empty, lost, and unwanted. And in just a few short weeks, he had been able to find the very part of me that had been missing for so long, and she wanted to meet me. All those years I wondered about her, thought of her, and wondered if she ever thought of me. All I could do was cry and hug and kiss him. Xavier Keonig was truly an extraordinary man.

“I can never thank you enough!” I cried.

“You don’t have to thank me. All I want for you is to heal. My lawyer will be in touch with the information.”

We shared yet another embrace before I gathered myself.

“Will you send Mitchell to me?” he asked.

“Of course.”

I stood and walked to the door. Before I made it out, he was asleep.

Mitchell

When Lavish told me my father wanted to see me, the hairs on the back of my neck rose. I swallowed hard, stood from the couch, and made my way to their bedroom. Opening their door, I found him sleeping lightly. Just that quick, he had fallen into a slumber.

Since his diagnosis, I had been terrified of walking into a room and finding him unresponsive. I didn't know if I had the mental capacity to deal with something like that. The father that raised me was a strong, proud man. I had never seen him so weak, and the fact that he was suffering on borrowed time was killing me.

"Pop?" I whispered. His eyes fluttered open slowly, and he looked at me. He smiled softly.

"Hey, son," he said, reaching up to touch my face.

"Hey, Pop." I tried to smile without tears falling from my eyes. "I was thinking I would take you outside to the swing for a while. What do you think?"

He nodded. I pushed back his covers and pulled his wheelchair over. Draping his arm around my neck, I slowly lifted him into my arms and put him in the wheelchair. I grabbed his blanket and draped it over his legs and wheeled him out of the room. He motioned for me to stop in the kitchen,

beckoning for my mother. When she approached him, he gently patted his lap for her to sit down.

“Xavier,” she started.

“Come on, woman,” he said, pulling her down.

My mother was a small woman, and even at his small size, she wouldn't hurt him. He wrapped his arms around her and held her for the longest time. There were no words spoken between them... just love. She leaned in and kissed him, resting her forehead against his. For the first time since we learned of his diagnosis, I saw a tear slip from her eyes. He wiped it away and kissed her sweetly once more. She got up from his lap and excused herself from the room.

“I'm ready,” Pops said to me.

I nodded and took my place behind him and rolled him outside to the shaded area of the trees. He allowed me to lift him and put him in the swing, and then I took a seat beside him. He rested his head against my shoulder, and I lightly swung us back and forth.

“I'm glad you came to see me today,” he said.

“How are you feeling, Pop?”

“I'm tired, Mitchell.” He sighed.

“I know.” I took his hand in mine.

I was quiet for a moment. I could feel the life slipping from him.

“I need to be honest with you about something,” I said.

“You can tell me anything.”

I hung my head. “You were right, Pop. At first, I did marry Lavish because you threatened to cut me out of your will. That was part of the reason. The other reason, other than the fact that she needed security, was because I wanted to make you happy. I didn't want you to leave this world without me giving you at least one thing that you asked of me.”

“Mitchell,” he whispered slowly. “I wanted you to get married so that you would have someone to love you the way I knew you needed to be loved. Someone to show you that there was more to life. And you found Lavish.” He squeezed my hand. “She loves you, Mitchell, and you love her, don't you?”

“I do. As crazy as it is, I fell in love with her, Pop.”

“She makes you happy. You deserve genuine happiness, son.”

“She's makes me grateful for everything that I have... everything that you and Ma gave me. Everything that you tried to teach me I see it in her.”

“I’m happy to hear that, son.” His breathing slowed.

“I’m gonna do better, Pop,” I promised, tears streaming down my face. I couldn’t look at him. “I’m gonna take over your charities. I’m gonna get out there and help people just like you always wanted. I’m gonna make you proud of me.”

“I am proud of you... I’ve always been proud... I love you, son...”

“I love you too.”

I felt his body go limp against mine. His hold on my hand eased completely. I couldn’t force myself to let go or look down at him. I knew he was gone.

“I love you too...” I whispered again.

I sat out there holding my father in my arms until the ambulance came. My mother led them out the back door and over to me.

“Mitchell...” she said, stooping in front of me. “Mitchell, you have to let him go.”

“I can’t!” I cried. “I can’t!”

“You have to, baby,” she said, kissing my cheek. “He’s gone. You have to let them take him.”

I couldn’t understand how she was so calm as I looked at her. I could see my siblings and Lavish standing on the porch crying.

“It’s time, Mitchell,” my mother said, standing.

I finally nodded. I stood with my father’s limp body in my arms and laid him on the gurney. I finally looked down at him. He had a slight smile on his face... like he passed a happy man. That broke me. My knees began to tremble as they rolled him away. Before I knew it, I was on the ground on my hands and knees, crying harder than I had ever cried in my entire life. My mother sat on the ground with me, and I cried in her lap as she stroked my back and whispered reassuring words to me. She rocked me back and forth like I was a baby.

I felt arms around me from behind, and I knew that it was Lavish. She held on to me tightly, and I could feel the love radiating from her.

“We’ve got you, baby,” she whispered, kissing the back of my head. I could feel her tears on my neck. I couldn’t offer any words. All I had right now were tears. My father was no longer in pain. He was no longer suffering. He was gone.

Lavish

Seeing Mitchell crumble the way he did when the paramedics rolled his father away did something to me. I had never seen someone cry with so much anguish, so much pain. All I wanted to do was hold him in my arms. His mother and siblings had gone to the hospital, but we, along with the spouses and kids, stayed behind waiting for them because he couldn't bear to go himself. He was in my arms, the tears ever flowing. All I could do was rock him and stroke his head, singing to him softly.

