



I'M THE

remedy

MONICA WALTERS

I'M THE REMEDY

A BEROTTE FAMILY BOOK

MONICA WALTERS

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Also by Monica Walters

INTRODUCTION

Hello, readers!

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

bit.ly/3zrlUVk

This is book four of a new family of books... The Berotte Family (pronounced Bee-Rot). It starts with the father, and the following books trickle down to the kids. So if some things seem incomplete where the sub characters are involved, that was done intentionally. Those issues will be resolved in their books. It is highly recommended that you read the previous books of this family series before indulging in this one, because it picks up right where the last one left off.

Love On Replay

Deeper Than Love

Something You Won't Forget

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

Shyrón (Pronunciation: Shy-Ron) is something serious! Whew! Poor Brittany didn't stand a chance. LOL! I hope you enjoy the ride this story is going to take you on.

Monica

Brittany,

You have always been my baby. Although you're my youngest sister, I begged Mama to be your godmother. She allowed it! Being that I'm ten years older than you, I've always felt like I was a second mama to you instead of your sister. I remember I was ready to beat up a little boy for picking with you at church when you were only two years old. The little boy couldn't have been older than four. I was twelve! (Lord have mercy). LOL!

As we grew older and you became an adult, our relationship transitioned into sisters (in my eyes). However, I was still extremely protective of you. It would irritate me when you kept things to yourself... (hospital incident). Of course, I now know that's just your personality and how you do things. I know if you need to talk, you will, so I've learned not to push.

I've watched you become a wife and a mother, and your strength inspires me. Seeing you raise a special needs son with so much love and patience helps me in ways you wouldn't believe. I'm proud of the woman you have become.

Thank you for playing a critical role in my career and always looking out for me. Had it not been for you, I wouldn't have met B. Love in Dallas at the Girl, Have You Met event in 2018. I had never even heard of it. Your support means the world to me, and it was past time to make you the inspiration for a character of mine. Thank you for allowing me to do so! Knowing that you are shy, I was surprised you allowed me to share your pictures all over the place. LOL!

I love you, and although we're sisters, I feel like you prepared me for motherhood. You'll always be my first baby. Continue being the amazing woman and mother that you are and know that I will always have your back.

Love Your Big Sis,

Mon

CHAPTER 1

S_hyrón

SHE LOOPED HER ARM AROUND MINE, AND WE MADE OUR WAY down the aisle. My dad was so happy, and the last thing I wanted to do was start drama at his wedding, but... the nigga in me wouldn't allow her to be this close to me and not say something, especially since she'd been avoiding me. "You know, if you paid attention to the nigga in front of you, you wouldn't be worried about the bitch nigga that should be behind you."

The smile fell from her lips, and she turned to me. I could see the shock on her face, but I didn't care. She was playing games. "Smile, Brittany. The cameras are flashing. Don't act like you shocked. You know I've been watching your fine ass for a while. I was trying to respect your relationship until I realized how toxic that shit is. I don't know why you letting that muthafucka disrespect you when the nigga you walking with right now waiting to treat you like royalty."

She plastered on a fake smile, and I noticed Alexz had caught on to her vibe. They were staring at one another. "Shyrón, this isn't the time for this conversation, but aside from that, I love my man."

I chuckled as she glanced at me. That nigga was far from being a man. "Oh, that's what y'all women call a man these days? A nigga that talk to you like you trash? I'm exhausted watching the shit, so I know you gotta be tired of it."

“What do you mean? Are you watching me?”

I slid my hand down my chin as we approached the altar, to split and go our separate ways, but I left her with something to think about. “When you ever known a priceless treasure to be left unattended?”

Her face reddened just that quickly as she walked to her place next to Alexz. When I got to my place next to Chad, he leaned over and said, “What the fuck you say to her?”

“That she need to quit fucking with that bitch she with and fuck with me.”

He slowly shook his head. “You couldn’t wait until the reception?”

“Nope. Now she has time to think about what she gon’ do.”

He slowly shook his head again as Dylan and a very pregnant Skyler made their way down the aisle. I was proud of my lil brother for putting his player ways behind him and finding his forever. I didn’t realize I would be the one to introduce her to him. Since they first saw one another, they’d been entranced. Dylan couldn’t fucking function if Skyler wasn’t around these days. They dived all the way in right away. She was about seven months pregnant, and they’d barely been together eight months.

I was ready for something like that... beyond ready. My dad had said I was way too picky though. There was nothing wrong with having a preference. I liked short women... always had. Five feet five inches or shorter. Dimples caught my attention, and she had to have some meat on her bones. Skyler was a beautiful woman, but she was way too skinny for me. Plus, she was absolutely meant for Dylan. I needed something to grab onto... something to squeeze when I was fucking her just right.

I had been watching Brittany for almost a damn year. It was past time for me to make a move. Her nigga had only been getting worse as time passed, and she was being too accepting of the shit that should be beneath her. She deserved

the world and all heaven had to offer, but she was letting that fuck nigga drag her through hell like she belonged there. I was sick of watching that shit. She apparently needed someone to rescue her.

As I glanced over at her, I could see her glancing at me too. She was thinking about the shit I put in her ear. There was nothing to think about. She'd been watching me too. I knew she wanted a piece of my love, but unlike Dylan, I didn't fuck with women already in relationships... normally. When I first saw Brittany, I wanted her thick ass. After I realized she had a man, I kept my distance, but I never took my eyes off her. I'd even had somebody watching her for the past six months to make sure her nigga didn't go too far.

If he ever put his hands on her, he would be a dead man, no question. There were ways around the law, and I'd been researching every loophole that would get me off for slitting his fucking throat. However, if I had my way, things wouldn't get to that point. He was a bitch that was too scared to go toe to toe with a man. They were usually the type to be abusive to women. While from the outside, I looked like the educated professional that I was when he saw me, he would get an entirely different side of me when I went there to move Brittany out of that house.

I tuned back in to the wedding, just as my dad was saluting his bride. Brittany had my mind so gone, I had never even seen Mama Nissa walk down the aisle. Thankfully, we were in the same venue that the reception would take place in because I would snatch Brittany's ass up and make her ride with me so we could talk. I almost wished her nigga would have been here, but it was probably good that he wasn't. I would have fucked this wedding up by now.

As we walked out, Brittany hesitantly looped her arm around mine again. I could feel the tension in her as we walked. Before we could get to the foyer, she said, "You don't get to just say whatever you want to say to me."

"Oh, and he does? He can tell you to shut the fuck up when you're trying to express your opinion? Or wait... he can tell you to make sure you clean the fucking house today after

you've worked like a fucking dog for nine hours? What about telling you that you waited too fucking long to fold his clothes and now his shit is wrinkled, so you'll have to iron his shit. Need I go on?"

She frowned hard, and I frowned just as hard. When her facial expression eased and her eyes watered, I knew I had gone too far. I grabbed her hand as I licked my lips. "I'm not tryna hurt you. I'm tryna make you see the bullshit you been subjecting yourself to. That shit done became normal for you. That watered down life ain't healthy. Let me put some protein in your shit, Brittany."

She slid her hand away from mine and walked away to be with Alexz, Skyler, and Mama Nissa's friend Yolanda. I was sure she picked up on that double meaning my statement had. I slid my hand down my chin and went to chill with Chad. Besides my dad and Skyler, he was the only one that knew about my attraction to Brittany. I was more than sure they all knew now though. I didn't give a fuck. I'd put all my cards on the table. As long as *she* knew how I felt, I didn't care who else knew.

I probably would have come at her differently had she not been avoiding me since the rehearsal dinner last night. She knew that I'd been feeling her, and I knew she was feeling me. So that little charade she put on earlier like she was shocked by what I said had to only be for her benefit, because I saw right through it.

I flopped down in my seat as Dylan set a glass of Hennessy in front of me. I kept my eyes on Brittany while they took pictures with Mama Nissa. She was going to be mine whether she saw it or not, but right now, I was a little heated. Her response to me was driving me insane. I expected to be able to be friendly with her last night and tell her how I felt about her, but instead, whenever she saw me getting near her, she would take off like I had fucking leprosy or some shit. I felt like she was being childish about this.

However, the more I thought about it, I realized that nigga either had a hold on her or she was scared. I needed to ease her mind. Although I was patient at times, now that I had made a

move and made her aware of how I felt, patience wasn't something either of us could afford. Had that nigga been here with her, I still would have said the same things I said. I didn't give a fuck about him at this point. As I sat here, I tried to allow my core to soften so I could get her to talk to me. I needed to know what her issue with this was. I was obviously a better option.

Just from what my guy Ali told me, the nigga was home all day but had the audacity to fuss at her for not cleaning and cooking. He didn't go to work until six in the evening and was off by midnight. I didn't have Ali following him, but I'd done a background check on his ass. He was in the system because he'd done a couple of years for theft. He had a couple of charges for misdemeanor petty theft before that. I supposed he wanted to test his nonexistent luck and steal a car after that.

“Nigga, what’chu gon’ do? I’ve been sitting here watching you stare the clothes off that woman and drink that Hennessy like it’s water.”

I looked over at Chad, but I didn't answer him right away. I was planning in my head what I would say. Being reckless with her earlier didn't work, although that was just how I was naturally. I didn't bite my tongue usually, unless it involved a client, and it would break attorney-client privilege. Finally answering him while I kept my eyes on Brittany, I said, “I’m strategizing, nigga.”

He chuckled then said, “Man, come on so we can take these group pictures.”

We'd taken our solo pictures with Dad before the wedding. The women were running a little behind schedule, so they weren't able to get all their pictures done before people started arriving. The photographer wanted us coupled off like we had been for the wedding, and as I made my way to Brittany, I could see the tension fill her shoulders. They became stiff and somewhat lifted. She'd always been calm around me... around our entire family. I needed that calmness back. When I got to her, I stood behind her as the photographer suggested. I rested one hand on her hip and grabbed her hand with the other. “I’m sorry, Brittany.”

I could feel her relax a bit, but she only nodded in response, so I asked, “Can we talk after pictures?”

She turned her head and glanced up at me. “Not after pictures, but we can talk some time before I leave. We have a lot to talk about, and, honestly, I’m hungry. I may not be able to eat after I talk to you.”

Although I wanted to kiss her lips, I gave her a slight smile as I felt her relax a bit more. The photographer was ready, so we began posing the way we were instructed so we could get the pictures over with. Once they were done and we were walking away to our seats at the head table, the photographer stopped us and asked, “Would y’all like to take solo pictures?”

Before Brittany could even object, I grabbed her hand and said, “Yeah, let’s do it.”

Her eyes widened, but she didn’t object like I knew she wanted to. I supposed she didn’t want to embarrass me. What she failed to realize was that I wasn’t easily embarrassed. Everyone was shot down at least once.

When we got to the backdrop, I gently pulled her to me, and she rested her hands on my chest. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Getting proof of how good we look together... manifesting our destiny... showing you what it’s like to be adored... Need I go on?”

“Shy—”

“Naw. Just enjoy the moment. That nigga ain’t gon’ see these pictures. He got family here or something?”

“No.”

“A’ight then. Chill out.”

We turned to the cameraman and smiled, then he started putting us in other poses. When he had me sit in a chair and told Brittany to sit on my lap, she went stiff. I could see her cheeks turn rosy and her eyes became shifty. Gently grabbing her hand, I slowly pulled her to me. Her eyes met mine, and

the moment was so intense. This was how I wanted to pull her away from that fuckboy she was with.

She eventually sat on my leg, her posture extremely straight, like I had shit on me. I grabbed her hand and pulled her arm around my shoulder as I wrapped my arms around her waist, pulling her closer. She stared at me like she'd never done before. When I saw the passion in her eyes, I knew that my advances weren't for nothing. She wanted me to snatch her ass away from that nigga. That shit would be my fucking pleasure. If I had my way, I would do that shit in his face.

I stroked her arm and watched the goosebumps appear, then stared up into her eyes. "Give me permission to take you from that nigga. Let me show you what it's like to have a real one taking care of your every need and desire. Let me be the man to love you and take you to ecstasy with my every touch."

I could feel the flashes of the photographer's camera while I spoke to her with my heart. I wanted her to know my intentions were pure. It wasn't just about sex. I'd gotten to know her over the past year or so. She attended some of our family functions, but the barbeque when Dad met Anissa was when I knew I wanted her to be mine. That was when I was first able to say more than hello to her.

She brought her hand to my cheek, and my body heated up slightly. She licked her beautiful lips, and I wanted to dive in to get to that tongue. "Prove it, Shyrón. I'm not about to jump from the skillet to the frying pan. You're always aggressive. Show me your tender side."

"You'll get my tender side when I know you're receptive to me. You know damn well that nigga ain't on the same playing field with me. He still playing ball in the park. I'm on the world stage. Don't fucking insult me like that. You know better. Now do better."

"Okay, y'all. I think I got some really great shots. I'll give them to the bride once I edit them."

I gave the photographer a head nod as Brittany stood from my lap. She looked nervous as hell, and I knew that she was nervous about where this could lead, but she was gon' have to

drop those inhibitions with me. I wasn't that nigga, and on his best day, he couldn't be half the man I could be to her. When she realized that, the better off we would both be.

CHAPTER 2

*B*rittany

“GIRL, WHAT THE HELL WRONG WIT’CHU?” ALEXZ ASKED ME.

I cut my eyes at her as I sat next to her. “I guess you didn’t see the shit Shyrón pulled. The photographer asked if we wanted to take solo pictures, like we’re a damn couple, and he said yes and pulled me to the damn backdrop.”

“Why didn’t you tell him no? I know yo’ ass feeling him, so don’t even answer that. What about Lamar?”

“I love Lamar, you know that. Hopefully, he’ll never see these pictures. Shyrón is the type of man you can’t say no to. His aura sucks you in if you get too close. I got too close today for way too long.”

“Girl... I didn’t know he was feeling you like that. He kept that shit under wraps. Imagine that. The nigga that can’t hold cold water around his family kept that shit tucked tight. You want me to talk to him? Tell him to leave you alone? I know you’re the type to be extremely reserved when you aren’t totally comfortable. But I also know how passive you are. You ain’t gon’ hurt that nigga feelings if you tell him to back the fuck off.”

I glanced around to make sure I wasn’t being watched. Shy had revealed that he had someone watching me. While I wanted to be annoyed by that, I was grateful at the same time. Lamar was getting more aggressive with every passing day,

and if he ever tried to take things too far, I felt comfortable knowing that someone would be there for me. I didn't know how I allowed this shit to get so deep. We'd been together for nearly four years, and in the beginning, I thought he was everything I wanted in a man.

Lamar was considerate, compassionate, and caring. He was always looking out for me. Things changed when we started living together. It was like he thought he had a live-in maid and sex toy. I was sick of the shit. His temper was getting increasingly worse, and his aggressiveness turned me off. Maybe it was his authoritativeness when he demanded things of me. I was afraid that one day all that aggressiveness would result in him hitting me. He'd already shoved me a couple of times. The last time, I fell to the floor.

After taking a deep breath, I turned to Alexz and said, "I'll handle it."

I grabbed my fork and picked at the turkey on my plate. I loved fried turkey, but my nerves were on edge, and I couldn't eat. That was saying a lot. I hadn't gained all this weight from fasting. I loved good food and sweets, but Lamar constantly made me feel like I was too big, as if his ass hadn't gained weight too. I brought the fork of rice dressing and baked beans to my mouth and closed my eyes.

I couldn't shake the feeling I got when Shyrón wrapped his arms around me. I felt safe, loved, and cherished... things I hadn't felt in a long time with Lamar. I'd always been attracted to Shy, and if I was honest with myself, I knew that he'd been attracted to me as well. That was the reason why I did my best to avoid one-on-one situations with him. Today couldn't be helped. I was hoping they would have paired me with Chad. I knew I wouldn't be paired with Isaiah, because I would have had to be Anissa's maid of honor.

I didn't really know Ms. Anissa well, but I was extremely honored to be a part of their wedding. I'd known Mr. Berotte for a while, and I knew the family history. This moment in time was a beautiful one, and I had no intentions of missing it, whether I was a part of it or not. However, Alexz was paired

with Chad. That shit was a disaster waiting to happen. They elbowed one another all the way down the aisle.

The other lady in the wedding was Dylan's girlfriend, so I had no choice but to walk with Shyrón. I never expected him to go there while we were walking down the aisle. I knew he was irritated with me the night before. Whenever I saw him heading to where I was, I would leave the area. Today was proof that I was justified in that. You never knew who knew who. Someone that knew Lamar could be here and wouldn't have a problem telling him how I was all in another nigga's lap.

Not that he should be upset, since I knew he was fucking around on me. Maybe my self-esteem was lacking. I didn't know what it was other than the fact that I didn't want to be alone. My parents were way in Natchitoches, Louisiana. I'd come to Beaumont to go to Lamar University. They had one of the best nursing programs, so I was excited when I got accepted. Fast forward eleven years, and I was still here. The only friends I really had were the Berottes... well, Alexz.

We met in college. I was a couple of years ahead of her, but we had an instant connection. She was everything I wished I could be. It just wasn't in my DNA to be as assertive and aggressive as she was. So I found myself living vicariously through her. Lamar, the nigga named after the school I went to, was toxic. Fear kept me from letting go. I first discovered he was cheating nearly a year ago, and he began flaunting his flirtatious ways right in front of me. We'd argue, but ultimately, he knew I wasn't going anywhere. The shit was pathetic.

As I ate a little of my food, I could feel eyes on me. When I looked up, I caught Shyrón's gaze. *Jesus*. He was so fine... from his light brown skin covering all six feet of him and his perfectly groomed beard, to his gold and platinum grill and his immeasurable swag. With him being an attorney, I knew he was resourceful. He was probably more informed on Lamar than I was. He didn't strike me as the shy type, but he was definitely respectful until he felt he didn't have a reason to be. Apparently, he felt he didn't owe Lamar an ounce of respect

anymore; otherwise, he wouldn't have ever come at me the way he did.

I quickly averted my gaze only for him to approach me. "Alexz, let me sit there."

She frowned. "For what, nigga? I'm sitting with my girl."

"Because I wanna sit next to my girl too."

My eyebrows lifted as did Alexz's. This nigga was so fucking bold. I loved that though. He wasn't afraid to go after what or who he wanted. I was flattered to know that he wanted me. I knew that I was pretty, but I was so self-conscious about my weight. There were days I actually hated looking at myself in the mirror. I knew if I didn't like what I saw, then I should do something to change it, but that was easier said than done, especially when I passed down the aisle with the hostess cakes and the bakery at the grocery store. Sweets of all types were my weakness.

Exercise was pretty nonexistent in my daily routine. By the time I got off work, I was wiped out. Dr. Ax was gaining new patients every day it seemed. He was an amazing doctor, despite how cocky his ass was. The people were coming in droves to see him. It didn't help that he was easy on the eyes. Before long, he was going to have to hire another nurse to keep up. Then once I got off, I had to deal with Lamar's bullshit. Every day, it was something different that he found to complain about. Maybe I was lowkey depressed.

Alexz was staring at me, waiting to see what I would say. I glanced at Shy, and he flashed that damn grill at me. If I didn't know he was a lawyer, I would swear he was a thug. His swag was so appealing though. I took a deep breath then said, "It's okay, Alexz."

She gave me a look that said, *Okay, bitch!* I wanted to laugh, but I had to keep my cool. The way she lowered her head and lifted her eyebrows even more than they already were always made me laugh. When she stood from her seat, she said, "Nigga, that's my friend. Don't be running her off."

"I'd never run her off. I'm tryna get her to be closer."

He said that shit while staring at me, and a chill slithered up my spine. When he sat next to me, he said, “I just wanna spend time with you. I know you’ll probably be leaving in a lil while.”

His lip twitched when he said that, and I knew it had everything to do with who I was going home to. He reached over, grabbed my fork, and said, “You need to eat, girl. I need this figure to stay just like it is.”

When he lifted the fork with green beans, I literally wanted to cry. Choosing not to say a word in response, I simply opened my mouth and took what he was feeding me. He held my gaze, which caused me to quickly divert it to the people dancing. Shy wasn’t having it though. “I know I ain’t get shit wrong, Brittany. If you wasn’t feeling me, I wouldn’t even be pressing you like this, but I know what I feel from you. I’m a smart man... hella smart. I know my perception of the vibes you giving off ain’t skewed. If you worried about that nigga, I got’chu. I promise I do. I’ll move you in my house tonight if you that worried about his ass.”

He gave me more food, and I accepted it. I was grateful because I didn’t know what to say in response to what he’d said. While I *did* know Shy, I didn’t know Shy. I didn’t know how he was in a relationship. I’d never seen him with a woman for as long as I had been coming around. Dylan either, for that matter, but he seemed to be doing great. I supposed with a dad as strong as Mr. Berotte, they didn’t have a choice but to know how to treat a woman.

After I swallowed my food, I said, “I need time to think about this. I don’t want to have to depend on anyone. That’s my apartment we’re living in. My lease isn’t up for a couple of months. I don’t need him doing anything to mess up my reputation.”

He shook his head slowly. “You obviously don’t understand the meaning of I got’chu. It’s cool though. I’ll fall back and let you handle it. I ain’t falling that far back though. I want you, girl... all of you. And I ain’t gon’ rest until I have you. Get yo’ mind ready, because I’m firing at all cylinders, short stack.”

“Short stack?”

He smiled then bit his bottom lip. “Mm hmm. Short and stacked. Fine as fuck. Too fine to be putting up wit’ a nigga that ain’t got shit going for himself.” He grabbed my hand and kissed it, and my soul nearly left my body. “But I’m here to change that. I just need you to promise me that you gon’ let me.”

I cleared my throat, trying to bring my mind back from the pits of hell. Before I could respond, he said, “I’m not saying that has to happen today, Brittany. I can be patient, but a nigga ain’t waiting long. I’ll walk in that apartment and snatch that nigga out of there. I been dying to get at his ass anyway. Just say the word. I already got my defense planned out.”

“So it would be premeditated?”

He frowned. “Says who?”

“Nobody.”

He gave me a look like he wasn’t so sure about me anymore... like he thought I would snitch. One of his eyes was squinted, because he’d lifted the right side of his top lip. He released my hand and was about to stand from his seat. “Shyrón, I was only joking. I would never snitch on someone who was defending or protecting me. I apologize.”

It was clear that he had my best interest at heart. I would be a fool not to see it. I could also see that there were certain things he didn’t joke about. He felt threatened. I wasn’t trying to give off that type of vibe. I’d never seen this side of him, and it was making me nervous as hell. This was my problem. I never wanted to be on anyone’s bad side. I was too fucking considerate... even of people that didn’t seem to give a damn about me or my feelings.

He continued staring at me, and I couldn’t take that. It wasn’t the same stare he’d been giving me for the last couple of hours. This stare was filled with hesitancy and doubt. He was debating whether he could trust me or not. I took a gulp of my tea, then I stood to throw my plate away. Before I could walk away, Shy stood as well. I thought he would have

something more to say to me, but he didn't. He walked away, leaving me staring at him, wishing I could take my words back.

Now it was time to go home. I felt sick inside, knowing that I had him feeling a way about me. After throwing my plate away, I went to the dressing room to retrieve my things from a locker. My feet were hurting anyway, and I was just ready to clean this makeup off my face and get in my sweats and fuzzy socks. Hopefully, Lamar wouldn't be home when I got there. He was off on Saturday and Sunday nights. He was probably out fucking around, like he usually did.

After getting my things, I headed out of the door and ran right into Alexz. "Shit! You scared the hell out of me."

"Sorry. What happened? Why are you leaving already?"

"It's late, and I'm tired."

She twisted her lips to the side. "What did Shy do?"

"Nothing. You walking me out?"

"I guess so."

She grabbed my hand, and we made our way to the foyer. I was grateful that I didn't have to walk through the reception area to leave the building, because I was embarrassed about how Shy took what I had to say. Before we could leave out of the door, I heard his voice. "Why are y'all about to walk out there at night by yourselves? Just asking for trouble. Y'all gotta be smarter than that."

"Nigga, shut up. Stand here and keep watch then," Alexz responded.

"I ain't finna 'keep watch'. I'm walking out with y'all."

"Ugh! Where's Zay? Can he walk us out?"

"His friendly ass ain't gon' protect y'all like I can." He laughed after he said that. "I'm just clowning. Y'all pretend I ain't here."

Alexz huffed again and held my hand all the way to my car. That was when I realized I was trembling. Shy being this

close to me was driving me insane. I was so damn nervous. He didn't seem the least bit bothered like he did when he walked away from me. I didn't know how to take him. Neither of us said a word all the way to my car. Once I'd gotten my things in the back seat, I turned to Alexz and hugged her. "Give your mom and dad my best. It was a beautiful wedding."

"Call me when you get home, please."

"I will."

When I let her go, I glanced at Shyrón then went to my driver's side door. As I was about to open it, he slid his hand over mine then removed it from the handle. Instead, he opened the door for me. "Thank you," I said softly then proceeded to get in my car.

He leaned over and said, "Be careful."

He closed the door and took a step back, draping his arm around Alexz. I cranked the engine and pulled out of my parking spot, wishing I would have given him a definitive answer. By the time I got to the traffic light, my phone was ringing. After stopping, I grabbed it from my purse to see Lamar's name on the caller ID. After rolling my eyes, I answered. "Hello?"

"You think you gotta shut the damn wedding down? You need to be heading home."

"I'm on my way, Lamar. Damn."

He ended the call. Was this what I wanted? To be talked to like I was a kid? I supposed it was too late now. It felt like Shyrón's proposition was no longer on the table, and I wouldn't dare ask for clarity about it. I exhaled loudly and made my way to the pit of hell, where I was sure to be set ablaze from its flames.

CHAPTER 3

S

hydrón

MY RINGING PHONE AWAKENED ME FROM A MUCH-NEEDED NAP. I was on the couch in my office, getting the best sleep of my life. Checking the time, I saw it was nearly ten o'clock. I'd had a client call me at midnight from jail, and I'd been up almost all night. I got him off for drinking and driving once before, but I clearly told him that was a one-time deal since no one was hurt. He needed to see a therapist and get that shit under control.

When I found out that was why he'd been arrested once again, he and I went back and forth, and I ended up leaving before I knocked him the fuck out. He was drunk as hell, and it made no sense trying to talk to him that way. When I grabbed the phone from the table in front of me, I saw it was Alexz. "Yeah, what's up?"

"Hey. You wanna do lunch? Ax has a couple of colonoscopies to do today."

"Yeah. See you at noon."

"Eww. Why you sound like that?"

"I was sleep. I had a long night with a client. I'll be there at noon."

I ended the call, aggravated as hell. Now that I was awake, I knew I wouldn't be able to go back to sleep. I wasn't

aggravated with Alexz. It was the situation that had me frustrated. Standing from the couch, I left my office to fix me a cup of coffee. No sense in just sitting there feeling pissed. After starting the Keurig, Skyler appeared next to me with a boudin kolache in her hand. “I swear, you gon’ start looking like that shit.”

She shoulder bumped me. “Whatever. I’m leaving for lunch. You want me to bring you something back?”

“Naw. Alexz just called for me to go to lunch with her.”

“Mm hmm. I can’t believe you told that woman how you felt while walking her down the aisle at the wedding this past weekend.”

I supposed me mentioning Alexz brought what happened back to her pregnancy brain. “She already knew how I felt. I was just making that shit clear for her. I didn’t tell her shit that she ain’t already know. The ball is in her court. I told her I wouldn’t wait forever though. I’ll go snatch that nigga out of her apartment.”

“And do what? Force her to be with you?”

I glanced at her, only seeing her in my peripheral. “I said some other shit that I shouldn’t have said to her, and the way she responded had me questioning where her mind was. I can’t have nobody dropping a dime on me about no bullshit. So it’s probably best I let her breathe for a minute.”

I wasn’t all that comfortable telling Skyler what I said, although I knew she had my back. With her being seven months pregnant though, I didn’t want to get her all riled up, especially since she’d already dilated a centimeter. Dylan was tripping on her being at work, so I limited her to half a day in the office whenever she came in. Most days, she worked from home, which was cool. She’d hired an assistant to help her with the day to day.

“Shy, that situation is touchy. Just... be careful with that.”

“Yeah.”

“Tell Alexz my feelings hurt. She could’ve invited me to lunch. I like to eat, especially now. This baby is kicking my

ass. Mr. Berotte said your mom had the same issues when she was pregnant with Dylan. She dilated to three centimeters a month before her due date and ended up on bedrest. I only have a month and a half left, so I guess I'm doing okay, but whew! I'm tired as hell."

I chuckled at her facial expressions then rubbed her stomach. The first baby in our family was coming, and I couldn't wait to spoil her. However, I had to know one thing. "Have you and Dylan talked about marriage?"

She smiled slightly then lowered her head. "We have. He's ready... beyond ready to make me his wife. I'm a little hesitant. After watching what my mom and dad went through earlier this year, I just... I wanna take things slow. We're bringing a little one in this world. I know we're living together and doing everything married people do... I just... I guess I'm scared."

"You are not your mother, and Dylan is not your father. I know his past is shady, but the way he loves you is real. I know my brother... since he was shitting on himself. The nigga quiet and was sneaky as hell, but I *always* knew what he was into. I had to protect him and make sure he was straight... all of us did. I kept somebody watching his ass at TSU when I couldn't watch him. I was still there when he started, but once I started the master's program, I was busy as hell. That nigga love the hell out of you. There is no way y'all would live together or you would be pregnant if he didn't. I was pretty sure Chanell was lying, because Dylan has always been careful... until he met you."

She lowered her head again. I continued. "Hold your head up, sis. You don't have to be afraid. You got a team. If that nigga ever giving you problems, you got eight muthafuckas that will be willing to fuck him up."

She frowned slightly. "Eight? Five brothers, Daddy Sheldon, and who else?"

"Axton and Arrow. We family, and we run deep. We love and care about each other. If one has a problem, we all have a problem."

“I know. I’m gonna think harder about it and give him an answer after the baby is born. Hopefully, we can come up with a name before she gets here.”

“Y’all will. In the meantime, why don’t you get home so you can get off your feet.”

“You’re just as bad as Dylan. Ugh! I’m going to get my purse and head out.”

I chuckled and slowly shook my head as she walked away. I was expecting for Dylan to be the one hesitating about getting married, but my brother had made a one-eighty, turned completely in the opposite direction. I was beyond proud of him. We’d all struggled a bit coming up, craving the love that was taken away from us so suddenly. For the longest, I wanted nothing to do with Alexz because I thought she’d taken our mother away from us. Once I got a little older, I learned to look at Alexz as my mama’s parting gift, especially since she looked so much like her... and me.

I vaguely remembered Mama. I remembered her smell. Dad had sprayed my room with lavender so I would sleep in there alone. She always laid in the bed with me until I fell asleep. So if the room smelled like her, it was like she was there. To this day, I still longed for that smell. My entire house smelled like lavender. It just made it feel like she was near. Like my brothers, I hadn’t loved another woman. My sister was still all our baby, and we were just getting to the point of seeing her as a woman. She was about to get married soon, and I was more than sure she would be trying to get pregnant.

However, any other woman was gonna have to damn near move heaven and earth. Skyler had done that for Dylan, and I truly felt like Brittany would be the one to do that for me. I still had Ali watching her, but like Skyler had warned, I felt like she would fuck me over about that nigga. If I fucked his ass up and she reported me, no other woman would have a chance after that. I would be completely done with trying to find love. My heart was telling me that she wouldn’t do that, but I was a thinker.

My brain was a well-oiled machine that had me graduating school a year earlier and passing the bar with flying colors at twenty-four. I was a smart nigga, and matters of the heart didn't matter until now. However, I didn't want to end up behind bars because my heart overruled my mind either. I would have to wait on Brittany to make a decision. When she was sure that she didn't want to be with that nigga anymore, that was when I would step in and do what was necessary to get her away from his ass.

Once Skyler came out of her office, I helped her to her car, then went to mine. Before going to get Alexz for lunch, I called Ali to check in. I hadn't checked in since Thursday, and it was Monday. I figured if something out of the ordinary would have happened, he would have called me by now. Usually, he only talked about how Lamar and Brittany argued nonstop. There was only one instance where he'd told me that he pushed her to the floor. I was so angry. I had to go to the gym and work out with Dylan to get it off me.

If I hadn't, I would have shown up there and blew his brains out. The fact that I wanted to do that let me know how much I was feeling her. I just wanted to show her that all men weren't like his ass... that she deserved better. As I waited for him to answer the call, I checked my messages to see that Alexz had texted me before she called. *I have something to talk to you about.*

So that was what lunch was about today. Although I'd spoiled her by taking her to lunch all the time, our lunch dates hadn't been as frequent since she'd been with Axton. Before I could put any more thought into it, Ali answered right before it was about to go to voicemail. "Just watching this punk ass nigga kiss another woman."

I shook my head. "Where that nigga at?"

"Their apartment. Him and the woman were walking out. After he locked the door, he grabbed her ass while they kissed then went their separate ways."

"I'm so sick of his ass. Don't watch his ass no more, because just that bit of news making me wanna fuck him up."

“I just wanted to fuck him up on GP.”

“A’ight, my nigga. Just focus on Brittany... make sure she stay safe.”

“Got’chu.”

I ended the call and made my way to get Alexz for lunch. I still couldn’t believe Brittany was settling for his bullshit. She was better off being alone than being with a nigga that was gon’ treat her like shit. That nigga probably wouldn’t even say shit to keep her from leaving. He was a bitch, and I couldn’t wait to have a one on one with his ass.

When I got to Alexz’s job, she was walking outside. I was hoping to get a glimpse of Brittany, but maybe I’d see her when I brought Alexz back. Getting out of my car, I walked around to the passenger side to open the door for her. She was extremely quiet, and that wasn’t like her. After softly kissing my cheek, she got in.

Preparing myself for bad news, I walked around the car while taking a deep breath and got in. “What’s up? You good?”

“Yeah. I just need advice. Can we go to the Thai restaurant?”

“I guess. What you need advice about?”

“Knowledge’s woman contacted me, wanting to talk.”

I frowned. “Talk about what?”

“Him.”

“I mean... why? What is there to talk about?”

“Maybe why he was watching me for years before he even approached me. That shit is crazy as hell. Maybe she can give me some answers.”

“Well, if you go, don’t go alone, and meet her in a public place. She might be just as shady as his ass. Did she call you?”

“No. She emailed me.”

“I don’t know about that shit, but if you wanna go, I’ll go with you.”

“I really do wanna go. Let me know what’s a good day within the next week so I can let her know. She’s flying in Wednesday, I think.”

“A’ight. I ain’t got nothing going on right now, so Friday is good.”

“Okay. So what’s going on with you and Brittany?”

“Ain’t shit going on. I wanna be with her, and she with that fuck nigga.”

I could see her lift her eyebrows in my peripheral. Surely, she had to know that Lamar was a bitch. Alexz could peep shit... most of us could. Dylan was about the only one who couldn’t seem to. “What you know about him?” she asked.

“I know he ain’t treating her right. He ain’t making her happy. That’s more than enough for me to know. She with that nigga because she’s gotten used to his ass, and she comfortable.”

“Damn, Shy. I didn’t know you were checking for her like that. Besides at the wedding, have y’all talked before?”

“Naw, but I knew she was feeling me. I just decided that I was tired of watching her be unhappy. I didn’t want to disrespect her relationship, but fuck that nigga.”