Today was the saddest of happiest days.

A new life was being brought into this world at the same time we had to say goodbye to one of God's most treasured gifts. Xavier Keonig would live on through his children and his children's children and their children after that. He created a life and a legacy that I knew nobody would let be in vain.

I noticed that Mitchell had grown quiet in my arms. I looked down to see that he had fallen asleep. I was glad that he had finally found a little bit of rest. I didn't know his pain, but I felt it radiating through him with everything in me. I just wanted to be here for him. Even if I didn't know all the right words to say, I loved him, and I wanted to be here for him and his family. I lay with him in my arms, continuing to sing softly as I stroked his back, until I fell asleep myself.

I WAS AWAKENED BY THE SOUNDS OF KEYS JINGLING IN THE DOOR. BOTH Mitchell and I jumped awaked.

“It’s just us,” Mrs. Keonig said with a light smile. Mitchell and I sat up and made room for them to sit down.

How she was holding up was beyond me. The woman had just lost her husband of forty years. When she looked out the door and saw Mitchell holding his father, she had calmly told me to call an ambulance while she spoke to her children. This was even before he took his last breath. It was like she knew the end was near. I thought about that moment I witnessed them share before he had gone outside.

No words were spoken between them. They just held each other for the last time. That was when I realized he was saying goodbye to her. The thought alone brought tears to my eyes, and I quickly wiped them away.

“I want to talk to you all,” Mrs. Keonig said. Everyone’s ears perked up. We all sat staring at her, waiting to hear what she had to say.

“I’m sure you all will be upset with me,” she said, rubbing her hands together as she stood before us. “Your father and I knew that he was diagnosed with cancer a year before we told you all.”

“What!” went up around the room. Everyone started talking at once, but she held up her hand to silence the room.

“We knew from the beginning that the cancer was aggressive and that even with chemo and treatment, there wasn’t much that they could do. He had made his peace with it. I wanted him to get treatment. Maybe give him a fighting chance. But he said no. He said that he got to live a long life full of love and happiness. We created four beautiful, brilliant children. He got to see you all grow up, lead happy, successful lives, and marry the absolute best people for you. He got to enjoy being a grandfather six, almost seven, times over. There was nothing in the world that he loved more than this family. You all were his pride and joy. Knowing that you were all loved and taken care of made his decision to forgo treatment easier. He told me, ‘Margret... my work here is done, and if it’s my time to go, I am just going to have to be okay with that.’”

She nodded, tears streaming down her face.

“He started getting his affairs in order. Elvin, that’s why he had you take over the business. It’s why he wanted to spend more time with you all and

his grandbabies. Mitchell, it's why he pushed you so hard to do more with your life. Make no mistake, he was always proud of you, even when you felt like he wasn't. He just wanted to see you experience love that material things could never offer you. Do you understand that now?"

Mitchell nodded.

"He loved each of you so very much. To his bonus children, that's what he called all of you, he loved you as well because you took the time to love our children, and we knew that that wasn't easy." She smiled lightly, causing us to smile a little. "I was thankful and blessed that I got to spend forty years with my best friend... my comforter... my soulmate. For that, I don't cry tears of sadness because he's gone, but tears of happiness for the four decades we spent together... the beautiful family we created. The love that we shared is what I will carry in my heart until the day I get to spend eternity with him."

I couldn't fight back the tears that had been brewing in me since she started crying. There wasn't a dry eye in this room. Mitchell stood and went to hug his mother, his huge frame practically swallowing her. All his siblings surrounded her, and they cried together. It was sad, but the moment that they shared was nothing short of beautiful.

Mitchell

*M*y father was gone. He was really gone. When he stopped in that kitchen and I watched him say goodbye to my mother, I knew he wouldn't be coming back in the house. He had made his peace with leaving this world, and I needed to make my peace with him. I made promises to him that I intended to keep as long as I had breath in my body.

I lay in bed that night, with Lavish in my arms, just staring at the ceiling. It was three in the morning, and sleep had yet to find me. I thought about my father... about my mother. I had tried to get her to come home with us or one of my siblings, but she refused, saying that she needed to be close to my father's lingering presence. I knew she just wanted to grieve in peace.

I had been calling her every hour until she told me that she was going to bed. Even now I was fighting the urge to call and make sure that she was okay, that she was alive. I had heard many stories about spouses dying not long after each other because they couldn't bear to be apart, even in death. My parents were married for forty years and together for fifty. Their love was the only love either of them had ever known. How do you part with that?

My phone had been going crazy with calls and texts and social media notifications. People were showing my father so much love. It was amazing. It made me smile that he had not lived his life in vain. That was the very thing he wanted me to learn.

“Baby?” Lavish whispered.

“What is it?”

“You should try to get some sleep,” she said.

“I can’t sleep,” I said, looking over at her. “I told him everything today, Lavish.”

“He already knew everything, Mitchell. You know what he told me a few weeks ago?” she said, sitting up.

“What?”

“He said that you weren’t as cunning as you liked to think you were.” She poked my chest with a soft smile. “He said that the joke is on you because he got to watch you fall in love with me.”

“He said that?”

“He did.” She took my hand and brought it to her face, rubbing the back of it along her cheek. She kissed it and smiled at me. “I love you, Mitchell.”

I sat up and cupped her face. “I love you too, Lavish. I love you so fucking much.” I kissed her passionately. “You are everything to me, baby.”