I was getting angry just speaking about it. Apparently, Alexz noticed because she slid her hand over mine. “If the situation bothers you that much, you need to tell Brittany. She’s been unhappy for a while, Shy. I feel like she’s just settling for what she can get, and I hate that shit. That muthafucka don’t mean her any good. He’s using her. She’s way too smart for his shit.”

I nodded. Brittany already knew how I felt about that nigga. If she wanted change but was scared to be alone, that should change now that she knew she wouldn’t be alone. I was well prepared to take care of a woman. I’d been out here stacking my paper and living and learning about life. I had my occasional trysts, but I was sick of that shit. I was ready to

settle down and be in love. Thirty years had taught me a lot, and I was ready to put some of that experience to use.

When we got to the Thai restaurant, Alexz hopped out of my car. “Girl, slow yo’ ass down. That food ain’t going nowhere.”

She laughed as I rested my hand on her back. As we made our way to the entrance, I felt my face harden at the sight of her. I just hoped Alexz stayed cool. As I was about to grab her hand, she put immediate space between us when she ran up on Chanell and popped her in the mouth. “That’s for trying to fuck over my brother!”

Chanell balled her fists up, and Alexz let her ass have it. She two pieced her, and Chanell fell to the ground. Alexz quickly straddled her and was about to go to work. I ran up on her, as she got in her third punch, and pulled her off Chanell. “Alexz, man... fuck! Come on.”

When I pulled her off, Chanell quickly got on her feet and picked up her purse. Alexz was still trying to get at her as she took off in the other direction, trying to fix her clothes. I had to literally pick Alexz’s ass up and carry her back to the car. After unlocking the door and dropping her ass to the passenger seat, I asked, “You tryna go to jail? Just ’cause I ain’t got shit going right now don’t mean I wanna be in court defending yo’ ass! Chill out! If you wanted to do some shit like that, we could have figured something out, but you did the shit in public where everybody and their mama can see the shit!”

She was so damn hotheaded, but the worst part about that was that she didn’t think before she acted at times. That was where we differed. If Chanell wanted to file assault charges, she had all the proof in the world—camera footage and witnesses. Alexz was huffing like she’d been doing wind sprints for hours. Her face was red as hell. “I’m sorry, but fuck that bitch. I *been* wanting to get at her ass.”

I slammed the door and got in the car and took off in the other direction. I swore she did shit because she knew I could get her out of trouble. I had no words for her ass. Since she wanted to be a renegade, I picked her up something from

McDonald's and took her ass back to the office. She was mad as hell too. "If I have gas after eating this shit, I'm coming for yo' ass."

"Naw. That's yo' own fault. You know I'm all about fucking shit up. I could have set something up to where we caught that ho by herself where no one could see and let you go to work on that ass. But you had to do shit yo' way. Get yo' ass on and pray she don't press charges on your ass."

"That bitch better not, or I'm gon' give her a reason to press charges. That wasn't shit what she got."

She got out of the car and slammed the door. I swore her ass was spoiled. Just as I was about to pull off, Brittany walked out of the door. I guess she was taking a late lunch. Alexz still had nearly thirty minutes left of her lunch break. She glanced at me, so I decided to park and get out of my car. When I did, I saw her nigga pull up. He glanced at me then honked the horn for her like she wasn't walking toward him.

I refused to allow my eyes to leave him as he yelled at her. "Hurry up, man! I wanna get back home to sleep before I have to go to work!"

Muthafucka wasn't thinking about sleep when he was fucking that broad. I made my way to his car as my blood started to boil. Brittany's eyes had widened, and she almost started running to his car. I was sure that was to prevent whatever she thought was about to happen between me and him. That muthafucka didn't know who he was fucking with. Although I had on a suit, I would smash his head on this fucking concrete.

Brittany hurriedly got in the car, and I saw Alexz running out of the building. That bitch rolled down his window. Like... who in the fuck didn't have power windows? "What's up, my nigga?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I ain't yo' nigga. You keep talking to that woman like that in my presence, I'm gon' beat all the bitch out yo' ass. Only a bitch ass nigga talk to a woman that way."

He frowned as Alexz pulled my arm. “Come on, Shy. It ain’t worth it, bruh.”

“Nigga, who the fuck you think you talking to?” he asked as he stepped out of the car.

I quickly pulled off my coat and yanked my tie off. He had the right one today. Brittany jumped out of the car, screaming for him to get back in the car so they could leave. Alexz was pulling my arm, but I wasn’t budging. Both of them got between us, trying to prevent us from coming in contact with one another. “Bitch, get the fuck out the way!” he yelled and pushed Brittany against the car.

I shoved Alexz in his direction then swung. Since she was so short, I was able to go right over her head and hit him right in the side of his head. He fell against the car and slid to the ground as I wrapped my arms around Alexz to steady her. “Shy! You wanna fucking talk about me, but look at you!”

“We ain’t the same. Axton hasn’t installed cameras yet,” I said calmly. “And no witnesses but you and Brittany.”

Brittany stared at me in disbelief as her possibly snitching briefly crossed my mind. I stared right back at her and asked, “So what’chu gon’ do? This the shit you wanna continue subjecting yourself to?”

“You just made things really bad for me now.”

“Naw. I made that shit easier. You can get in the car with me, I can get you something to eat, and I can take you to your place to pack some shit until I get his ass out of yo’ place. I’ll set you up in a new apartment after I pay off your lease.” I shrugged my shoulders. “See? Simple as fuck. Now, you gon’ ride the wave of simplicity, or you wanna continue being difficult? You can walk away with me, or you can stay with this bum ass nigga and continue being talked down to and disrespected. It’s up to you.”

“Shy... I promise this shit ain’t as easy as you making it sound.”

I wasn’t about to stand here and go back and forth with her. The tears fell from her eyes as her nigga started to come

to. My lip twitched as I stared at him, and everything in me wanted to give him some leather to taste. My foot was itching to knock his teeth out. I repeatedly nodded then turned to walk to my car. “Alexz, get inside the building so you don’t get caught up in no shit.”

I turned back around to make sure she was doing what I told her to do and saw that nigga was standing there, looking out of it. I glanced over at Brittany and said, “I need to know. I’m not a nigga that like to wait or be in limbo.”

She glanced over at him as he struggled to gather his bearings then walked back to the building with Alexz.

CHAPTER 4

*B*rittany

MY NERVES WERE BAD AS HELL AS ALEXZ INSISTED THAT I EAT some of her nuggets. I couldn't eat right now. Shyrón was trying to force me into doing something I didn't feel I was ready to do. I had enough money to take care of myself. I didn't want to feel indebted to no one. Today had been a complete disaster, and it wasn't over. Lamar had been blowing my phone up for the past twenty minutes. It wasn't that I was confused about whether I wanted Lamar. I didn't want to be with him anymore, but I didn't want to commit to anyone else either.

If I allowed Shy to do all of that for me, then I felt like I would be giving him the greenlight on a relationship. I didn't want to just jump out of one thing into another. However, I felt like I couldn't express that to him. My tongue would damn near be frozen around him. I wasn't afraid of him, but I was definitely scared of how he would react to whatever I said. As I sat at the nurses' station, looking over charts for tomorrow, Alexz said, "You know I'm here for you, but there's no way you can go home alone tonight."

"I know. I wanna get away from Lamar, I really do, but I didn't want to be forced. Neither do I want to jump into another relationship once I leave him."

“Why didn’t you say that to Shy? I’m more than sure he would understand that.”

“There’s no way I can let him do so much for me and then tell him no to being with him.”

“I get it, Britt. I really do, but I also know my brother. He hates seeing you with that nigga. Just tell him how you feel, and I’m more than sure he will understand. Just the fact that you want to leave Lamar will be a step in the right direction. Let him help you by being there for you. None of my brothers will mind helping you get situated on your own.”

I nodded as she continued. “We aren’t busy. Call him now.”

I lowered my head and huffed. I was nervous as hell to call him after I let him walk away without an answer. She walked away and went into Dr. Ax’s office after writing his number down on a piece of paper. Before I lost the nerve, I dialed his number from the office phone. “Shyrón Berotte,” he answered.

His voice was so damn sexy. He had somewhat of a deep, authoritative tone like Blair Underwood, but it also had a little rasp to it. “Hi, Shy,” I responded. He remained silent, and I could feel my legs trembling under the desk. “I wanted to explain. I’m ready to leave Lamar, but I’m not ready to jump into another relationship yet. I’m not choosing him over you. I’m choosing me over the both of you. I need to be okay with being alone for a little while. I need to rediscover who I am again.”

I stopped talking and took in a nervous breath as he remained quiet. After a few more moments, he said, “I understand that. Just don’t forget I’m here. You can’t go home alone now. I don’t mind going with you. I can get Chad and Zay to come with me.”

I took a deep breath, thanking God he was cool with what I had to say. While I knew he would still be trying to be around, I was glad that he understood where I was coming from. I didn’t want him to expect more than what I was willing to give. Still... despite everything, I loved Lamar. That didn’t just disappear. However, I loved me more. I was scared as hell,

and I didn't know what I was going to do or where I would stay tonight, but I was up for the challenge and new beginning.

"Thank you. I could use the help."

"I got'chu, Brittany. Breathe easy. Are y'all busy?"

"No."

"You good with Chinese?"

"I'm not really—"

"That's a yes or no question."

"Yes."

"A'ight. I'm on my way back. Don't tell that ol' bucket head girl that I'm coming back. Fried rice and eggrolls cool wit'chu?"

I chuckled. "Yeah. Thanks. I really appreciate you understanding where I'm coming from."

"I wouldn't say I understand your decision, but I can respect it. See you in a lil bit."

He ended the call before I could say anything else as our follow-up patient came through the door. We only had two other patients after him for the day. However, just like that, after talking to Shyrón, I felt better. I stood from my seat at the nurses' station and got the patient's chart so I could call him to the back. My vibrating cell phone caught my attention, and I saw I had a text from Lamar. I rolled my eyes and dropped it back in my pocket. This was going to be an uphill battle, but I knew it would be one I would appreciate later.

Alexz emerged from the office, and she smiled as she approached. "Well, what did he say?"

"That he respected my decision, and he agreed to help me get situated when I got off."

I almost told her he was bringing food. Just that fast, I'd forgotten he said not to say anything to her. She smiled bigger and said, "I told you. You were all nervous and shit for nothing. One thing I know about my brothers... even Chad... they are caring and somewhat sensitive. They don't like

anyone to know that, but they are. The only reason Dylan was fucking around so much was because he was trying to hide that shit.”

“Yeah, yeah. Let me get Mr. Caldwell checked in so you can visit with him, Mrs. Dr. Ax.”

She giggled. She did that every time I called her missus, and I thought it was so cute. They weren't married yet, but she was giddy as hell to take Dr. Ax's name. I smiled as she walked back toward his office, and I went to the front and called Mr. Caldwell back. After getting his weight and checking his temp and blood pressure, I asked a few questions about how he was feeling since his colonoscopy and made notes in the computer for Alexz to look at.

Once that was done, I left him there for her to attend to. Before I could head up front, there was a knock at the back door. I knew that it was Shyrón with the food. I went to the back door and pushed it open to come face to face with Lamar. He slapped the shit out of me, causing me to fall against the door. The only thing I was thinking at this moment was why he didn't slap the fuck out of Shyrón.

“You stupid bitch! You must be fucking him. I knew you was fucking around.”

He tried to push past me and come inside the building, but I knew I couldn't allow that. I couldn't lose my job over his bullshit. “The only person fucking around is you. You need to leave!” I yelled, jumping in front of him.”

“Don't worry. I'm gon' take care of your ass when you get home. You not gon' fuck around on me on your best day.”

“Or what? What's gon' happen, muthafucka?”

Shy appeared out of nowhere. I suddenly got nervous. I didn't know how this was going to go. I quickly turned my head where he couldn't see where Lamar had slapped me, but it was too late. I could see in his eyes that he'd seen it. He slowly handed me the food, never taking his eyes off Lamar. “You keep getting in our personal business, and I'm sick of that shit.”

“Then maybe you should handle your personal business in private since it’s so personal.”

In the blink of an eye, Shy grabbed him by the neck and slammed him against the door. Looking at me, he said, “Call the police before I kill him.”

I hurriedly walked away to get a phone. After setting the food down, I ran to the door to find Shy kicking Lamar. “Shy! Please stop. You can’t get in trouble on account of me.”

When he turned to me, I could clearly see that he’d been hit. Bitch ass Lamar had swung on him. I simply nodded. I knew what that meant. *Self-defense*. Not to mention the handprint that was probably on my face. I called the police like he told me to as I noticed Alexz coming out of the room with an assistant and Mr. Caldwell. She never even looked our way. Once she came back from around the corner, she ran straight to us. I supposed she *did* see us.

Walking past me, she went to Lamar and said, “You just don’t want to learn yo’ fucking lesson.” She slowly shook her head then turned back to me. “Stay out here with Shy. We only have two more patients. I got it.”

I gave her a tight smile as she rubbed my arm. “Thanks for lunch, Shy. I knew you wouldn’t let your sister starve.”

He gave her a head nod, but I could tell he wasn’t thinking about what Alexz was talking about. He kept his eyes on Lamar. I did so too. He was on the ground, holding his ribs. I was more than sure that at least one of them was bruised or broken. When I lifted my gaze back to Shy, I found him staring at me. “You’re too good of a person to be dealing with this piece of shit.”

I lowered my head again as he stepped closer to me. He lifted it by my chin, forcing me to look at him. Who in the hell was I fooling? I wanted Shy like I needed my next breath. I’d been admiring him from a distance for a while, and now that I was this close to him, my body wouldn’t behave. As I stared at him, I said, “I know.”

“I know what you said earlier. But man, I have to check on you... see about you... make sure you good. I wanna spend time wit’chu, and I want this nigga to know that I’m staking claim to the priceless treasure that he treated like trash.”

He gently rubbed my cheek, but the sirens caused him to step away. I was thankful for the reprieve, because my body was telling me to kiss the soft lips of the man that came to my defense. As the cop car pulled up, he turned to me and said, “You staying with me tonight, and it’s not up for discussion. I have four bedrooms. You’ll be able to pick whichever one you want.”

I only nodded. He said it wasn’t up for discussion, so I knew it was pointless to even try to dispute it. When the officer approached, he called for a bust then shook Shyrón’s hand.

“Hello, Mr. Berotte. I hate you’re in this situation. Who’s the young woman you were defending?”

Shy stepped to the side and turned, beckoning me to him. I walked over, and he slid his arm on my shoulders. “This is Brittany Davis. She works here with my sister and future brother-in-law. I was bringing lunch for the both of them when I saw him at the door. However, we’d had a slight altercation earlier about the way he was talking to her in my presence.”

The officer nodded and wrote down some information as Shy spoke, then he looked up at me. “Why was he here again, Ms. Davis?”

I glanced at Shy and said, “He was angry that Mr. Berotte defended me and accused us of messing around. We aren’t. We’ve just known one another for a while since his sister is my best friend. He umm... he slapped me right before I noticed Shyrón approaching us.”

The cop nodded his understanding then turned back to Shy and asked him a couple of questions as the ambulance arrived for Lamar. I stared at him as he lay on the ground, wondering how I had subjected myself to this for so long. It shouldn’t have had to come to this. I should have left his ass in my dust when I first noticed he wasn’t trying to be the man I had come

to know and love any longer. All of this could have been avoided.

I couldn't believe he'd actually come here and slapped me. I halfway expected it when I got home, but he caught me totally off guard this time. He only had one time to hit me, and he'd fulfilled that promise. While I'd put up with the emotional and mental abuse, physical abuse was the straw that broke the camel's back. I couldn't deal with that shit... I refused to deal with it. If my parents knew what was and had been going on, they would have been on the first thing smoking to get me out of Beaumont.

I watched them get Lamar on the gurney with a frown on my face as he stared back at me with a frown on his face as well. When I saw his lip twitch, I knew that if he could, he would fuck me up. Shy quickly noticed. His frown deepened as he said, "Brittany will be pressing charges. Since you're a felon, you might be gone for a while. So save that look for those inmates that's trying to get at that asshole."

The cop turned red as he tried to hold in his laughter. Shy was completely serious though. His demeanor was rigid, like he wanted to fuck Lamar up all over again. The officer asked a few more questions as I watched them get Lamar into the ambulance, then he promised he would be in contact with the next steps. Shyrón and I stayed outside until they drove away. As I turned to head inside, he grabbed my hand and pulled me to him.

I fell against his chest and allowed a couple of tears to fall. I could still feel the sting of Lamar's slap on my cheek, and I knew I should probably put ice on it. As I tried to pull away, he only held me closer. "I'm sorry you having to deal with this bullshit. But I want you to respect yourself a little more than you do. I want you to respect yourself enough to say, I deserve better."

He finally released me to where I could pull away, but he didn't allow me to go far. After rubbing his thumb across my cheek, he kissed my forehead. My face had to be red as hell, because I was hot... like to the point of sweating. "Thank you."

He nodded then allowed me to leave from his grasp to head inside. My emotions were all over the place, and I hated that I was feeling sympathetic toward a man who couldn't give two fucks about me. When I walked through the door with Shy behind me, Alexz made her way to us. "You need to get your eggrolls before I eat them. They smell so good."

"Girl, get yo' greedy ass away from my food. Did Ms. King come in already?"

"Yep. Come and gone. You ought to just go home and handle your business. We only have one more patient for the day. Ax has already called to see how everything was going and to say that he was on his way to file some paperwork."

I nodded then grabbed my food from the countertop. She was right. It smelled delicious. Before leaving, I hugged her then looked over at Shy. "Thank you... both of you. See you tomorrow, Alexz."