“You’re everything to me,” she whispered, resting in my arms again. I felt my chest swelling with pride. I knew my father would be happy to hear us say those words to each other. He always had a way of knowing shit, even before you did. That was one thing I was going to miss about him. I stared up at the ceiling and closed my eyes. *Rest easy, Pop.*

THIS HAD BEEN THE LONGEST WEEK OF MY LIFE. IT WASN’T THE FUNERAL preparations that got to me, because my father had planned out and paid for everything before his passing. It was the media. Everywhere I looked, there were cameras in our faces. It was already enough that Carver had unknowingly released Lavish’s statement the very same day my father passed. We were dealing with that shit too. All I wanted to do was bury my father in peace. Was that too much to ask for?

Instead, I was bombarded with question after question. “*How are you holding up?*” “*How is your mother?*” “*What was your father’s last days like?*” “*Was he happy with the attention you’ve been getting in the media lately?*” I was fed up, and I didn’t even have the energy to curse anybody out. I couldn’t shed another tear. I couldn’t stand to hear another condolence. I just wanted to lay my father to rest.

Today was his funeral. We had all gathered at my parents’ house to ride over to the church together. The family cars had just pulled up, and the funeral director was giving us instructions as to who got in what car. Then we lined up and headed outside. The silence that pierced the air was deafening.

As we walked down the manmade pathway, someone started praying for our family. Lined up from the front steps all the way to the cars was a line of people holding up signs. As I looked around, I could see that these were people that his charities had helped. Each sign acknowledged what my father had done for them or their loved ones.

I was in awe of how many people my father had touched over the years. This was work I knew I needed to continue in his honor, just as I had promised.

Lavish squeezed my hand, and I looked at her.

“I’m okay,” I said, kissing her forehead.

We all climbed into our respective cars and drove off to the church. The outside was packed. People were everywhere with signs and flowers. Again, as we lined up to go inside, the crowd drew quiet. They allowed us to enter peacefully. Seeing the casket at the front of the church sent a chill through my body. I was on one side of my mother, and Elvin was on the other side. My sisters stood behind us. We made our way down the aisle, and I couldn’t feel my legs. I just knew I was moving in the right direction.

As we approached the front, I could feel my body trembling. My mother looked over at me as she wrapped one arm around my waist to steady me and held my hand with the other. I was a giant compared to her small frame, but it was like she was sustaining me right now. When we stopped in front of the casket, I felt another pair of arms around my waist, and I knew it was Lavish. She stood behind me with her forehead pressed against my back. I could hear her whispering a prayer over us.

No woman had ever prayed for me other than my mother. As I stood there looking down at my father, I tried to muster all the strength that she

was praying for me to receive. I had to be strong. My father was a strong man, and he wouldn't want me to crumble. I held my head up as the man he had taught me to be. I would get through this. We all would.

THE FUNERAL SERVICE, THOUGH LONG, WAS A BEAUTIFUL ONE. EVERYONE had such wonderful things to say about my father. How kind he was, how respectful and down to earth. People told stories of the time they'd spent with him. A few people from his charities told stories of how he helped change their lives, their futures. To let the world tell it, Xavier Keonig was a man crafted by God himself. He was pure, and he was good. If that wasn't something worth being remembered for, I didn't know what was.

After the burial, we all headed back to my parents' house. So many people had shown up that it was a little overwhelming. I found myself seeking solace in my father's favorite spot... the same spot he had taken his last breath in... under his oak tree. I sat there along looking down at the ground, in deep thought, when I felt a presence in front of me. I looked up to see my wife standing with a plate of food.

"You need to eat, baby," she said.

"I'm not hungry..."

"Mitchell, you haven't eaten a thing in two days," she said, sitting beside me. "You are *going* to eat." She scooped up a spoonful of dirty rice and put it to my lips. I hesitated and then opened my mouth.

"Have you eaten?" I asked between chews. I swallowed, and she gave me another spoonful.

"My stomach's acting a little funny," she said. "I feel a sick."

"Maybe we should make you an appointment," I said, swallowing the food and then taking the plate from her to feed myself.

"Probably just my nerves. This was a lot," she said, looking down at her hands. "I want you to know that I loved your father, Mitchell. He was good to me. He never failed to make me feel like I was one of his own, and I will forever be grateful for that. For a brief time, he was the father I always wanted."

I smiled softly. "He loved you too, Lavish. He was grateful for the time you spent helping my mother take care of him. You reminded him a lot of

the people that came through charities. I mean that in the most humble way possible. I just mean that he took your hurt personal. He wanted to help you heal.”

“Mitchell,” she said, looking at me with tears in her eyes. “He found my mother.”

“What?”

“He found my mother. After all those years of asking, he took the diligence and found her. She wants to meet me.”

“That’s great, baby,” I said, setting my plate down to hug her.

“I’m so nervous. What if she doesn’t like me? What if she doesn’t accept me? What if she has a whole family, and they don’t accept me? What if she only wants to meet me to tell me that I was a mistake and she meant to get rid of me?”

“What if you meet her, and everything is the opposite of what you are thinking, baby? Think positive. They would be crazy not to want you. Even if they don’t, you always have a family here. All of us love you.”

“I love you guys too. I am so grateful for you all.”

She kissed me softly and rested her head on my shoulder. I picked up my plate and continued eating as we sat in silence.

Everyone finally left around seven that night. We were in the midst of cleaning up when my mother called us all into the living room. Elvin sent his oldest son outside to look after the kids while the adults gathered around. My father’s long-time lawyer, Paul, stood before us in his black suit with his briefcase open.

“First, I just want to say that I am deeply saddened by the loss of Xavier. He was not only a good man and a hell of a human being, but he was a hell of a friend. It was my honor to serve him over the years.”

“Thank you, Paul,” my mother said.

“I wanted to discuss the details of his will while I have you all together. Xavier revised this just a few weeks ago.”