As I headed to the back door, I realized Shy was right behind me. He quickly got ahead of me and opened the door. After walking through it, I turned to him. "I really appreciate you being there for me. I can't believe he actually came back up here."

"I wanna always be there for you. Listen... although he's in the hospital, you need to get out of that apartment as soon as possible. So I'm gonna go change and help you get the things you need." He pulled his phone from his pocket and said, "Save your phone number and address in here."

I smiled slightly then did as he requested. I couldn't be more grateful for his help, and I just hoped that he continued to respect my wishes so I could respect them as well.

CHAPTER 5

S

hyrón

“I NEED YOU TO WATCH HIS ASS. I GOT BRITTANY. I KNOW he’s in the hospital right now, but I need to know everything about that muthafucka... every time he fart, I wanna know that shit.”

I ended the call as Chad looked at me and slowly shook his head. I’d picked him up to help me get Brittany situated. He was used to how I got down, so he had absolutely nothing to say. Brittany had gotten a hotel room for the night, but she had no idea I would be staying with her. When I offered for her to stay at my house, she declined, but I refused to leave her alone, even if I thought she would be safe. I supposed it was the attorney in me that always expected the worst.

It was still early in the day, so I planned to go to the leasing office and pay out her lease. Since he still had shit in there, I wouldn’t tell them to change the locks just yet, but I planned to be here whenever he came to get his shit. I refused to let him fuck up Brittany’s good name and tear up this apartment. Finally breaking his silence, Chad asked, “That was Ali?”

“Yep.”

“I knew you hanging with that nigga was gon’ infect you.”

I chuckled. Ali was involved in all kinds of bullshit when we were in school. We met way back in middle school because

we had P.E. together. He wasn't athletic at all, and I helped him work on his game when we played basketball instead of laughing at him like everybody else. I still remembered what he said to me. *"For a nerdy ass nigga, you pretty cool. I got'chu from here on out."*

He didn't lie about that. While I could fight, he taught me how to fight dirty without getting caught. Me being smart and knowing I wanted to be a lawyer even back then, I researched the law and just what I could work around. If my daddy had known all the shit Ali and I got into back in the day, he would have killed my ass. We did it all... from smoking weed, to selling cocaine, and even robbing a couple of people. I wasn't proud of that shit at all, but the experience of it all made me who I was today.

When we got to the leasing office, Chad frowned slightly. "I know you ain't 'bout to do what I think you about to do. You going too far. She ain't yo' woman."

"Yet, nigga. She ain't my woman yet, but she will be. Brittany is a good woman. Even if things don't work out between us, I'll just write this shit off on my taxes as charity or some shit."

He shook his head again. That was why that nigga was still single. He was guarded as hell and had all kinds of hang-ups on shit that didn't matter. He didn't want to date a woman in her twenties... she couldn't have kids... she had to have a degree... just a bunch of bullshit. He was gon' mess around and miss out on his forever with all those fucking requirements.

Hopefully, the right woman would come along and change his mind. I thought Skyler's sister would be the woman. I could tell every time they were around one another, she was still checking for him. His ridiculous preferences would catch up with him soon enough.

After walking in the office, the women all stared at me like I was a fresh new item on the menu. I wore a plain purple T-shirt, a Lakers' cap on my head, white basketball shorts, and tennis shoes. When I smiled, I flashed them my grill. I found

that most women loved it these days, especially when I only wore the bottom. Today, I had them both in—top and bottom. “I’m here to pay out the lease on a unit.”

Three of them all came to counter at once. I wanted to chuckle, but I kept my cool. When I heard the door open, I turned around to see Brittany. Her eyes widened slightly, then she frowned. “Why are you in the leasing office?”

“Just handling some business. Why are you in the leasing office?”

“Same.”

I extended my hand to her, and she hesitantly put her hand in mine. I looked over her body in her sweats and T-shirt and immediately wanted to undress her. I’d never seen her look so comfortable, but I supposed that was because I was never in her space like I am now. The lady at the counter cleared her throat, gaining my attention. “What unit did you want to pay out, sir?”

Brittany slid her hand from mine and brought it to her hip, resting it there as she shifted her weight. “Shy... I don’t need you to do that.”

“I know you don’t need me to do it. What does that have to do with me doing it though? I’m doing it because I want to. I wasn’t expecting you to come to the office; otherwise, we wouldn’t be having this discussion.”

She rolled her eyes and huffed. I knew she wanted to say more, but she wouldn’t dare in front of these people. I was learning more and more about her by simply being around her. She tried to appease people, even when she didn’t agree. I was gon’ have to break her out of that shit. After turning back to the lady at the counter, I gave her Brittany’s unit number then paid a little over three grand to pay it out. I wanted to tell her that Brittany would be moving out, but like Brittany, I wasn’t trying to go back and forth with her in front of these people.

We walked out once they gave me a receipt, and the minute the door closed, she turned to me. Before she could say a word, I pulled her to me and lowered my face to her lips. For

a split second, it felt like she was going to melt into me, but she quickly pulled away. My only agenda was to make her forget what she was going to say. It seemed to work because she walked away without another word.

I glanced at my car to see Chad shaking his head, something he seemed to do a lot of in my presence. I took off behind Brittany as he got out to drive my car around. “Yo, hol’ on.”

She stopped walking and turned to me, sporting a slight frown. “What’s up?” I asked.

“You’re being pushy. Can you let me handle my affairs on my own?”

I lifted my brows. “Oh really? That what you want? You want me to take a step back?”

She huffed. “I want you here on *my* terms... not on yours. I’ve been handling my affairs for a long time. I’m good with that.”

“But you shouldn’t have to. Had you had a real man in your life, you would know that.”

She turned to walk away, but I gently grabbed her arm, pulling her back to me. “I just wanna show you what you would have in me. But if I’m being too pushy, I’ll let it go. Tell me what you want... specifically.”

She fidgeted slightly as she stared at the cement. She would never ask for help, because that wasn’t her style. So I was confused as to what she thought I was here for. I didn’t do female friends. Fuck that. She looked back up at me. “Shy... I know you, but at the same time, I don’t know you. I don’t know you this way, nor do you know me. I don’t easily allow people in my space. It makes me uncomfortable. Someone that I’m not romantically involved with spending money on me is not acceptable. I need your cash app ID so I can pay you back. While some women may be cool with that sort of thing... I am not one of them.”

“What else?”

“I’m not ready for a romantic relationship. It has nothing to do with you specifically. This is about me. I’m not trying to be saved. While it may have seemed like I was a damsel in distress, I don’t need rescuing. I want to get to know you... through phone conversations. I need to get reacquainted with myself before I submerge myself into another relationship. Please give me time. This isn’t a rejection, but I need you to respect my boundaries.”

I wasn’t used to no shit like this, but it left me even more intrigued. “I’ll try. I wanna get to know you more too. I’m just used to going after what I want and getting it. I’ll pump my brakes though.”

That felt like poison coming out of my mouth. Things were usually my way or the highway. Maybe that was why I was single. No one else was worth going against that mantra. Brittany, however, seemed worth every ounce of trouble and every second of conversation. This was why I was trying to do this behind her back though. I supposed that wasn’t the way to start doing things. This entire situation would require a consultation with my dad or Zay.

I followed her to her apartment, as Chad parked not far away then got out of the car to come meet us. I would have to pray for patience because that was something I never really had once I felt like something was within my grasp. It was why I was thirty years old with a law degree and my own practice. I worked hard, and I realized that being with Brittany wouldn’t be any different.



I SAT IN THE FOOD COURT AT THE MALL WITH ALEXZ, WAITING for Knowledge’s wife to show up. Alexz was nervous as hell. If she didn’t have acrylic on her nails, she would have bitten them all off by now. My nerves were on edge for a totally different reason. *Brittany Davis*. I hadn’t seen her since Monday evening, and I was tripping hard. I went to Axton’s office, but it was like she was hiding from me like at the rehearsal dinner. Alexz refused to help me and told me to

leave Brittany alone so she could recuperate from what happened between her and Lamar.

I couldn't understand why she couldn't see that I only wanted to make life better for her. We'd talked on the phone a couple of times, but she refused to go out with me this weekend or to allow me to go to her hotel room. Everything in me wanted to say fuck it and move on, but my heart wouldn't allow me to do that. Something about her was pulling at me... tugging my damn soul to hers. She had to feel that shit, because it was strong as hell.

After Chad and I helped her pack her shit Monday and box some other stuff, we'd followed her to the room she would be staying in to help her get her things inside. She told me she'd found another apartment that she planned to lease month by month, but I'd planned to be moving her into my place by now. I should have been fucking her all over the damn house by now. Whenever I went to bed at night, my dick stayed hard just thinking about her.

When I talked to my dad about it, he told me to be patient. *Good things come to those who wait.* I was tired of waiting. I'd been waiting for a while already. I took a sip of my lemonade as I watched a woman walk toward us. She was beautiful, but I could clearly see the sadness in her eyes. I nudged Alexz. "I think that's her."

She looked up at the woman and mumbled, "Wow. She's beautiful."

"Mm hmm, but so are you."

I could feel where her mind was taking her, and I wasn't having that shit one bit. She never had to feel inferior to no-damn-body in no damn circumstance. When the woman reached us, she smiled slightly. "Hello, Alexz. I'm Fatima."

"Hello," Alexz responded. "This is my brother and attorney, Shyrón."

She nodded at me and said, "Nice to meet you."

I nodded as well and offered her a seat. We took our seats as she pulled out some paperwork from her purse. "I wanted to

meet you because I wanted you to know that I had no idea Knowledge was actively pursuing you the way he had been. I came with proof that he'd been watching you since you first got to Lamar University. He was there with frat and saw you."

I frowned as she slid the paperwork to Alexz. That shit had all her personal information on it—her birthday, social security number, and even her medical and dental records. *How the fuck did he have access to all that shit?* Alexz frowned just as hard then looked back up at her. "How long have you known him?"

"About five years. I know you think this whole thing about him having multiple wives is crazy, but it was the way we were both raised. My father had three wives. It's our lifestyle. He was wrong for trying to force those beliefs... or better yet, trick you into our way. He made me believe you were aware. For some reason, he was obsessed with you. You're a beautiful woman, that's for sure, but it seemed that it was something deeper."

I stared at Fatima, trying to analyze her. She didn't seem to have a hidden agenda, but I couldn't be so sure. Alexz was staring at her as well. Her mind was probably doing the same thing mine was. Finally, Alexz said, "I'm so sorry about the loss of your child."

She frowned slightly, then the tears fell from her eyes. "Thank you, but he didn't die. I know that was something Knowledge reported to gain sympathy. He was extremely sick though. He was on a ventilator. Tareek made it through, and he's almost one. We found out that he has sickle cell anemia, so we have a long road ahead of us."

I frowned extra hard. That nigga was something else. Why would he lie about his child dying? This shit was puzzling as fuck. "I can understand lying to gain sympathy, but lying about his child's life is taking shit way too far," I said.

She lowered her head and said, "I agree. I divorced him. That was extremely hard for me because my family doesn't believe in divorce. They've shunned me because of it, but I had to do what was best for me and Tareek. We're all each

other have now. I didn't feel right leaving you in the dark, Alexz. I'm sorry for what you went through. Your decision had to be a tough one, and I hate that you felt forced into it by Knowledge. He was really a good guy. I don't know what happened to him."

As she was about to stand, Alexz said, "Wait. Thank you. It was really hard... the abortion, and I still have my moments, but my family has been extremely supportive. Can you stay for lunch? What type of food do you like?"

"I'm sorry, Alexz. I can't stay. I need to get back to Tareek. My family hasn't supported me in anything since I found out about Knowledge's lies. I admire your strength to do what you needed to do for yourself. I know your family made the transition a little easier for you. I'm trying to do what's best for me without their support, and it's extremely hard, especially now since Knowledge is locked up. I've never worked because, in our traditions, the women stay home and have babies."

"If you don't mind me asking, what are your traditions? I hear your accent."

"My family is from Nigeria, but I was born here. We're Muslims. However, I don't believe all my dad's beliefs are rooted in culture or religion... just some things he chose to implement in our family. I've had enough of being humiliated and dehumanized. I want to teach my son differently. I want to teach him to treat women with respect. I start a new job in a week, and I'm praying that it will be enough to take care of us. I'm receiving government assistance now, but I don't want to receive that forever. Thank you for your hospitality, but I really need to get back to Tareek. He's with one of my friends."

We all stood from our seats, and Alexz went to her and hugged her. I still didn't quite trust her. She could be trying to lay a guilt trip on us too. For all I knew, she could have a hit out on my sister for taking her husband away. Plus, there was no way she took a flight just to talk to Alexz, stay fifteen minutes, and leave. She was here to see his ass. Ali would

have to outsource help because it seemed nearly every woman around me needed protecting.

Although I hadn't heard from Brittany in a couple of days, I knew she'd hired a moving company to get her moved into a new apartment and that Lamar was out of the hospital. He was still in the apartment, but he looked to be packing as well. This shit was wearing me thin, and everything except my heart was telling me to move on. My heart had me placing an order for flowers. They would be delivered to the office on Monday.

She seemed somewhat receptive earlier that day Monday. Maybe she was just emotional and vulnerable because of what had gone down, even after our talk about her not wanting to jump in another relationship so quickly. *Fuck it.* This wasn't me, and I refused to pussyfoot around anymore about what I felt was destined to be. I would just have to move on, and whenever she was ready, if I hadn't met someone else by then, maybe we could see where we could go.

CHAPTER 6

Brittany

AS I RELAXED IN A HOT BATH, I SIPPED FROM MY GLASS OF wine, grateful for the reprieve. I'd been getting my new place situated for the past week, and I hadn't had time to just relax. I was beyond tired. The office had been busy, and the only time I was able to get a breather at work was on my lunch break. I hadn't talked to Shyrón in over a week or seen him in nearly two weeks, and I knew that he was probably done with me. I just needed the time to myself. I was grateful for him defending me, but I needed to recoup from that. Well... I'd sent him a text, thanking him for the flowers, but he didn't respond. That was Monday, and today was Friday.

Lamar had been blowing my phone up, begging me to come back and apologizing for his behavior. He was the total opposite of how he had been lately. I supposed two bruised ribs would have anyone sensitive as hell. Just dealing with his foolishness and getting my business situated, it seemed I'd pushed Shy right out of my life. When he'd come in the office, I made sure to stay out of sight. I was so weak around him, but I knew what I needed to do for myself. I hated that he couldn't seem to understand that.

Alexz had assured me that he would get over it, but I didn't know. When he didn't respond to my 'thank you' text for the flowers, I felt like he'd given up on me. The card on the flowers had a generic message. *I wish you the best. Shyrón*

It was like he was bidding me farewell, and my spirit was extremely unsettled about it. I just wished he would respect my time. He said he did... but his actions were saying something totally different. When he laid his lips on mine, everything in me wanted to let him do whatever the hell he wanted to do to me. Then my mind interfered and caused me to pull away. It felt like he was taking my soul and gently caressing it, putting it at ease.

I was angry at myself for trying to ignore how his kiss made me feel. I took another sip of my wine as I thought about him and how much I missed him. This shit was crazy. I hadn't seen him in nearly two weeks, and my mental was wearing me out about it. I wanted to do something that would catch him by surprise, to let him know that I still wanted him around.

I'd sent his money back through several cash app transactions, and that was probably why he didn't have anything to say to me when I'd thanked him for the flowers. It was too soon for this shit! *Why couldn't he see that?* I just left a relationship with a controlling man, but he wanted to force his way into my life. He had to know I wouldn't be receptive to that. I was extremely passive at times, but I couldn't afford to be that way right now.

It didn't seem I was relaxing as planned. I gulped the wine and got out of the tub to take a shower. I'd had time to be alone with myself. While I didn't think I'd had enough time, I knew that I couldn't lose Shyrón... not without knowing for sure what he was about. It was only seven o'clock, so I was sure he was either out with his brothers, at work still, or at home. Alexz had told me that he was extremely lowkey, although he didn't seem to be.

For once though, I was going to go for what I wanted and refused to let anything get in the way of it any longer. If he was consuming my thoughts this way, I might as well be around him. I'd imagined every scenario being around him could produce, and I was tired of simply imagining it.

I wanted to feel everything I'd imagined. Something was telling me that what I imagined didn't even touch the tip of the iceberg of what Shy could have me feeling. Even though I

knew he was spoiled and wanted his way, something wouldn't allow me to leave him in his feelings. I needed him, and I hadn't figured out why yet.

Once I was done showering, I called Alexz. Hopefully she wasn't busy. "Hello?"

"Hey, Alexz. What are you up to?"

"Hey! Mama had just asked about you. You ought to come over to my dad's house. We are here planning my wedding. It's just us women. Mama Shirlene is in town with Kaysyn, and Skyler, her mother, and sister are here. We're having a great time. You know being around this many women at once is new to me, and I'm loving it."

The excitement in her voice made me happy. Hearing her so excited made me smile. "Actually, I called to ask a favor."

"What's that?" she asked as I heard her moving around.

"Can you tell me where Shyrón is? I want to surprise him. I umm... I haven't spoken to him in almost two weeks, and I feel like he's trying to forget me."

She laughed. That made me frown. This wasn't a laughing matter. As if sensing my irritation, she said, "I'm sorry. That nigga ain't forgot about you, Brittany. He asks me almost every day how you're doing. Don't tell him I said that though. He ain't as hard as he try to make everybody think he is. Why don't you just call him?"

"Well... he never answered my last text, so I figured he was done with me."

"Girl... that man still checking for you. He's just trying to give you the space you asked for. I told him he was being too forceful with you. That's not how you operate, especially after dealing with Lamar's controlling ass."

"Thank you for understanding me, Alexz."