I didn’t know what to expect at this point.

Paul pulled out a document and adjusted his glasses.

“I, Xavier Ronald Keonig, being of sound mind hereby bequeath the following...”

We listened as he rattled off the list. Of course my mother was left the house and all of the money in their accounts, all of his royalties, plus stocks and bonds. He had also set it up where she would receive a bouquet of her

favorite flowers once a week for the duration of her life. He expressed his love for her and how grateful he was to share his life with her. He thanked her for her dedication to him, their marriage, and our family. At the end, Paul handed her a small box. Inside was the very first wedding ring he had given her. She thought she had lost it after he presented her with a new set, but all this time, he had it. He left it to her as a representation of where their love all began.

We all had to cry a little off that one. My mother slipped the ring on her finger, vowing to never take it off again.

Paul handed my siblings and I handwritten letters. We each took the time to read them. I nervously opened mine and looked down at his handwriting. A tear slipped from my eyes as I read the words.

Dear Mitchell,

My baby boy. The Lord blessed me with you to teach me patience and unyielding trust. I know that I have been the hardest on you. You are undoubtedly my strongest child. You have never been afraid to step out into the world and be yourself. I admire that about you. You took risks. You enjoyed life. You loved life enough to experience it for yourself, in spite of what others, me included, thought about the way that you lived. I learned to trust you blindly even when you made decisions that I didn't agree with because I knew you were capable of anything. Maybe I didn't say it enough, but I am and always will be proud of the man that you are and the man I know you will become. Take care of Lavish. Love her. Honor her. Be the man that she needs and more than that, the man that she deserves. Protect her heart and she will give you the world beyond your wildest dreams. I love you son. I love you with everything that is in me.

I folded the letter and wiped my face. My siblings all wiped their eyes, so I knew he had written each of us something from his heart. Paul then handed us another envelope. Inside was a copy of a wire transfer that would be issued upon the reading of my father's will. When I looked down at the amount of the check, I didn't feel like I thought I would when I devised this plan to marry Lavish for this money. It all seemed so stupid now. Trivial. I made up my mind that I wouldn't spend a dime of it until I could find something meaningful to do with it.

"Now, for the 'bonus children', as he so affectionately called you all. Xavier was very fond of all of you. He took the time to write you all as well."

He handed Lavish, my brothers-in-law and sister-in-law envelopes. I watched Lavish read hers, her emotions changing as she read the letter. When she finished, her hand went to her heart, and she wiped away tears.

“That man,” she whispered. He then presented them with another envelope. Lavish opened hers, and her eyes widened.

“This can’t be right,” she said, looking down at the check for twenty-five million dollars. “I can’t. I can’t accept this.”

“Mrs. Keonig, as I stated, Xavier was very fond all of his children’s spouses... including you,” Paul said with a smile. “Please, he wanted you to have that.”

She looked at my mother, and she nodded.

“It would mean a lot to him, baby,” my mother said with a smile. Lavish looked down at the check again, then at me and back to my mother.

“Thank you...” she whispered.

“He also left this for you.” Paul handed her a manila envelope. “Xavier had us working very diligently to get this information for you in hopes that it would bring you comfort and peace. Inside is the name, phone number, and address of your mother, along with everything that we could find on her and you before you went into the system. She is anxiously waiting to meet you.”

The envelope trembled in Lavish’s hands. I knew she had been waiting on this moment her entire life. It made me proud that my father had thought enough of her to do this for her.

“Take her in the room, Mitchell,” my mother said. “This should be a private moment.”

I nodded and helped Lavish to her feet. She was still staring at the envelope as she allowed me to guide her into what use to be my old bedroom. She sat on the bed, and I sat beside her.

“Baby?” I said.

“I... I don’t know if I can do it, Mitchell. There is no going back after I open this.”

“You’ve wanted this your whole life, baby.”

“I know. It just seems unreal that it is finally happening.”

“Just take a deep breath,” I said, stroking her back. “Let go of all of your doubts and fears. You’ve got this. You deserve this.”

“I deserve it,” she repeated.

She shakingly opened the envelope and dumped the contents on the bed. The first thing she picked up was the paper with the name and address.

“Sienna Miller,” she read. “That’s the last name on my original birth certificate. If we shared the same last name, maybe she intended to keep me.”

“That’s a good sign.”

She picked up her birth records, her eyes wildly scanning the document.

“She was only fourteen when she had me. It says that when I was only a week old, a Caroline and James O’Conner adopted me. I don’t remember that. It says that they died when I was two, and I went back into the system.” She set the papers down. “She gave me up.”

“She was a kid, Lavish. Who knows what happened? Who forced her hand.” I cupped her face, and she looked at me. “The only way that you are going to know the truth is if you ask her for yourself.”

I picked up the paper with her name, address, and phone number. “Call her.”

She hesitantly took the paper from me and pulled her phone out of her pocket. I watched her dial the number and put the phone on speaker. It rang three times before someone picked up.

“Hello?” came a soft female voice. Lavish held the phone, her mouth open but no words coming out.

“Hello?” came the voice again.

I nudged Lavish, and she finally came out of her trance like state.

“Hello? Is this Sienna Miller?”

“It’s Mathis. May I ask who is calling?”

“Lavish.”

The line went quiet.

“Hello?” Lavish said.

“Lavish... is it really you?” Sienna whispered.

“Yes.”

She burst into tears and started thanking God. She screamed for someone, who I assumed was her husband.

“Johnathan! Johnathan, it’s her!”

For a moment, it sounded like she dropped the phone. Her cries echoed throughout the room. This couldn’t be a woman who would willingly give up her child.

“We have waited for you for so long!” She cried.

“You did?” Lavish asked, tears streaming down her face.

“We never stopped praying for you, baby.” Sienna sniffed. “Can we please see your face?”

Lavish looked at me, and I nodded.

“Sure.”

The FaceTime call came through almost immediately. Lavish nervously held the phone, then with a shaky finger, she accepted the video call. There on the screen appeared a woman about Lavish’s complexion. She didn’t even look old enough to be her mother. I mean, there was only a fourteen-year age difference. Sienna shared the same hair texture and signature gap between her two front teeth. She also shared her eyes. There was no denying that Lavish was her daughter. The minute her mother laid eyes on her, she burst into tears again.

“Oh baby, you are so beautiful!” She cried. “You are everything that I thought you would be.” She motioned for someone to come into the camera. A man, who didn’t look much older than me, appeared. He was also Lavish’s complexion, and they shared the same nose and ears.

“Baby, this is your father, Johnathan,” Sienna said with a smile.

“Hi,” Lavish said, a smile gracing her lips.

“Hi, baby. It’s so good to finally see you. You don’t know how long we have waited for this moment.”

“Can you tell me what happened?” Lavish asked. “I asked about you for years, but no one could tell me anything. Please? I need to know.”

“I was fourteen when I had you,” Sienna said. “Johnathan was sixteen. I grew up in a strict Christian home in a small little Tennessee town. My parents treated me horribly, especially my mother. She thought everything was the devil and that I was just pure evil. She forbade me from seeing your father from the very beginning because he was older, and she didn’t like his family. But I loved him.”

She looked at her husband lovingly.

“When my mother found out that I was pregnant, she had your father arrested. She told them that he raped me and tried to force me to go along with the story.” Tears formed in her eyes, and I could tell that this was painful for her. “When I wouldn’t, she tortured your father and his family until they just up and left during the night.”

“She wouldn’t let me speak to your mother,” Johnathan said. “My letters were returned unopened. When I called, she would say all sorts of

horrible things to me. She cursed me for everything but a child of God. She said that I ruined her child and that no Christian man would ever want her because she was too young to be pregnant out of wedlock. I tried for months, and finally, she changed the number. I tried to come back for her, for both of you. But by the time I got there, they had moved to Florida.”

“I gave birth to you alone,” Sienna said, wiping her face. “Neither of my parents came to the hospital. They refused to take me when I went into labor. I had to catch the bus. There I was, fourteen... nine months pregnant, in labor, and alone. When I saw you, my heart fell in love with you. I wanted you, baby. I wanted you so bad. I didn’t know how I was going to raise you, but I wanted you.”

She was quiet for a moment as we watched her husband console her. She cleared her throat and continued.

“My mother came to the hospital a few days after you were born. She had me sign some papers. She told me that they were forms to file for your social security card and birth certificate. Unbeknownst to me, she had me sign away my rights to you. When the nurse came to take you away, I thought they were just taking you to the nurse. I went to look for you, and you were gone.”

She broke down into tears again.

“She stole you from me!” She cried. “I tried everything to get you back, but by that time, you had been adopted, and your records were sealed. Nobody believed me when I told them what my mother had done. They all thought that I was just some kid who had gotten pregnant and was regretting my decision to give you up. I looked for you even when all roads led to a dead end. The only thing I ever learned was that your adoptive parents had died and you were sent into the system. Somehow, you got lost among the thousands of other children, and no one could tell me a thing about you. Even with a name as unique as yours, it was almost like you had disappeared from the face of the earth.”

“How did you two find each other again?” Lavish asked curiously.

“Fifteen years ago, I went back home for my mother’s funeral. I didn’t even know that she had died. If it wasn’t for my aunt, I wouldn’t have known anything. We had moved back to Tennessee just two years after you were born. I hadn’t seen or spoken to my parents since I turned eighteen and moved out. So imagine the surprise when I walked into that church. I heard all of the whispers. I saw the dirty looks. But I didn’t let it faze me. I

went to the funeral simply because she was my mother. My father had me escorted out. He said I wasn't welcomed."

"I happened to be in town, visiting my grandmother when she told me the news," Johnathan said. "I could feel your mother in my spirit. I followed that feeling all over town until I found her sitting in the diner, drinking a milkshake."

He looked at her and smiled as he kissed her forehead. They looked at each other the same way that my father had looked at my mother.

"When our eyes locked, the rest was history," Johnathan said. "Even with a fifteen year hiatus, I still loved your mother as much as I did when I was sixteen. She was always meant to be with me."

Sienna cupped his face and kissed his lips. Lavish smiled.

"I need you to know and understand this, Lavish," she said, turning back to the camera. "You were... while irresponsible at our ages... you were conceived in love. You were always wanted. We *still* want you."

The tears my baby had been holding back the entire time came rushing forward. She removed the phone from her face and cried sorrowfully in my arms. Her parents shared in her cries, trying to offer her words of encouragement. When they told her that they loved her, she cried even harder. It was real, and it was genuine. Even I felt that.

I held her away from me and wiped her face.

"Take a deep breath," I said, coaching her through the breathing. She was finally able to calm down enough to return to the phone.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I've just... I've imagined this moment so many times."

"Don't you dare apologize," Sienna said.

"Do I have any siblings?"

"Yes. You have two brothers and a sister. Krystal is fourteen, and the twins Jeremy and Jason are ten."

"Do they know about me?"

"Yes. We have never kept you a secret. They are just as eager to meet you as we are. Do you have any children? Are you married?"

"I don't have any children... but I did get married almost five months ago."

"Oh, that's wonderful, sweetheart."