"I more than understand you. I was determined not to give Axton a chance after all I had been through with Knowledge. But look at me now... planning a wedding. Sometimes your forever can come at a time when you least expect it. Shy..."

although gangsta at times, is a loving, gentle soul when you get to know him. That bullshit he's showing you ain't the real him. He wants to show you the real him. I know it's soon after your heartbreak but let him. Take it slow, but allow him to be there. You won't regret it. If you do, I'll buy your lunches for a year."

My eyebrows lifted as I chuckled. "I know you didn't say a year. You are really confident in how he feels about me."

"That I am. He's supposed to be going out with the guys, but let me see if he's left the office yet. Skyler had said he was working late to help Perry on a case. I'm texting him now."

"Okay," I said as the nerves flowed through my body effortlessly.

My legs were trembling as I slid on my jeans and sandals. Seeing Shy again had my insides feeling like they were in the hotseat... full on simmering. Alexz's voice came through. "He's still at the office. If you hurry, you can catch him before he leaves. He said he'll be leaving within the next thirty minutes."

"Okay. Thanks."

"Good luck, sis."

"Thanks, Alexz."

I ended the call and hurriedly threw on my two-layered shirt. Afterward, I combed my hair down from the wrap I had it in then grabbed my purse and practically ran to my car. I'd gotten lash extensions, making mascara a thing of the past, at least for the next two to three weeks when it was time to get them redone. So all I needed to do was slide some lipstick on my lips. I could do that while I was driving.

I hopped in my car and made it to Berotte's Law Firm in ten minutes. I could feel the heat under my breasts and in my armpits. *Jesus!* After sliding on some lipstick, I exited the car and made my way to the entrance. Before I could get to it, a man came out of the door, talking loudly and laughing. When he noticed me, he said, "I'm sorry, ma'am, but we're closed."

Right after he said that, Shy walked out of the door. He froze. The way his gaze penetrated me caused a shiver to slither up my spine. *Good Lord*. His employee looked back at him and smiled slightly then walked away without a word. I didn't know what to say, so I did my best to hold my gaze until he spoke. My entire body was trembling as he began walking toward me. "What'chu doing here? Something happen?"

I swallowed hard then lowered my gaze. His eyes were sucking the air out of me. "Something did happen."

He moved closer to me and lifted my head by placing his fingers under my chin. "What's wrong?"

"I don't have you. I lost you, and I came here to get you back," I responded softly.

He licked his tinted pink lips, and I for sure stopped breathing that time. He grabbed my hand and led me inside the building. Once he locked the door, he pulled me close to him. "Why are you trembling? I make you nervous?"

"Just the situation. I'm not used to being so assertive and aggressive. There's no way I would have come here under normal circumstances."

"What changed?"

I felt like we were playing twenty-one questions, and I still didn't have any answers. I frowned slightly. I thought I'd said all that already. "I feel like I lost you... And I don't want to lose you."

"You said you weren't ready for what I wanted, so I stopped crowding you."

"I'm sorry I bothered you, Shy."

I turned to leave. This shit was so uncomfortable for me, and he was making it more difficult. It felt like I was about to have a damn anxiety attack. As I walked toward the door, Shy said, "Brittany, stop."

I froze at his demand, and it felt like I was gonna piss on myself. He walked around me to face me. "What's so hard about expressing the way you feel? I've already told you how I

feel about you. That hasn't changed. Tell me what you're feeling."

He brought me to the couch, and he sat. I stared at him for a moment and tried to gather the audacity. I licked my lips then sat on his lap. His eyes widened slightly, but he recovered quickly by wrapping his arms around my waist. "I'm extremely attracted to you, Shy, but you already know that. For nearly two weeks, since the last time I saw you, you've been on my mind. There's something special between us, and I want to explore it... slowly."

"Thank you for expressing how you feel, but I want you to know something. You don't ever have to be nervous about doing that around me. I know I can come off as aggressive, stubborn, and demanding. I mean... I'm all those things, but I'm also sensitive at times. Don't tell nobody that shit," he said then rubbed his hand down his chin, something he seemed to do a lot. "Not talking to you made me extremely sensitive to you. I was worried about you, but I was trying to give you what you asked for."

I put my arms around his neck and hugged him. "Thank you. Well, I'll let you go. Call me when you turn in for the night."

"Naw. You not finna let me go. I been waiting for this day for two weeks. I'm hanging with you, if that's okay. You wanna go to dinner?"

"Come on na, Shy. You know that's always a go. I'm friends with Alexz."

He chuckled then patted my thighs, signaling for me to stand. When I did and he stood, towering over my five-foot-three-inch frame, he lowered his head and kissed my forehead. I had to be nearly a foot shorter than him. I smiled, feeling happy that I'd taken a chance and come over here to talk to him. "You good with Pappadeaux?"

"Absolutely. You're one of few people I've heard pronounce it correctly. Even though I know how to pronounce it, I still say Pappadeaux's."

“I was trying to impress you. I say Pappadeaux’s normally too... along with JCPenny’s and Kroger’s.”

I put my palm to my forehead as he grabbed my other hand and took me to the door. Once outside, he locked up. “Should I meet you there?” I asked.

“Naw. Go to your place and park your car so you can ride with me. Now let me get this straight. You wanna proceed with getting to know one another. Am I supposed to act like we just cool? I mean, are you going to be seeing anyone else, or am I allowed to stake claim?”

“You can claim me, Shy. I don’t want anyone else. I just want to take things slow.”

“A’ight. Well, I’m right behind you.”

“Okay.”

I slid my hand from his and went to my car, feeling the lightest I’d felt in a long time. I couldn’t wait to see just where this would go with us. It felt right, and I hoped it would continue to feel that way.

CHAPTER 7

S

hyrón

“IT’S PRETTY CROWDED. YOU WANNA GO SOMEWHERE ELSE?” I asked Brittany.

“It’s up to you. It’s a Friday night. Everywhere we go will be crowded. I know you’ve had a full day of work, so we can get something quick if you want to.”

I was tired as hell. I’d been at work since seven this morning and didn’t take a lunch break. I’d had Alexz bring lunch for me and Perry on her lunch break. However, seeing Brittany walking up the sidewalk when we were leaving was like drinking a 5-hour Energy drink. I was shocked as hell, but I was happy. Her finally allowing me to be with her felt amazing, and I was doing my best to be patient with her. Every chance I got, I wanted to kiss her and hold her in my arms, but I didn’t want to make her uncomfortable.

While I knew I had time, I wanted to get through this get-to-know-you phase as quickly as possible. So if that meant I would have to be around her every day, I would do that. Grabbing her hand, I looked into her eyes. “Would you be upset if we just went to Whataburger?”

“Not at all. I can taste the French fries already.”

I smiled at her. She was so easy to please. I loved that already. When we got back to the car, I opened her door and watched her slide her fine ass on the leather seat and cross her

legs at the ankles before I closed the door. Her thick thighs were calling out to me, and I couldn't wait to slide between them. My dick had been on one since she'd sat on my lap back at the office.

When I joined her in the car, I smiled again. "Thank you for being understanding. It's been a long day. Can we go to dinner tomorrow?"

She reached over and grabbed my hand, squeezing it slightly. "Sure. Everyone isn't as blessed as Alexz and me to get off at noon on Fridays. I've had a nap and everything."

"Rub it in then," I said while slowly shaking my head.

She giggled as I made my way to Whataburger. My phone rang, and I immediately knew it was one of my brothers calling. I declined the call because the last thing I wanted was for one of them to say something stupid and offend Brittany. Chad would have easily said something like, *You must have found some pussy to slide up in.* While I wasn't practicing abstinence, I wasn't nearly the ho Dylan had been. It had been a smooth two or three months since I'd gotten my dick wet, and the last time I did, it was only head.

I glanced at Brittany to see a slight smile on her face as she looked at the passing scenery like she'd never seen it before. I always thought I would have to have a woman as aggressive as me in order to make a relationship work. I was wrong. Brittany was the total opposite of me, and she had me reevaluating my actions and words. She had me conforming to what she wanted, teaching me an acceptable way of treating her. Some women liked my aggressiveness and wanted me to tell them what the fuck to do. Brittany wasn't going for that shit, and she'd shown me that she can disappear.

I was feeling depressed and pitiful as hell the past two weeks. I tried to psych myself into moving on and playing the field, but thoughts of her wouldn't let me. It was like she'd snatched my heart out of my chest and kept it tightly tucked away for her use. Somehow, the moment I told her how I felt about her, she sucked me in.

After getting in the drive-thru line at Whataburger, I turned to her and just stared at her. Her cheeks reddened as she tried not to look back at me. I just wanted to admire everything about her... from her nearly shoulder length hair to her full breasts. The dimple on her right cheek sucked me in. Whenever she pursed her lips, it showed itself, and I just wanted to lick it. Real shit.

She had a beauty mark near the corner of her eye and one under her lip that simply did their job and enhanced her beauty. There was some darkness around her eyes that only increased her mystery. Her eyes... they were slanted and naturally low. I could only imagine what they looked like when she was turned on. It was that extra thickness on her that had me fantasizing about doing arm curls as I lifted and lowered her on my dick.

She finally turned to me and asked, "What? Did I do something?"

"You ain't do nothing, beautiful."

I gently stroked her cheek then pulled up to the intercom and ordered our food, only to discover that neither of us liked raw onions or tomato on our burgers. When I drove away from the intercom, I said, "It seems that we have some things in common despite our personality differences. I hate raw onions."

"Me too. Even if they are cooked, I don't particularly care for them."

"Me either. They make your breath stank. I'm always talking to people, so I can't have onion breath."

She giggled. That was when I realized she rarely showed her teeth. Her smiles were always closed mouth. She had a beautiful smile. I couldn't stop staring at her though. While she had a quiet demeanor, she was adamant about what she needed to do for herself, and I couldn't help but admire that. After she'd told me what she needed, she didn't constantly go back and forth with me. She ignored me and focused on her.

That was a traumatic situation she had to get over. I didn't help matters by demanding things of her that she wasn't ready to give. As I inched up in the line, I asked, "Can I ask you something?"

She glanced at me, and I could see the tension fill her slightly. "Sure."

"Why don't you show your teeth when you smile?"

She relaxed immediately, probably thinking that I was going to ask a deeper question than that. "I don't know. Even as a kid, I never really showed my teeth when I smiled. Every now and then, it happens, but only when I'm extremely excited or happy. When I laugh, I tend to cover my smile."

"I like your smile. It's beautiful. Can I see it for the one time?"

She blushed hard and turned away. When she turned back, she slowly gave me what I asked for, and I was mesmerized. "Damn. You so gorgeous."

She quickly hid her smile as I moved up in the line. This woman was going to have me doing all kinds of shit I wouldn't normally do. I could see it already. "Thank you, Shy," she said softly.

Damn. I just wanted to hold her in my arms, spooning her and kissing her neck and shoulders. It was like her softness made that desire more intense. Her ex crossed my mind, and I couldn't imagine how he could fuck things up with this angel. If she was as sweet with him as she was being with me, I didn't know what the problem was. She worked hard at the office and at home... I'd seen her on several occasions cleaning like she worked for a cleaning service. I watched her for hours one Saturday morning.

When she finally turned the light off and rested, it had been three or four hours. The entire time I watched her, I got images of how my mother used to clean up on Saturdays. When Dad was off, he would take us out of the house so Mama could get the housework done without us getting in her way. However, when he had to work, I watched her and

constantly wanted to be in her presence. I was a mama's boy for sure. I remembered crying a lot after she died.

After getting our food, I headed to her apartment, although I had the urge to take her to my house. It was where I wished she was living, and if I would have had my way, I would have moved her right in with me. We would have made love already and been functioning like we'd been together for years. Watching her for so long before telling her how I felt was a bad idea. I was already familiar with her and felt like I knew her when I didn't.

It made me want to move more quickly than I normally did, and in the process, I almost lost her. The fact that she'd come back to me because she thought she lost me told me everything I needed to know. She felt just as strongly about me as I felt about her. It was fear that was keeping her from moving quickly. She didn't trust her judgment after dealing with that nigga she used to be with.

As I drove, my phone rang again. When I saw Isaiah's number, I turned to Brittany. "I'm not responsible for whatever foolishness falls out of their mouths."

She chuckled as I answered. "What's up, Zay?"

"What's up, nigga? Where you at?"

"Man, I ain't coming. I'm tired as shit. I just got off and got something to eat. My bad for not calling."

"Uh huh. We'll talk later."

I slightly rolled my eyes. He could always tell when I was either lying or holding back. Before he ended the call, I heard him telling everyone else, "*That nigga ain't coming.*" As I glanced at Brittany, I saw her mouth moving. When I turned my head to her, she stopped. She glanced over at me, and I could see the smile dying to break out on her lips. "You ain't slick, girl. Stuffing fries in your mouth like you storing them in those sexy ass cheeks."

She had big cheeks that I could imagine storing some shit in alright. She cracked up laughing, and I was in awe of her. "Thank you for dinner," she said after she contained herself.

Her laugh was infectious, and it caused me to laugh too. She started laughing again as I said, “Make sure you only taking fries from one container so I know which one is yours when we get to your place. Don’t be dipping in mine. Whataburger fries are the truth.”

“Hell yeah they are,” she said as she pulled a couple from the bag and held them to my mouth.

After taking them in my mouth, I said, “Girl, you can’t trick me into nothing. I see what’chu doing.”

She frowned slightly like she was innocent, and I was accusing her of something she didn’t do. I continued. “You feeding me fries so when you take the one with the most left, you can say that I ate fries too. I know all the tricks.”

She died laughing then lightly shoved me in the arm. “So it’s gon’ be hard to trick you. Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

“Hell yeah. I ain’t a lawyer for nothing. I see everything you tryna hide. I should have been a detective.”

She quieted down as she glanced at me then out the window. Her mind had gone to a different place. “What am I trying to hide?”

“Just how much you really feeling me... how much you want me. You’re afraid to trust yourself again, and I can understand that. I’m gon’ meet you on your terms until you see for yourself how I can elevate you in every aspect of your life beyond your wildest dreams. I know you can do that for me too, because you already are just by being here. You got this rough, gangsta ass nigga being all sensitive and shit. If that ain’t elevation, I don’t know what is. When you *do* see what I see, I’m gon’ put so much of my seed in your life you ain’t gon’ have a choice but sprout roots right here with me.”

Her face was red as hell. I was pretty sure that I’d said too much. She was gonna have to learn not to ask me questions she didn’t really want to hear the answers to if she was bothered by what I said. My dick was hard as hell now, and

that was my fault. I shouldn't have gone there with her right now. She pulled that shit out of me though.

After parking, I was about to get out to open her door, but she stopped me. I just knew she was about to tell me that I couldn't go up to her place. She had something else on her mind though. "What if I want to establish roots with you, Shy?"

I couldn't answer her right now, or I would have her bouncing on my dick in this car, throwing caution to the wind and putting a Berotte in her tonight. I bit my bottom lip and got out of the car to open her door. When she got out, I took the food from her and set it on the seat. I moved her toward the front of the car then lifted her and sat her on the hood. "Listen... I hope you ain't playing because I'm ready to be all in. If you not sure, let's just keep things how they've been tonight... slow, like you said. I ain't rushing you, but you saying shit like that gon' get you fucked up."

She grabbed my shirt, pulling me closer to her, between her legs, and laid her soft lips on mine. I couldn't help but suck her bottom lip. I didn't want to let that shit go. When I released it, I immediately went to her neck and sniffed the lavender scent from her, lightly gliding my nose over her skin. That shit made me look up at her. She could have had on any scent but lavender. I swore she had my nose wide open now.

"Brittany, if you don't stop me, I'm gon' taste you right on the hood of this car. I don't think you'd be down with no shit like that."

Her smell had me sensitive as hell. The scent of lavender always took me back to the days of Marie Berotte holding me in her arms while I fell asleep. It was what my house smelled like. I was surprised I didn't smell it on her when I first saw her earlier. Maybe I wasn't close enough. She gently pushed me away from her and hopped off my hood then went to the car and got the food while I got our drinks.

My dick was hard enough to bust concrete. I hoped she was serious, because this nigga was gon' go upside her head like a baseball bat if she wasn't. As I followed her to her

apartment, I couldn't help but watch her ass jiggle. That shit only caused my dick to start leaking. I took a sip of my Sprite to somewhat calm my nerves while she unlocked the door. Easing closer to her, I knew she felt my presence, because I saw the goosebumps appear on her skin.

When she walked through the door and I walked in behind her, I looked around at just how nice she had the place already. I went to the table and set our drinks down then pulled her into my arms. She eased hers around me. "I know I said slow, but being in your presence is doing something to me that I can't control. It was why I didn't want to be around you before now. Shy... you are a force that makes me weak with desire. I'm tired of trying to control myself. I want to be free with you."

I felt like I wanted to make love to her at that very moment. Although she didn't look into my eyes, I knew enough about her to know that she wouldn't say something she didn't mean... not when it came to her feelings. I knew that was how she felt when she appeared at my office. I was more than sure Alexz had told her where I was since she'd texted fifteen minutes before Brittany arrived. Had her feelings not been as strong, she wouldn't have come looking for me.

She pulled away from me and said, "Let's eat."

I nodded and pulled out her chair at the table. She looked back at me and smiled as if pulling out her chair was a big deal. I wasn't the nigga she'd dealt with previously. She'd better get used to that fact. That muthafucka had gotten all his shit moved out of that apartment. I was surprised. I just knew it would be a hassle to get him out of it since it was paid up for the next two months. He moved in with some broad on the southside of Beaumont. Looked like a downgrade in my eyes. I was confused as to why the police hadn't arrested his ass yet.

Once I sat next to Brittany, she held her hand out. When I put my hand in hers, she blessed our food. I couldn't even focus on the Lord with her sitting next to me. My eyes stayed on her as she thanked God for putting us together. I couldn't agree more. Once she was done praying, she looked up at me just as I was leaning over to kiss her lips. She smiled slightly and puckered up. I couldn't believe this woman was finally

mine. While I knew she eventually would be, I had lost faith that it would be this soon.

When I pulled away from her, I pulled out my fries to see the carton was half empty. I looked over at hers to see she had more. I slowly shook my head. “Why my carton half empty, Britt?”

“Don’t be such a pessimist. It’s half full.”

She could barely keep a straight face. “We only been together two minutes and you starting already. I thought you were shy and reserved.”

“Not when it comes to food.”

“Shit, I see. You worse than Alexz.”

She giggled as she ate her fries and never offered to give me more. *This woman*. She had better be glad I liked her so much. I didn’t play about my food either. Let it would have been a homecooked meal and I would have taken my food back. I had to chuckle at the thought. We continued eating our food in silence, and I could feel my body wearing down fast. I didn’t lie when I said I was tired. It had been a long day of research for a murder case.

Perry was behind, and I refused to let him embarrass the firm. However, I knew of his troubles at home, and he had a sick mother. His wife had cheated on him, and he’d caught her in the act. I couldn’t imagine not being in jail after seeing something like that. They both would have gotten fucked up. Plus, his mother was in the final stages of cancer, so I didn’t mind helping because I knew his plate was full.

After finishing my meal, I noticed Brittany was done as well. I gathered our trash and threw it away. When I turned back around, she was standing at the table, staring at me. Just like that, my dick was ready all over again. I didn’t know if I even wanted to perform this way, being as tired as I was. When I got to her, she grabbed my hand and led me to the couch. The moment we sat, I slouched somewhat, and she pulled me to her. “If you want to go home, I understand.”

“Naw. I’m good. I wanna be here with you.”

I wrapped my arms around her waist as I laid against her, taking in her scent once again. She felt like home... lavender and her soft touch. *Home.*

CHAPTER 8

*B*rittany

I WAS ON MY COUCH, LISTENING TO THE SOOTHING SOUNDS OF Tweet as Shyrón lightly snored. He was so tired, but he didn't want to leave my side. Staring down at him, I kissed his forehead then played in his curly hair. He tightened his grip on me and whispered, "Mama."

I was confused for a second, then I realized he was probably dreaming. Their mother had been deceased for nearly twenty-six years. Shyrón was only four years old when she died. Maybe he remembered more of her than I thought he did. My brain started working overtime, trying to convince me that his attraction to me was because I reminded him of his mother. That would be a hard pill to swallow. I knew I didn't look like her, but maybe my mannerisms were hers.

Before I could fully analyze the situation, he sat straight up. After rubbing his eyes, he turned to me. They were red. "I'm sorry I fell asleep on you. I'm gonna go home before I embarrass myself any longer. I'm not easily embarrassed, but I know I snore and slobber at times."

I smiled. "Why don't you just stay? I'd never forgive myself for not offering if you were to fall asleep at the wheel."

"Only if I can sleep in the bed with you. If not, I can go home and sleep alone."

My breath caught in my throat for a moment, then I asked, “Why would I have you sleep anywhere else? I want you close to me.”

“Mm. Lead the way, gorgeous.”

I stood from the couch and grabbed his hand, helping him up. His body in those navy slacks and white button-down dress shirt was taking me *through* it! Shyrón was so damn fine there were literally no words bold enough to describe him. My hand trembled in his as I led him to my bedroom. When he walked in and saw all the white linens, he whistled. “A nigga better be clean as the board of health when he come in here.”

I giggled as he pulled me to him. “It looks nice. I take it white is your favorite color.”

“Not to wear, but it looks nice... and clean.”

He kissed my forehead then took off his dress shoes and put them in the corner near my chair. “My bed isn’t huge, so I hope you’re comfortable in it.”

“I’m comfortable wherever you are.”

I lowered my head as I felt my cheeks heat up. This man was everything. It was like he always knew what to say and when to say it. *Jesus Christ*. When I looked back up at him, he was unbuttoning his shirt, and I was stuck. I literally couldn’t move. I could see the wife beater he had on under it, and I was wondering if he would take it off too.

After he finished unbuttoning his shirt, he looked at me and grinned as he took it off. I quickly looked away and said, “You can sleep on whatever side you want. I’m comfortable on either side.”

“A’ight. I’ll sleep on the side closest to the door. Shit. I forgot my work bag in the car. Let me go get it, and I’ll be right back.”

I frowned slightly. “Why can’t you leave it in the car?”

“I never do.”

I nodded, although that statement wasn’t really an explanation. Once he left the room, I came out of my clothes

and put my nightshirt and some leggings on. Normally, I didn't wear leggings with my night shirts, but now that the opportunity was here for him to have his way with me, I was nervous as hell. I wouldn't say no if he wanted to get into it, but I surely wouldn't initiate things. Thankfully, I'd taken a shower before I left to go to his firm. I knew I wouldn't be safe in here naked. That thought produced a chuckle out of me.

When the door opened, I smiled at Shy. I was standing in the mirror, wrapping my hair. He chuckled as if something were funny then set his bag in the chair. He bent over and unzipped it, pulling out a gun. A tremble went through me as I watched him walk over and set it on the nightstand. "That's why I never leave my bag in the car."

I nodded and swallowed hard then continued wrapping my hair. He came and stood behind me, giving me goosebumps. When he stooped slightly and wrapped his arms around my waist, I closed my eyes and relished in the feelings of adoration and security. He kissed my neck then left me to what I was doing.

After I was done, I turned to see him in my bed, in his boxers and wife beater, just staring at me. I smiled slightly and nervously made my way to the bed as well. Once I said my prayers, I got in bed with him, and he immediately pulled me close... spooning me. The dick I felt on my ass told me that we probably wouldn't make it through the night without him getting acquainted with my insides.

"What did you pray for?"

"I'll tell you if you tell me what you were dreaming about earlier."

"What makes you think I was dreaming?"

"You talked in your sleep."

"Damn. What did I say?"

"Mama."

He got quiet... so quiet until I had to turn to look at him. "I can't talk about that right now."

I nodded. “It’s okay. I understand.”

He pulled me close once again and kissed my ear. “Good night, Brittany.”

“Good night, Shy.”

I had probably ruined his mood when I brought up the dream, because I felt his dick somewhat deflate. That didn’t stop him from holding me close and making me feel the safest I’d ever felt.



WHEN I WOKE UP, I WAS ON MY BACK, AND SHYRÓN WAS kissing my neck and shoulder. I didn’t have time to be nervous about it, because his touch was soothing. His hand rested at my hip as he slowly devoured me. When he licked my neck up to my earlobe and gently bit it, I couldn’t stop the moan that left me.

He lifted his head and kissed my lips. I was worried about my morning breath, but then I realized it was still dark outside. “Give me your tongue, girl,” he said against my lips.

I slowly obliged him, and when I did, I felt the gush below. It had been over a month since I’d last had sex, because Lamar and I weren’t getting along. It had probably been closer to two months, and my lady parts missed the connection. His hand gripped my ass while we made sweet music with our tongues. The slow, passionate kissing had me readier than a fresh battery. Lifting my hands, I brought them to the back of his head, gently scratching him with my nails.

My body hadn’t felt so open and ready in a long time. There wasn’t a nervous bone in my body about this, and that was saying a lot. I lowered my hands to the hem of his wife beater and pulled it over his head, causing him to separate our kiss. When I beheld all that caramel goodness he called skin, my panties got even wetter. He licked his lips as he stared at me then pulled his boxers off over his erection.

As if I wasn't already at the point of no return, seeing his dick only caused my mouth to water. It was just as big as I thought it was. I was hoping that I would even be able to take all of it. Before I could focus on it, he'd pulled me to a sitting position and pulled my shirt over my head as well. After I fell back to the bed, Shy pulled off my leggings and underwear in one swoop. A small moan escaped me. He was becoming more aggressive in his journey to conquering the task at hand, and surprisingly, I was good with that.

Once he got them completely off, he said, "Spread them legs, Britt. Let me see how beautiful that pussy is."

Why was he like this? I felt like I was about to cum just at his words. I set my feet flat on the bed and spread my legs as he requested. He grabbed his dick and stroked it. "Just like I thought. Let me see you slide your fingers in that gushy shit."

I masturbated at times, but I'd never done it with someone watching me. Sensing my hesitancy, he said, "Show me how to please you. I'm not trying to figure that shit out through trial and error. I wanna be right on it when my tongue strokes it."

I gushed again, and I realized he'd noticed, because he frowned and bit his bottom lip. When his eyes met mine, I slid my hand to my treasure and began flicking my bud back and forth then making circles around it. Shy lowered himself to the bed, his head right between my legs, watching my every move. When I felt his tongue on my fingers, my body temperature increased, and my heart rate took off for the races.

He hadn't touched the flesh of my fruit yet, but the anticipation was killing me. After I whispered his name, he pulled my fingers away and sucked them clean as my legs trembled. "I just needed a quick tutorial. I wanna do the work to get you there. I promise you, I'm gon' feel ten times better than your fingers."

"Well stop teasing me and get to it," I said, surprising even myself.

He looked up at me with a smirk on his lips. "Mm hmm. I'm gon' make you try to run from me. I hope you as ready as you think you are."

With that, he dived into my overly ripened fruit and sucked me right into an orgasm. He was a quick learner. Just as he said, after I came, I was trying to push him away. It hadn't even been three minutes. He delivered two swift pops to my ass and continued devouring me while I squirmed and twitched uncontrollably. "Oh my God, Shy! Oh my God."

When his fingers penetrated me, I began rolling my hips. The way I was enjoying this without restraint had me feeling free... like my old self when I first met Lamar... minus the weight. I didn't become so reserved until he started criticizing my weight gain, but here this man was, making me feel like I was the sexiest woman alive. He didn't want a thing from me. He just wanted me and wasn't concerned about what I could do for him or what the hell I was bringing to the table. He *was* the fucking table, and all he wanted me to do was sit at that shit and eat.

He was a true king, a man worth serving with all that I had in me. The things Lamar was demanding I did, I would gladly do them for Shyrón without being asked to. I would sit at his feet all day if I could... washing them, massaging them, and putting lotion on them. I'd even kiss them. That was just how gone he had me in a short amount of time.

He slowed the stroke of his fingers, rubbing light circles on my g-spot. I gasped as I saw the flash from his bottom grill. He didn't have it in when he went to sleep. I couldn't believe he'd put it in just to eat me out with them. I was sure he had his reasons for doing so, but it was sexy as hell to me. I loved his grill, especially the bottom one. "I'm about to cum, Shy."

"What you waiting on then? Quit playing with it and give it to me," he mumbled.

I closed my eyes and focused on just how good he felt to me, and within seconds, I came all over his fingers. When he withdrew them, he licked them all over while staring at me. I sat up and decided to take charge and show him that I wasn't as timid sexually as he thought I was. When I got to my knees then fell on my stomach, my face ending up right in front of his dick, it twitched like it was hopping in excitement for my

presence. I looked up at him and asked, “Is he happy to meet me?”

He didn’t respond verbally. Instead, he rested it right on my lips, then bent over slightly and rubbed my cheek until I opened my mouth, allowing him inside. He released an exhale, like he was holding his breath, then slid his hand to my headscarf, pulling it off. I allowed some of him to leave my mouth then began sucking the head of his dick, allowing the saliva to escape from my lips. When I stared up at him and found him staring at me, it made me want to put in my best technique.

I took as much of him as humanly possible as he swept my hair away from my face and threaded his fingers through it. Feeling him slide past my tonsils, I gagged and produced the throat orgasm people were starting to talk about these days. When Shy moaned, I looked up at him again. His moans were so sexy. He lowered his hands to my face and cupped my cheeks then began stroking my mouth slowly. *God*. This man could have whatever he wanted from me. When his pace quickened some, his balls started to swing, christening me with my own spit.

Sucking his dick was turning me on so much, especially when he said, “Fuck! You surprising me, girl. I’m about to nut.”

Just because I was reserved didn’t mean that I didn’t know how to perform orally. This was the start of my fourth relationship, although, the first one was never sexually charged. We didn’t have sex at all, actually. It was my first year in college, and I just wasn’t ready. Surprisingly, I broke up with him. He was cool with not being sexually active with me, because he wasn’t sexually active either. He was a Seventh-day Adventist and trying to follow the instruction laid out in the bible.

So Shyrón would make only the third man I’d been with, but I’d had plenty of practice with my last two boyfriends. The one before Lamar would have been fine. I enjoyed sex with him, but so did other women... at the same time I was enjoying it. He was a huge ho, and I refused to share. Sex with

Lamar was okay, but it was his heart that I fell in love with. That shit must have been a smoke screen, hiding the real him.

Although I didn't stop sucking Shy when he admitted he was about to nut, he pulled out of my mouth, squeezing his dick as he rolled me over and released on my breasts. With the position I was in, the spit I'd left all over him was dripping right in my face. When he moved and saw it, he gently wiped it from my face. "Although I believe I'm clean, I wanna be sure that I am before we go there."

I could only respect his actions. "I suppose I should take a test as well."

"As a woman, most STDs would show up quickly in you, but it would be wise to get one. It won't hurt, that's for sure. We can go together."

I nodded as I glanced at his dick. He was still hard as he left me in the bed and went to his bag. I supposed his life was in that damn bag. After a few seconds, he turned back to me already strapped up. I was so ready to see what he would feel like inside me. I bit my bottom lip as I stared at him and waited for him to join me. He picked up his wife beater and wiped my chest with it then threw it back to the floor. Instead of joining me, he grabbed my hand and pulled me from the bed. "What was that shit you was talkin' earlier?"

Oh fuck. He was about to hurt me so good. Shy stooped and grabbed the backs of my thighs then lifted me in the crooks of his arms. The head of his dick was playing at my opening, and I was praying that he wouldn't just drop me on it. As if reading my thoughts, he brought me to the wall and slowly breached my opening. "Ooooh shit," I said.

He went further inside of me with every stroke as he watched the action below. "Damn, girl. You creamin' on a nigga already. Let me see what else this pussy gon' do for me."

He started pumping into me more powerfully, and I thought I had seen the light. My nails dug into his shoulders as I screamed to the high heavens. His face was slightly red as he gave me the business. His grunts and my screams were filling

the air, and I knew that this was how sex was supposed to always sound. For him to get screams out of me, he was definitely putting that work in. I wasn't a screamer. Nothing about me was loud, but he was a fucking OG for this.

“Brittany, look at me.” When I opened my eyes and stared into his, he continued. “You know this pussy belong to me now, right? You finna bring out a whole notha nigga now. I'm extremely possessive, and got damn if every part of you doesn't belong to me now. Fuck!”

He pulled me away from the wall and continued fucking me as he made his way back to the bed. When he lifted me from his dick, I heard the slight popping noise. “Mm. That's that good shit. But listen... just like you belong to me now, I belong to you too. This yo' dick. Whenever you need me, I'm gon' show up every time.”

He joined me in the bed and hovered over me. Pulling my leg up, he kissed the inside of my knee then pushed inside of me once again. After bringing my leg to his shoulder, he leaned over and pulled my nipple into his mouth. I wrapped my other leg around his waist as he expertly dug out my treasure. He lifted his head and stared into my eyes. “I swear this the best pussy in the world, and I ain't quoting no fucking song lyrics. That's real shit.”

I loved how he talked to me, especially since I wasn't as vocal. Besides my screams and moans, it was rare I said anything else, just a word here and there. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him closer to me. My emotions were about to get the best of me. I could feel the water works building in my tear ducts. “Damn, Shy.”

“Mm hmm. Tell me how you feel, baby.”

I took a couple of deep breaths, trying to calm the tears, but as soon as I opened my mouth to let the words out, the tears fell anyway. “Like the world was laid at my feet. Tell me it will always be this way... oh shit. I'm about to cum.”

“Wait for me, Britt. Fuck! Wait for me. The world *is* at your feet as long as you with me. Don't forget that shit. Come on, girl. Cum with me, baby.”

Within seconds, we were both cursing and trembling. Shyrón lifted his head as my orgasm subsided and gently wiped my tears. To have a man that was so sensitive to what I needed felt unreal. I just hoped that he wouldn't dare sell me any wolf tickets. That shit sounded so believable, and I wanted nothing more than for him to back up his words. I was always the one that catered to other people. Now that I was finally getting a chance to possibly see what it felt like on the receiving end of it, I was in heaven.

CHAPTER 9

S

hyrón

“AIN’T NOBODY GON’ BE TRIPPING. THEY ALL KNOW THAT I was feeling you. I mean, I wasn’t really hiding it at the wedding two weekends ago.”

“I know, but I’m still nervous.”

I slowly shook my head. I was taking Brittany to Sunday dinner at my dad’s house. We’d been getting it in all weekend long. After my first taste, I couldn’t get enough. I had to explore her entire body. That first session, I just needed to feel her insides before I nutted without her ass. I had never been so turned on in all my thirty years, and it took her lil ass to do it.

While everything about her felt right in my soul, I was still a little on edge. I still hadn’t told her about my dream. I hadn’t had a dream about my mother in a long time, but I supposed smelling the lavender while lying on her soft body pulled it out of me. The dream was extremely vivid. My mama was rubbing my hair as I lay on her chest. She was humming and would occasionally kiss me on my forehead.

In that moment, the dream seemed so real. My mama was the reason I wanted a woman with meat on her bones. I wanted a woman that was like her. Brittany was as close to her as I’d ever gotten. It would only be a matter of time before I would know exactly how compatible we really were... once the excitement wore off.

When I pulled in the driveway, everyone had arrived except Zay. That was surprising. He was normally one of the first to arrive. After parking, I got out of the car to help Brittany out. The moment she got out and I'd closed the door, I leaned against her, pressing her back against the door of the car. I lowered my forehead to hers, trying to soak up her nervous energy. "I think Alexz is going to be excited to see us together. You're like a sister to her anyway."