She angled the phone so that they could see me. "This is my husband, Mitchell."

“Oh, he’s so handsome!” Sienna exclaimed, causing me to blush a little.

“Well thank you,” I said. “It’s nice to meet you both.”

“You two make a beautiful couple. You’ll have some beautiful babies.”

Lavish smiled. “Thank you.”

“Lavish, we would love to see you in person, if that’s okay with you.”

“I’ve waited twenty-five years for that moment. I would love to see you.”

“How soon is too soon?”

Lavish looked at me. “Whenever you are available, we will come to you,” I said.

“Is this coming weekend okay?”

“That’s perfect.” They both looked at her lovingly. I just knew that this reunion was going to be everything my baby wanted and needed.

Lavish

*D*ear Lavish,
My beautiful daughter in law. Words cannot express how grateful I am that my son found you. While we won't have much time together, I cherish the time that we do have. Thank you for donating yourself to my wife and I the last couple of months. Thank you for all of the talks and the laughs and the genuine love and care you have bestowed upon this dying old man. It has been an honor and a pleasure getting to know you.

I can see in your eyes that you have been a tortured soul...longing for love and a place to call home. I truly hope that you have found both with this family. I know that you will flourish in this world. Be the best YOU that you can be.

By the time you read this, I will have passed on. Hopefully, what I have been working on for you will be complete by then. You deserve answers. You deserve to know where you come from. I hope that I am able to help you obtain that and that in doing so, you find the peace that you need. Just remember, you always have a place in this family and this family will always have a place for you.

Love,
Xavier

I had read this letter every single morning for the past week. This man didn't understand what he had given me. As we sat on our private jet, making our way to Tennessee, I nervously rubbed my hands together. I couldn't believe that I was about to meet not only my mother, but my father and my siblings was well. We had been talking on the phone or video chatting every day since we first spoke.

The conversations lasted for hours. It all seemed to flow so naturally. I had learned so much about them already. I couldn't wait to get off of this plane and meet them.

"Are you nervous?" Mitchell asked me.

"Nervous as shit but in a good way."

"You've got this, baby," he said, rubbing my back.

I smiled at him. Even though he was grieving the loss of his father, he managed to still be supportive of me. I loved him that much more for being unselfish with me.

"Thank you for coming with me, baby," I said.

"Of course I would come with you. I would never let you do this alone, Lavish. You've been right by my side this last couple of months. There is no place that I would rather be than right here with you."

He leaned in and kissed me.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you too, Mitchell." I stared in his eyes, deciding that now was as good a time as ever to give him what I had been dying to give him for what seemed like forever now.

"I have something for you," I said, reaching for my purse.

"Oh really?" He raised an eyebrow.

I pulled out a small square box with a big ribbon and handed it to him.

"What's this?" he asked, grinning extra hard.

"Open it and find out."

"You're up to something," he said, wagging his finger at me. He pulled the ribbon loose, and I was trembling with excitement. When he pulled the top off the box, his eyes widened. I could see tears forcing their way to the surface.

"Is this... are you for real?" he asked, his lips trembling.

"Yes. I'm about ten weeks. We are having a baby," I said, putting his hand on my stomach. He dropped his head in his free hand and began to cry.

“I’m gonna be a daddy,” he whispered. “I’m gonna be a daddy.”

“The best daddy because you had an amazing example,” I said, rubbing his back.

“I did.” He nodded. “God, I wish he could be here for this.”

“He knew. I told him the moment I found out because I wanted to share it with him while I could.”

“Thank you for that, baby. He would have loved this child so much.”

“He’ll be watching over us. He told me that himself.”

He smiled weakly as he pulled my face to his to kiss me. While I wished my father-in-law could have experienced the birth of this child, I had no doubt that his words would reign true.

WE LANDED AT THE AIRPORT AROUND ELEVEN THAT MORNING. MITCHELL had reserved us a rental car, so we were able to hop in it and head to our hotel to check in. After we dropped off our luggage, I sent my mother a text, letting her know that we were on the way. My mother... it felt weird and right all at the same time calling her that. But that was what she was. I had a real family all along that was looking for me. I was wanted... and I was loved.

The closer we got to the house, the more my nerves were on pins and needles. My legs were shaking, and my hands trembled. I was sure I was sweating, and my mouth felt dry as fuck.

“Relax, baby.” Mitchell chuckled, grabbing my hand. “Everything is going to be okay. I have your back.”

He lifted my hand and kissed it. I was so happy that he was here. His support meant the world to me. He knew that I desperately needed to find my identity, and he wouldn’t let me go through that alone.

The GPS notified us that we were close. I squeezed Mitchell’s hand. I could feel my heart begin racing. It was pumping so loud that I could literally hear the blood coursing through my veins. I think I might have held my breath until we pulled in the yard.

I stared at the cute little bungalow. It looked like a family home. It was surrounded by a white picket fence and all. In front of the porch were beautifully trimmed rose bushes. The porch was tastefully decorated with a

swing, a few rocking chairs, a couple of plants, and a huge welcome sign. On the door was a beautiful wreath with an M initial in the middle.

“Baby? Baby!” Mitchell called.

“Huh?” I said, snapping back.

“Can I have my hand back?” He laughed. “My fingers are starting to cramp.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, letting go. “I’m so nervous.”

“Relax, baby. They already love you. You can feel that. They have waited just as long for this moment as you have. Y’all deserve this.”

He leaned over and kissed me sweetly.

“Now come on here, mama,” he said, rubbing my belly. He got out of the car and, as usual, came to open my door. I stepped out and took a deep breath. Mitchell grabbed my hand and led me up the driveway. We were almost at the top when the front door opened. I stopped in my tracks. I wouldn’t be able to move another step until I laid eyes on them.

A few seconds later, they stepped onto the porch. I could feel the tears swelling up in my eyes. My mother descended the stairs as I took her in. She was about my height and my complexion. I had her hair texture and her shape. I could finally say I knew what to look forward to when I was her age. At thirty nine, she didn’t look a day over twenty five.

Mitchell let go of my hand and gave me a small push forward. My feet had a mind of their own because there was no way that I was carrying myself toward her. We were about a foot apart when we came to a stop. I looked at her, and she looked at me. She reached out her trembling hands to touch my face. They traveled down my shoulders and arms as if she was trying to make sure I was real. She cupped my hands in hers and kissed them several times.

She began to cry... and then I began to cry. Once she pulled me into her arms, I literally fell in love with her. I could feel the love pulsating through her and into me. My heart had never felt so full.

“My baby!” She cried. “Oh God, my baby!” She rocked me back and forth, kissing all over my tear-stained face. “I love you so much! I never stopped loving you!”

I felt that with every bone in my body. For all the years I had people telling me that no one would ever love me, that I didn’t deserve or wasn’t worthy of love, here were two people who had loved me my entire life. My mother and I shared our moment, and when we finally calmed down, my

father came down the steps. My mother smiled through her tears and pushed him forward to meet me.

His eyes were already red. He was a handsome man, and like my mother, he looked nothing like his forty-one years of age. He was tall, maybe an inch or two shorter than Mitchell, and my complexion. I had his nose and his ears. He must have realized it, too, because his hands immediately went to my ears, and he smiled.

“You may look like your mother, but these ears are all me,” he said. We shared a laugh, and he kissed my forehead before pulling me into his arms, and I melted.

“My baby girl. I love you so much. I’m so sorry we couldn’t save you.”

The tears started flowing once again. At this point, I was glad I didn’t wear any makeup. The three of us must have cried together for a good five minutes before we were able to gather ourselves.

“You must be Mitchell,” my father said.

“I am,” Mitchell replied, finally coming amongst us. He shook my father’s hand and embraced my mother. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you too,” my mother said. “Thank you for being here with her.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t be anywhere else,” he said, kissing my cheek.

“Come on inside. There are some people who can’t wait to meet you.”

We instinctively grabbed our partners’ hands at the same time as we headed up the front steps and into the house. Kira would love my mother. Inside was decorated like something out of a magazine. I smiled as I saw the “Welcome Home” party banner. There were balloons and food and even a few gifts.

In the middle of the room were a group of seven adults and at least eight kids of various ages. The first three kids approached me, and I recognized them as my siblings. We smiled at each other, and they instantly came into my arms.

“I’ve always wanted a little brother or sister,” I said, looking down at them. “Now I have three. “It’s so good to finally see you.”

“It is!” Krystal said, looping her arm through mine. “I’ve always wanted an older sister. That way these two demons can’t team up and outnumber me.” She pointed at my brothers, and they frowned.

“Hey!” they said in unison.

Krystal and I laughed.

“Don’t give her the wrong impression of us,” Jeremy said.

“Yeah!” Jason agreed. “We’ll at least let you get use to the family before we torture you, okay?”

Everyone laughed. I could tell there was never a dull moment with these two.

“It’s a deal,” I said. My father came over and took my hand, leading me over to introduce everyone else.

“This is your uncle, my older brother, Kevin; his wife, Janine; and their kids, Melanie, Kyzer, and Andrew.”

They all hugged me, and we continued with the introductions. “This is your aunt, my older sister, Lonnie; her husband, Chad; and their kids, Chasity and Marc.”

They all smiled and hugged me as well. The last two people were an older couple. I looked from the to my father, guessing that they were his parents.

“Grandparents, am I right?” I asked with a smile.

“You are,” my grandfather said, embracing me. “Oh, you’re so beautiful, sweetheart.” He kissed my cheek.

“Thank you.” I grinned. My grandmother took my hands.

“I’m so sorry we didn’t fight harder against your grandmother for you and your mother,” she said, tears streaming down her face. “I hope you can forgive us.”

“I don’t hold any grudges,” I said. “It means enough to me that you all tried.”

She pulled me into her arms, and she and my grandfather hugged me tightly. There was so much love in this room that I was about to burst at the seams. When our embrace ended, I reached for Mitchell’s hand.

“This is my husband, Mitchell,” I said. “His father is the reason for all of this. He found my mother.”

“Well, you just come in here and give me a hug,” my grandmother said, opening her arms. Mitchell smiled and went to her as she scooped him up in a bear hug. She hugged him so tight, I think his feet may have left the ground. “Your father blessed this family.”

“He definitely blessed my baby,” Mitchell said. “I wished he could have lived to see this moment.”

“We would have loved to meet him,” my grandfather said. “We could never repay him for what he has given us.”

That was the truth. Xavier had given me so much more than I ever could have asked for. I was blessed with his son, I was carrying his future grandchild, and now I had the family I belonged to. I couldn't ask for anything more.

I THOROUGHLY ENJOYED THE TIME SPENT WITH MY PARENTS AND FAMILY. They showered me with love and affection. I told them all about me, every single detail of the life I lived up until now. They were shocked and upset and even cried. They were so apologetic. I didn't hold any grudges toward them. My parents were kids when they had me. Just knowing that they wanted me and looked for me was enough. We couldn't change the hands of time. We couldn't take back anything that happened. All we could do was try to move forward.

"We have some things for you," my mother said, standing and going to the table where the gifts were. My father helped her bring them over.