"She already knows. I got your whereabouts from her. So she called yesterday to see how it went when you went home to shower and get clothes."

"So what'chu tripping for?"

"I don't know. It's stupid, especially since I know everyone in the house."

I kissed her lips, allowing it to linger as I gently sucked her bottom lip. "Come on before I put your fine ass back in this car."

She chuckled as Zay turned in the driveway. I decided to wait for him before we walked in. When he got out of his truck, he looked tired as fuck. I waited for him to get closer, and I noticed his eyes were slightly pink. "What's up, Zay? You good, man?"

"Yeah, I'm cool."

He greeted Brittany then walked past us to the back door. I knew he was everything but. He didn't want to talk in front of Brittany. I followed him inside to hear Alexz and Chad going at it, as usual. "Lexi just wants to be in a relationship with a man who can eventually love her. Admit that you scared instead of this stupid fucking stipulation that she's not thirty yet. That's bullshit, and everybody can see through it! You guys could have been together for a good seven months by now, and you too fucked up to see you messed up."

She rolled her eyes at Chad, and before he could say another word, Alexz saw us standing there. "Brittany! Hey, sis!"

While they greeted one another, I went to greet my dad and Dylan. “I see you, bruh. That’s what’s up,” Dylan said. We slapped hands as he asked, “You ain’t had no more problems with her nigga, have you?”

“Her ex-nigga,” I corrected. “Naw, but I’m on guard for the fuckery at all times.”

I shook my dad’s hand as I asked him, “How’s married life treating you?”

“Good. Anissa and I had already fallen into a routine with her living here, so the transition was seamless, especially since I was already calling her my wife. I see you finally went after what you wanted. She *is* the same woman we talked about months ago when Dylan did the paternity test, right?”

“That’s who I was talking about. It’s been a long time coming.”

“I know, but I ought to go upside your head for embarrassing that girl at our wedding.”

“Listen, I felt like it was a now-or-never type of moment. It worked out.”

“Lucky for you.”

I chuckled as I noticed Zay just kind of chilling by himself. “Y’all know what’s up with Zay?”

“He has a lot going on at work and his personal life. You’ll have to talk to him yourself. You know he don’t like getting sensitive with yo’ ass, because you always give him a hard time,” Dylan said.

“Shit, the way Brittany been having me feeling this weekend, I ain’t got no room to be judgmental of him. I been more sensitive than an asthmatic in a bed of pollen.”

Dylan chuckled as my dad shook his head. I picked with Isaiah a lot about how sensitive he was, but I knew it had a lot to do with his job. He could be aggressive when he needed to be. He proved that when we chased Chanell’s ass down that day she tore up Dylan’s car. He’d gotten to her before me and snatched her ass right out of the car she was in.

I walked over to him, and he straightened up slightly. “What’s up, man? For real. You need me legally?”

“Naw. Just this case at work. The same fucking case from nearly a year ago. I’ve been trying to get this mother to see that something more is going on with her daughter. None of us can speak to her daughter alone without her permission. It makes me think that her mother knows what’s going on and doesn’t want it to get out.”

“That’s fucked up. You probably feel like your hands are tied.”

“Legally, they are, but I swear I’ve thought about going to their house and fucking that nigga up... her mom’s boyfriend. I’m trying to exhaust every legal option though without getting CPS involved prematurely.”

“Shiiiiid, you know I can handle that shit. Just say the word, and I’ll get Ali to get somebody on him. After we know his comings and goings, we can handle him.” He nodded as I continued. “Seems like there’s something else though.”

“There is. This woman that I somewhat wronged back in the day has been plaguing my mind. I haven’t gotten much sleep this weekend because of it. I contacted her Friday evening and we talked, but she wants nothing to do with me. She still looks amazing, and I just want a second chance with her heart. I fumbled in the first quarter. Now that we’re nearing halftime, I’m trying to make some adjustments.”

I nodded. I totally understood what he was going through, despite his football terminology. Being without Brittany was getting harder every day, even though she had a nigga. I knew where she belonged, and I refused to rest until she knew it too. “Don’t give up. Maybe you can make her see how sincere you are about getting back with her or whatever. Send her flowers and constantly woo her until she softens up.”

He glanced at me and said, “Yeah, I know what to do. I just feel pressed. You the last person I thought I would be talking to about this. That woman got yo’ ass all sensitive. Congratulations though.”

I chuckled and rubbed my hand down my chin. “Thanks, man.”

When I turned to walk away from him to go find Mama Nissa, I nearly ran into Brittany. I leaned over and kissed her forehead. We’d fallen into this thing headfirst. It was like we were meant to be in a relationship a long time ago. Friday night had proven that. Once we had sex, that was it. It was the act that sealed the deal. “What’s up, baby?” I asked her.

“Nothing. I just wanted to be close to you.”

“Mm. I don’t have a problem with that. Come with me to speak to Mama Nissa.”

“Okay.”

When we got to the kitchen, she was stirring her pot of what smelled like beef stew, and Alexz was taking the potato salad from the fridge. “It smells good in here, Mama,” I said.

She turned around and smiled big then hugged me. “Hey, baby. How was your week? You doing okay?”

I pulled Brittany to me and said, “I’m doing better than I’ve ever done.”

Although I stopped by frequently during the week, I rarely talked to Mama Nissa. I was just mainly passing through to holla at my old man. Most times, she was busy doing something inside the house, or she would be out and about. Dad was always outside, keeping busy since he’d stopped volunteering at the school. He said he’d had enough of those bad ass kids and now that he had someone to keep him busy, he didn’t have time.

He used to wish more people would volunteer, but now he saw why they didn’t. Some of those kids didn’t have an ounce of respect for adults or authority figures. Unfortunately, that could only lead them to two places: jail or the cemetery. He said the kids were way different than when we were growing up. We were taught at home how to show respect, but these kids were on something totally different, and their parents weren’t any better.

Mama Nissa smiled at Brittany and me and said, “I bet you are. Congratulations on your new relationship. Seeing y’all find love is beautiful to watch. It’s like you were all subconsciously waiting on your dad to do so first. Now that he’s happy, y’all are living your lives for you. That’s amazing to watch unfold. Hopefully, DJ and Jamel can settle down, too, since they don’t have to worry so much about me.”

“I’m sure they will. I don’t think Jamel is really looking right now though,” I said as she rolled her eyes.

I chuckled. Jamel was just as bad as Dylan used to be. He and Arrow hung tight, loving them and leaving them. Arrow was Axton’s brother, but since Axton was Alexz’s fiancé, he was accepted as another brother as well. Our family was growing so fast. Brittany didn’t have any siblings, so there was no one else to welcome, although I knew I wanted to meet her people in Natchitoches. I would make time for that soon.

After speaking to the rest of my brothers, I sat next to Chad. He’d been quiet since Alexz called him out about Skyler’s sister, Lexi. When they met nearly six or seven months ago, I could tell that they were feeling each other at first sight. I paid attention to every damn thing, just like I noticed Brittany kept looking at her phone and rolling her eyes when she thought I wasn’t watching.

“Bruh, what’s up? You quiet as hell.”

“I’m cool. Alexz just took shit to a personal level. I’m tryna cool off.”

“She always takes it to a personal level. Come at somebody else with that falsehood. You talking to a nigga that studied your every move because I wanted to be like you. I didn’t focus on exactly who I was until I became a Kappa instead of a Que. So come again.”

Chad never liked spilling his feelings everywhere... never. When Alexz had her abortion, that was the softest I’d seen him since Mama died. I still remembered how much the three of us cried for her. That was a damn near twenty-five-year break in his sensitivity... or at least his public sensitivity. He took a

deep breath then slid his hands down his face and stood from the couch and walked toward the back door.

I followed behind him while glancing at Brittany again to see her engrossed in her phone. Isaiah joined me outside with Chad. “I wanna talk to her, but she seem way too perfect... Like, I ain’t found shit wrong with her. That shit making me nervous. Ain’t nobody perfect.”

I frowned. “You did a background check?”

“Hell yeah. No tickets... no nothing.”

“That don’t mean she perfect, nigga. That could just mean she ain’t got caught doing her dirt. You only gon’ find shit out by giving her a chance,” Zay said.

“I don’t know if I wanna risk it.”

“Man, you gon’ be single for the rest of your life if you approach every woman with that mindset.”

“She’s only had two jobs, one of them was as a teenager. She’s twenty-six or twenty-seven now.”

This shit wasn’t making sense. It was something else that was going on that he wasn’t saying, but I didn’t have time to figure that shit out. Brittany was having an issue as well. I needed to check on her. I patted his back and said, “Quit being scared and shit and just talk to her.”

When I walked back inside, I didn’t see Brittany or Alexz. My dad saw me looking around, so he said, “They went to Alexz’s old bedroom. Something is going on with her family. I’m not sure what though. I only got that much because I was ear hustling.”

I nodded then took off toward Alexz’s bedroom. When I got to the door, I heard Brittany say, “How could they drop that shit on me like this? And by phone? So I don’t have nobody! I’m so disgusted, I could throw up.”

“Brittany, you know you have me and Shyrón for sure, but you have our whole family. We all love you, girl. We adopted you a long time ago. You had no idea, and that’s on them.”

My curiosity had gotten the best of me. I lightly knocked on the door, interrupting them. Brittany's voice and the hurt I heard in it made me want to get to her as quickly as possible. Alexz opened the door then smiled at me when she stepped aside to let me in. She walked out, leaving Brittany and me alone. When I saw the tears streaming down her face, I went to the bed where she was seated and sat next to her.

I put my arms around her and held her close. "What's going on, baby?"

She remained quiet for a moment. "Can you take me home? I'll explain there."

"Yeah. Whatever you need, baby. You know I got'chu." Releasing her from my arms, I kissed her forehead then her lips. "Come on," I said as I stood from the bed and extended my hand to her.

When we got to the front, everyone was gathering at the table. "I'm sorry I ruined Sunday dinner," Brittany said softly.

"You ain't ruin shit. I'm gon' get us some plates to go. Let me start the car first; that way you can have some privacy. Ain't nothing worse than having to pretend you don't want to fall apart."

I led her to the car after she kissed Alexz, Skyler, and Mama Nissa and hugged my dad. I assured her I would be right back. Once I went back inside to get the to-go plates Mama Nissa was already preparing for us and told everyone that I would get with them during the week, I made my way back to the car. She needed me, and I'd be damned if I wouldn't be there at her beck and call.

CHAPTER 10

Brittany

I COULDN'T BELIEVE THE BULLSHIT I FOUND OUT TODAY. It was beyond unbelievable at best. So evil and cold-hearted. I was quiet for the entire ride back to my place. When we got here, Shyrón insisted that I pack a bag and come to his house. I didn't have the strength to argue with him. While I wanted to be alone with what had just been revealed to me, I knew that it was probably best that I wasn't.

After packing a bag for the entire week, I made my way to the front. It was filled with scrubs and a couple changes of regular clothes. "I got it, baby," he said as he took the bag from me. "I'm glad you're doing what I asked of you. I just want to be able to care for you. We'll have more room at my place. This apartment is made for one inhabitant. A nigga like me feel closed in."

I rolled my eyes, and he saw me. He grabbed me, lifting me from my feet and began tickling the hell out of me. I swore I couldn't breathe. The people next door had to think I was being attacked... but he made me laugh. That was what was so special about it. My mind was in turmoil, but with him, I felt a sense of peace about it all.

When he lowered me to my feet, he kissed my lips. As he tried to pull away, I held onto him by placing my hand at the back of his neck. He obliged me and gave me his tongue... the

tongue I had gotten to know so well over the past couple of days. I loved his slow kisses, but the quick, sloppy ones I experienced had given me an orgasm with my clothes on. I would have never guessed that this man was so passionate.

He pulled away again and said, “Don’t start no shit in here. You gon’ end up bowed up against that wall over there. I’ll take care of that at my house. You’ll be the first woman to ever stay there.”

My eyebrows hiked up a bit. “You’ve never had a woman spend the night?”

“Hell naw. Only two have been there, and only one of them I actually had sex with. So you mean a lot to me for me to have you in my place. I know that you’re it for me. Real shit.”

He had my heart swollen with gratefulness that I had given him a chance, despite my previous hesitancy. Shy was more than I ever thought he would be. Once we left and got in his car, his phone rang. He glanced at me and did something to his phone. When he answered, I realized he’d disconnected the Bluetooth. “What’chu got...? I know you fucking lying... How did you find that?”

I tuned him out because I figured he was talking about a case. He had to protect his client’s information. I stared out of the window, trying to figure out where I would go from here. Life surely could have a way of gut checking you, and it had knocked the wind out of me. As I wiped the tears that had fallen, I noticed we were at Shy’s house. It was beautiful. He didn’t live too far from me. He drove down the driveway to the backyard and parked in front of the garage. That was when I noticed the beautiful pool. I smiled as I stared at it, wanting to just jump in, and I couldn’t fucking swim.

Once he killed the engine, he smiled at me then got out and grabbed my big duffel bag from the back seat. When he opened my door, I asked, “Can we sit by the pool? You have a beautiful home.”

“Thank you. Yeah, we can do that. You know you can come here whenever you want. I wanted you to move in with

me, honestly.”

“You Berotte men move fast as hell, huh?”

“Not just the men. Look at Alexz. Her and Ax ain’t been together a year and about to get married. I feel like the only reason they aren’t married yet is because she want a big ass lavish wedding. She gon’ have Pop in the poorhouse.”

I chuckled as I thought about all the shit she was showing me before I got the phone call. My phone had been going off nonstop from unknown numbers, and it was pissing me off. I figured it was probably Lamar, because he’d left a couple of voice messages throughout the week, begging me to give him another chance. I knew that Shy had seen me. Just as I looked up at him, he was looking away. I wondered what he was thinking.

We made our way to the pool after Shy set my bag on the outdoor couch, then we went to the lounge chairs and sat. He grabbed my hand as I stared out at the water for a moment. What I had to say wasn’t easy, and I hoped he would be able to handle what I had to tell him. “My mother called to say that my father is sick. He’s in the hospital, and he was losing blood just as quickly as they were giving it to him. I offered to make a trip to donate blood and to see them. It’s been at least six months since I’ve been to visit.”

I took a deep breath as I thought about what I was about to say. Her response was haunting me and ringing in my ears. Shy squeezed my hand as he sat up in his lounger. “Before I could ask questions about why he was losing blood, she said that I couldn’t donate blood because he wasn’t my biological father, nor was she my biological mother. They adopted me when I was two. My birth mother got killed in a convenience store robbery when I was a year old, and my dad was absentee. I don’t know why her family didn’t take me in, but I ended up in the system. According to her, I was with my mom when it happened, and I was so traumatized, I didn’t talk until I was three.”

He was about to speak, but I held my hand up to halt him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cut you off. That’s not the worst of

it. People adopt kids all the time and don't tell them the truth. While I feel that it wasn't right for them to keep that from me, I would have still taken the three-hour drive and been there before it got dark. What she said next halted me and took my breath away."

The tears fell from my eyes, and I wanted to wake up and see that this was all a nightmare. I'd pinched myself a few times to make sure I was really awake. Shy rubbed my hand in a soothing manner as I continued. "They had a son, but they didn't want him. They wanted a little girl. He was about the same age as me, she said. After they adopted me, they gave him up for adoption... pretty much sold him to another couple, because none of that shit was done through any agency. How could they give up a child because they didn't want a boy? What kind of fuck shit is that? But here's the worst part."

I could see in his eyes that he was in disbelief already. My parents had never even given me a clue they could be this vile. Had someone else told me, I wouldn't have believed them. "Their son grew up knowing the truth about what they'd done. So he wasn't my age like she said. He was a couple of years older than me. He remembered every horrible detail of it. He was four years old when his parents sold him. Four!"

I pulled my knees up slightly as my legs trembled and turned to Shy. His face was slightly red, and I knew it was from the sun. Although there was a nice breeze out, the sun was still beaming. "I'm sorry. Let's go in the house."

"Naw. Finish what you have to say."

He didn't seem surprised at all or caught off guard like he was about me being adopted. He actually looked relieved, and I knew that whoever was on that call had probably told him everything that I now knew. I bit my bottom lip and said, "Lamar is their biological son. The man I spent years of my life with is their damn son. She said he knew exactly who I was. Apparently, he told them what he'd been doing, and she felt compelled to tell me. The crazy part is that they'd never met. He never wanted to go with me when I went to visit, and now, I know why."

“So Lamar wasn’t his birth name?”

“No. When he got to the other people, he was a handful. I could only imagine he was. They told him he could change his name to whatever he wanted, and for some reason, he picked the name Lamar. I was practically fucking my brother!”

“Don’t think that way, baby. That nigga ain’t your brother. You ain’t blood related to them.” He gently rubbed my cheek as he stared into my eyes. “If you want to go to Natchitoches, we can leave now. Regardless of what happened, they are the only parents that you’ve ever known. Don’t worry about Lamar.”

“He was going to kill me eventually. You got in his way.”

“See...” He paused and slowly shook his head. His face was redder than before. “I really need you to move here until I get to his ass.”

This was what I was dreading. The sensitive man I’d gotten to know was long gone, but I needed him to come back. “For the time being, I need the Shyrón from earlier. Please. This is hard enough.”

He stood and pulled me from my seat as well and held me in his arms. “So what’chu wanna do? You wanna go out there?”

“Yes. I need to confront my mom, face to face.”



WHEN WE ARRIVED AT NATCHITOCHEs REGIONAL MEDICAL Center, my nerves were everywhere. Shy did his best to keep me calm on the ride over. He ended up telling me the horrible truth. He’d thought that I was unknowingly sleeping with my blood brother. Since he didn’t know I was adopted, that was an easy assumption. Had that been the case, I didn’t know what I would have done. Just knowing that the same people that gave him away like he was nothing, did a wonderful job raising me, almost made me feel sympathetic toward him. I couldn’t understand it.