"It's nothing fancy, just a few things to remember us by," she said.

"I'm sure that I will love them," I said, smiling. I opened the first couple of gifts, and they were all beautifully framed pictures of my family. The last one was a picture of me and my mother the day I was born. Even as young as she was, I could see the love in her eyes as she looked at me.

"Now that we have found you, we will have to get some updated pictures in here," my father said.

"Well I have plenty from today," Mitchell said. "Videos too. I can send them to you."

"Please?"

As they exchanged numbers and Mitchell sent them over, I opened the last gift. It was a beautiful knit baby blanket.

"I made this for you when your father told me your mother was expecting," my grandmother said. "All these years, I kept it safe in hopes that we would find you. Of course you don't need it now." She chuckled. "But I wanted you to have it."

"Actually..." I said, smiling at Mitchell, "...we do need it, as we are expecting our first child."

"Oh my God!" went up around the room.

“I’m about ten weeks.”

“Well this just keeps getting better and better!” my grandmother said, her hand on her heart. “Congratulations, baby.”

“Thank you.” I looked down at the blanket, running my fingers over the soft fabric. “This has been everything that I ever dreamed it would be. For so long I felt like I never belonged anywhere. I was damaged and broken.” I turned to my husband. “You saved me, Mitchell. You brought me out of a dark place, and I am ever so grateful for you. You cared for me even when I was less than welcoming. You have loved me unconditionally. You gave me a family with yours, and in return, I was blessed to not only find my birth family, but I was able to start one of my own. I love you with everything that is in me, and I am so honored to be your wife.”

I grabbed his face gently and kissed him passionately.

“I would do anything for you, baby,” he said. “You are my rib, Lavish. The way that things happened between us... it was nothing but fate that we met. You gave me everything when you gave yourself to me. I’d gladly spend the rest of my life trying to give you the world. You are everything to me, baby.”

We stared at each other lovingly as my family smiled. To think that five months ago, I woke up drunk and married to a stranger that made me want to punch him every time he opened his mouth. Now I was madly in love with him and having his child. Everything I had been through had led me to this moment. It was unfortunate that life had to break me down to get here, but I was here now.

I was happy.

I had security.

And I was loved beyond this world.

There was no feeling that could top this.

EPILOGUE

Eighteen Months Later

“*H*ey there, precious.” My mother cooed at my baby girl, Michelle Xavia Keonig. “How is grandma’s baby?”

She kissed her little cheeks, and she smiled. My baby was almost nine months old, and I was so in love with her. She was the perfect mixture of me and Mitchell. My mother said that she looked just like me when I was born.

“Grandma’s baby has given me a run for my money all morning,” I said as I changed her bedding. My parents had come to visit for the next two weeks, and I just knew that Michelle was going to be spoiled rotten by the time they left.

Mitchell and I had made it a point to visit them once a month since we met. He had even flown everybody out when I gave birth so that they could share in the moment as well. He had been so supportive of this journey, and I couldn’t thank him enough.

“Aww, I don’t believe that,” my mother said, tickling my daughter. “Say, I’m just getting you ready for double the trouble, aren’t you, pumpkin?”

I was pregnant again with our second child. I couldn’t even be upset at my six-week checkup when they told me I was expecting. I just looked at Mitchell, and he grinned with excitement. He was a wonderful father. He

took up so much time with Michelle. He read to her and sang to her. I never had to get up in the middle of the night with her because he was on his feet the moment that she started crying or made even the slightest noise. I thought he was bad about spoiling Jacey, but now that he had his own daughter, he was going to be hell.

“Don’t hog her, Sienna,” my father said. “Grandpa wants some loving too.” He slipped my baby from my mother’s arms and held her in the air as she grinned and drooled.

“Give me those little cheeks!” He blew raspberries into her little rolls. She was so tickled. “I could never get tired of this laugh,” he said, smiling.

“Me either, Daddy,” I said.

He still teared up slightly whenever I called him that. Even though it had been the most wonderful eighteen months with them, I was still in shock that all of this was real. I was married, I had my own little family, and I finally had the part of me that had been missing for so long.

Things had been beyond amazing.

Mitchell had sold all of his dealerships. He wanted to devote most of his time to being a father. He had taken over his father’s charities, just as he promised him. I saw the change in him since he began actively working with them. He was much humbler. Of course, he still liked to spend his money, but he was a lot more grateful for what he had.

He vowed not to touch his father’s money until he could find something useful to do with it. And he had done just that. He was constructing several apartment buildings that would house low-income families. They were beautiful apartments. Kira came up with the interior designs for the buildings, and Valarie suggested the idea of adding a twenty-four-hour daycare in the building at no extra cost for the tenants. Elvin covered rent for the first year for every single building. Even after that year was up, the rent would remain affordable.

They did all of this to honor their late father’s memory. My mother-in-law and I had teamed up to run my father-in-law’s nonprofit for at-risk youth. We offered counseling services, after school programs, lunch programs, sports, and big brother/big sister programs. I was in love with the whole thing. It felt amazing to give back to our community—to give another child, another family the chance I wished someone had given me growing up.

I looked at my life now, and I was blessed beyond measure. I saw myself as a beautiful, confident woman, wife, and mother. I had love, I had health, and I had a family. That was more than I could ever ask for. And to think, this was all made possible because I accepted a marriage proposal from a stranger. Our story was strange and difficult to explain or understand for some. But for us... it was perfect timing.

The End

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *I Could Fall In Love*. I hope that you enjoyed Lavish and Mitchell's story as much as I enjoyed writing it! Join my mailing list and stay connected with me for sneak peaks of upcoming books, giveaways, and more!

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