As we circled, looking for somewhere to park, Shy's phone rang. This time, he answered on Bluetooth. I suppose there were no secrets now. "Hello?"

"Yo, you got me on speaker?"

"Yeah. She knows already, man. Apparently, Lamar told her parents. You still tailing him? I meant to ask you that earlier."

"Naw. He took a road trip. That was what I was calling back to tell you, because I meant to say it earlier. He left about ten this morning."

I frowned as I watched Shy do the same. "What direction did he go?"

"Don't worry, I'm tracking him. He's in Natchitoches. I'm assuming he went to confront their parents."

"Shit! Their father is in the hospital. You think he might have attacked him?"

"I don't know. It's just a tracker... no video footage."

"A'ight, man. We're out here too. I'll let you know when we leave."

"Damn. A'ight."

My nerves only got worse as I listened to their conversation. The only reason Dad could be bleeding as much as my mom made it seem would be if he suffered from some sort of trauma. If Lamar would kill me, surely, he would try to kill them. Suddenly, I didn't know why I even came out here. We should have stayed in Beaumont at Shy's place. What if Lamar was waiting for me to arrive? What if this was a tactic to get me here?

I nearly jumped out of my skin when Shy touched me. He quickly lifted his hand in a surrendering motion. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. You ready?"

I looked around and realized he'd already parked. My mind was completely gone. Just hearing that Lamar could possibly be responsible for whatever was going on with my dad had me feeling jumpy as hell. I swallowed hard and

nodded. He got out of the car and walked around to my side and opened my door.

“Stay close to me, baby.”

He didn't have to tell me twice. Our shadows were one at this point. Knowing that Lamar was wanting to kill me, I wondered why he hadn't done it already. We'd lived together for a year. He had plenty opportunities to take me right on out of here. It made me think my mother was trying to sway me into thinking Lamar was the bad guy. This entire thing was confusing as hell, and I just wanted to get to the bottom of it. She could be lying about Lamar wanting to kill me.

Once we'd gotten inside of the hospital, I asked for Nolan Davis's room, and they informed me that he was in ICU. As we headed to the elevator, Shy said, “Please move in with me. I feel like you'll be safer until we can get to that nigga.”

“Can I think about it during the week I'll be there?”

His jaw muscle flexed, and I knew that wasn't the answer he wanted to hear. It was just... I didn't think Lamar was after me. I wasn't even sure that he actually knew I was their daughter. We'd been together four years. There was no way he would have stayed with me that long if he was out to exact revenge or whatever. The shit wasn't adding up, and Cassandra Davis was going to tell me everything I needed to know. However, I didn't want Shy to think I was feeling soft toward Lamar, because that wasn't it at all.

“Yeah. Just... I wanna keep you safe, Brittany. That's it.”

“I know,” I responded as I rubbed his hand between mine.

When we exited the elevator, we walked down the hall to the ICU waiting area, and the first person I laid eyes on was my mother. She was in a recliner asleep. I flopped to the chair next to her, and her eyes opened. When she saw me, her eyes widened. “Brittany! I thought I told you not to come?”

“So you think I'm as heartless as you are? I didn't pick up on that trait growing up, so thankfully, I didn't take it on as my own. What happened to him?”

“Nol— I mean Lamar showed up. He shoved him, and he fell down the stairs.”

So he was originally named Nolan, like Dad. “Your eyes are extremely shifty. Are you sure that’s what happened? I really don’t trust you now. If you couldn’t tell me that I was adopted, then what else are you hiding from me? What else have you lied about?”

She wiped her pitiful tears and said, “He and Lamar got into a scuffle. Lamar pushed him down the stairs. That’s the truth. Nolan is fighting for his life.”

“When is visitation?”

“In thirty minutes.”

“Good. I’m right on time. This is my boyfriend, Shyrón Berotte. Shy, this is Cassandra Davis.”

He hesitantly shook her hand. I knew he had a keen perception and was probably analyzing her like he was Dr. Bull from the TV series. I was surely analyzing her ass, and everything from her shifty eyes and mannerisms were telling me that she was lying about everything.

CHAPTER 11

S

hyrón

I NEEDED SOME FUCKING ANSWERS. CASSANDRA DAVIS WAS hiding something to either make them look better or make Lamar look worse. I believed it was a little of both. We'd gotten back extremely late last night. After the visitation, we left. Nolan Davis was unconscious, so we couldn't get answers from him. I knew we were going to have to track down Lamar in order to get the answers we were searching for.

I was tired as fuck when I got to the office this morning. Skyler had shown up to work, and after fussing about her being here, I went to Perry's office to help him tie up some last-minute research for his case tomorrow. The minute I got to my office, I called Brittany. She'd taken off work today, and I had Ali sitting outside of my house to make sure she was safe. He was still keeping track of Lamar as well. According to the tracking device, he was still in Natchitoches... unless he'd switched cars.

As I listened to her phone ring, I began getting nervous. I knew she was probably asleep, but my worst fear was that something would happen to her. For some reason though, I didn't think Lamar wanted to kill her. If he wanted to do that, he would have done it already. Secondly, if he knew who she was and had an ulterior motive for being with her, why would he stay with her for four years? After I had time to think about the shit, it just wasn't making sense to me.

He was a fuckboy for sure. There was no mistake about that shit. However, I wanted to believe that he found out who she was while they were together. That was why he started acting a damn fool. Instead of breaking up with her and telling her the truth, I believed he wanted to do shit to make her break up with him. When she wouldn't do it, the shit started escalating. That logic made way more sense than anything else. I knew crimes didn't have to make logical sense, but I just couldn't believe the shit her mom was telling her... not all of it anyway.

When Brittany didn't answer, I left her a voice message asking her to call me, then I called Ali. "What's up, boss?"

I chuckled. "Nigga, you make it seem like I'm some kind of crime boss or something. Quit calling me that shit."

He laughed because he knew I hated him calling me that. I always associated it with the streets. Since I employed him, technically, I was his boss, and I was definitely a boss and made boss moves, but I still didn't like being called that. It was stupid but whatever. I continued once he stopped laughing. "I need you to have someone go by Lamar's place and make sure that nigga didn't switch cars and come back to Texas. There have been some new developments, and I need to talk to that bitch immediately."

"A'ight. I got'chu. Listen though... I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Yeah. I'll invest in starting you a P.I. firm."

"How the fuck you knew that was what I was gonna ask?"

"You don't think I check after your ass to see what'chu up to? I told you that the only way I would have you working for me was if you left the street shit alone. The stealing and robbing people were dealbreakers. I've been lenient on the drug shit, but eventually, that's gon' have to be done too. So I have to make sure you ain't breaking our agreement. Old habits die hard sometimes."

"I'm hurt you don't trust my ass." He laughed immediately after the words left his mouth. He knew how ridiculous that

sounded. “I wouldn’t trust my ass either. I appreciate you though, Shy. You’ve been a real nigga... always.”

“A’ight. Do more research, and we’ll have a meeting to talk about it when you’re ready.”

“That’s what’s up. I’m gonna send Kevin to check on Lamar.”

“A’ight.”

After ending the call, I felt good about what Ali was trying to do. He could be fully legit with a business like that. I knew that he still sold drugs, but with a P.I. firm that had an established clientele, he could leave that shit alone. I knew plenty of people that would be interested in his services.

I got up from my chair to fix another cup of coffee to help me make it through the day. I had a potential client coming through later, and I couldn’t look as washed out as I felt. They wouldn’t take me seriously. We should have gotten a room last night so we could get some sleep, then left around four or five this morning to head back. We didn’t get back until around one this morning, and I didn’t fall asleep until about three because I couldn’t make my mind stop going over all the inconsistencies in Brittany’s mom’s story.

As if shit couldn’t get any worse, I saw I had an incoming call from D.A. Norris. When he called, that usually meant someone I knew or was connected to in some way, was in trouble. I answered, “Shyrón Berotte. How can I help you, D.A. Norris?”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news.”

“No, you don’t. Spit it out.”

He chuckled. “Your sister has assault charges filed against her.”

“Great. Her fiancé is going to be ecstatic about that. Who filed the charges?” I asked as if I didn’t know.

“Come on, Mr. Berotte. You’re all over the camera footage breaking the attack up.”

I remained quiet. *Alexz and her reckless, hot ass temper.*
“See you in court.”

I ended the call and wanted to act a damn fool. My temper could be just as horrible as Alexz’s, so I decided to try to cool off before calling her. As I took a sip of my coffee then lowered it to the counter to add more sugar, Skyler appeared next to me. “I’ll handle it. You focus on Brittany.”

I frowned slightly then glanced at her belly. “Woman, you are what? Thirty-six weeks?”

“Thirty-five. I can handle it, Shy. I was reading the details when I heard you talking to him. You know I cut for my soror. Plus, I couldn’t stand Chanell and what she put Dylan through.”

“Yeah, but it may be a conflict of interest for you.”

“You too. I don’t give a fuck about that. I got some shit on Chanell. She gon’ drop those charges and just chalk that shit up to the game.”

“What you got?”

“She’s been boosting shit. I’ve been watching her, because I was afraid Alexz was gon’ get in trouble as soon as she saw her. She’s a good ass thief too, but not good enough.”

I nodded repeatedly. “Thanks, sister-in-law. I appreciate that.”

“Speaking of which, since you called me sister-in-law, I talked to Dylan about getting married. We’re going to do it at the courthouse this weekend. He wants us to be married before the baby gets here. We’ll probably have a reception at a later date, after the baby gets here. We decided on a name too.”

“That’s good! Congratulations! What are y’all going to name her?”

“Mariena Sky. We wanted to include your mother’s name somehow, so we came up with Marie-na. People will probably mispronounce it all the time because of how it’s spelled though,” she said, rolling her eyes.

I grabbed her hand and led her to a chair as my cheeks heated up. “It’s beautiful.”

“Thank you. You remember her, don’t you?”

“Parts of her... like her smell and how soft she felt.”

She gave me a tight-lipped smile then gently rubbed my arm. I knew that was something that I still needed to share with Brittany. I knew she probably had a clue, but I needed to let her all the way in. I cleared my throat and asked, “So when are you going to contact the D.A.’s office?”

“Today. I’m not playing around with her ass. No point in dragging this out. Plus, I can’t have Ax being mad at my sis too long. As petty as they both are, I’m more than sure that their house and office will either be extremely quiet because they aren’t talking to each other, or extremely loud because they’re both bullheaded.”

I chuckled because she seemed to know them as well as I did. “Hell yeah. I’d hate to be in that house this evening when they get home. But I’ on know. Ax been kind of soft with her lately. He just lets her have her way. I need to call and tell her about it.”

“I’ll make the call. I told you... I got this.”

I smiled at her then stood to head back to my office. After downing my now lukewarm coffee, I trudged down the hallway. Brittany still hadn’t called me back. I felt like she was safe since Ali was looking out, but my mind wasn’t going to rest until I knew for sure. My client would be here in minutes, and I needed to be sure that everything was cool before they got here. Just as I grabbed my phone to call her again, it began ringing.

“You must have known I was starting to worry about you,” I said as soon as I answered the call.

“Yep. How’s your day going?”

“Shiiiiid... too slowly. I just wanna be laid up wit’chu. Any updates on your father?”

“Nolan woke up this morning. I can’t bear calling them my parents right now. I know it’s because I’m still angry. I ummm... I hope you don’t get angry with what I’m about to say, Shy, but I think I need to talk to Lamar to get clarity of what actually happened. I know Cassandra isn’t telling me everything, and I feel like she’s lying about some things as well.”

“I think so too. I’m angry about it because, why not just tell the truth? The shit bad enough as it is, and lying is only making it worse. I was thinking the same thing this morning though. Just make sure I’m with you whenever you choose to do it. Ali is already trying to locate him for me.”

“Thank you. I was nervous because I didn’t expect you to be so understanding.”

“Remember you said you wanted to see my tender side? Now that you’re my woman... you got that, baby. I can only imagine how hard this is for you. So my tender side is what you get right now, unless you start acting irrationally.”

She chuckled. “Right. Well, I’m about to cook this chicken I took out of your freezer last night... well, early this morning.”

“Okay. Thanks. I didn’t even think about taking something out to cook.”

“Of course. I think I’m going to go to work tomorrow.”

“Whatever you want to do, I’ll support you.”

“Okay. See you when you get home.”

I smiled slightly. To know someone would be at my house to welcome me home was something I’d only imagined having. Now that I had that shit, no matter how temporary, it didn’t seem real. I wanted her to move in, but I knew I couldn’t force her to. Well... I probably could force her to, but I didn’t want that to be the reason why she was there. I wanted her to *want* to be there. After ending the call, I got myself together for the consultation by stretching and taking deep breaths, then pulled out paperwork, detailing the reason for

their appointment. Hopefully, it would eat some significant time off the clock.



WHEN I WALKED THROUGH THE DOOR, A VANILLA SCENT HIT my nose. I frowned immediately. My house always smelled like lavender. Dropping my bag to the couch as I made strides to the kitchen, I tried to check my facial expressions. When I walked inside, I saw a cake sitting on the countertop. I supposed it was cooling because there was no icing on it yet. I thought that was what I was smelling until I looked at the Air Wicks Plug-ins. The liquid wasn't purple.

Brittany was at the stove stirring something. After setting the spoon on the cooktop, she turned to me with a smile, but it quickly fell from her lips. I supposed my facial expression was still hard. She slowly walked over to me with a look of concern. "Hey, Shy," she said softly then pecked my lips. "I made a red velvet cake... our favorite."

I pulled her back to me and kissed her long on her lips to put her nerves at ease, then pulled her to the table. After we sat, I dragged my hand over my chin. I knew I needed to clue her in to my inner workings. If I wanted her to be open with me, then I needed to lead by example.

"The other night when I had the dream... I was dreaming about my mother. There are certain things that remind me of her, so I try to keep those things close to me. Lavender was her favorite. You had on a lavender scent that night. Laying on your soft body was also reminiscent of hers. This is why my house always smell like lavender. That's how I keep my memory of her alive."

Her eyes widened then misted over. She laid her hand on top of mine and said, "Shy, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have changed your wall scents. It was just that two of them were out and..."

"Shh. It's okay." I put my other hand on top of hers. "You didn't know. I'm happy you're here. With time, I may be able

to let go. That time just hasn't come yet."

"Please tell me where your refills are."

"In the drawer next to the sink."

I sat back in my chair and watched her pull out the drawer to see that it was full of lavender refills. I stayed stocked with them because I never wanted to run out. As she replaced the refills with mine, I wondered if I should have just let her keep the other ones in. Pulling my wallet from my pocket, I pulled out a twenty-dollar bill. I had to pay her for the refills she was throwing in the trash. That shit wasn't cheap. She'd thrown away at least six. I pulled out another twenty, and when she sat back next to me, I slid the money to her. "That's so you can buy more."

She frowned. "Why would I take money from you if I'm staying in your house?"

"Because if I had my way, this would be your house too. You'd be here cooking all the time, except you'd be butt ass naked, waiting on me to come home and stroke that pussy just right."

I pulled her to my lap as her face reddened. "So why can't you have your way?" she asked.

"I could have my way. It's not that I can't. It's because I *won't*. Huge difference. I want you to be here because you can't get enough of me like I can't get enough of you. I want you here because you wanna know what real love feels like. I want you here because you want to be fucked into paralysis... and made love to until Jesus welcomes you home. There's so much shit I wanna share with you, but forcing you to receive it won't give me the same gratification as you willingly accepting it."

I kissed her neck and slid my hands around her thick thighs to her honey pot. I was ready to taste the honey that overflowed from it as well. Moving her closer to me, I began sliding her back and forth over my erection. When I moaned in her ear, she said, "Shy... mm. Not yet. We have to eat dinner."

“Tell my dick that. His hunger trumps anybody else’s, Britt,” I responded in a low voice as I lifted her shirt.

When I noticed she wasn’t wearing a bra, I spun her around by pulling her leg over mine and pulled her nipple into my mouth. I slid my arms under her legs and brought her to the couch as she held on to my head. I needed to get to my bag to get a condom. When I felt this damn sensitive after spilling my feelings everywhere, I always wanted to dive into something. Now that I had something to dive into, it was a win-win situation.

I laid her on the couch and went to my bag to get a condom. Foreplay was going to be saved for after-play, because I needed to get this shit out like now. After unbuckling my belt and pulling down my pants, I strapped up and turned back to her. She’d pulled off her sweats and panties and was on my couch, waiting for me to fill her. I bit my bottom lip as I stepped out of my pants and boxers then made my way to her.

The minute I slid over her body, I grabbed her leg to put on my shoulder and slid right into her pussy. “Oh fuck,” she said then moaned.

Those words were my sentiments exactly, but I only moaned along with her. This wasn’t going to be a lovemaking session. I had plans to fuck up the way she walked, and I believed she knew that. The first stroke nearly pulled my fucking soul from me. I lifted my head and stared at the woman that was taking every part of me and doing with me as she pleased. She had my heart already and didn’t even know it.

I swept my hand over her cheek, and she opened her eyes to stare at me. “You’re so beautiful, Brittany. Thank you for being in my life... for real.”

I didn’t give her a chance to respond to my soft ass words before I started digging her pussy out. The way she clawed me when I did... it felt like she cut into the meat. I knew she wasn’t hurting though because her facial expressions were filled with pleasure. Her hand drifted to my lower back as I beat her shit for everything it was worth. “Shy! Oh my God!”

I loved how she called on the Lord when I was beating that back in. She knew He was the only one who could save her. I pulled away from her and sat on the couch, pulling her on top of me. When she straddled me, I brought her feet flat to the couch. “Let me see you bounce on this dick, baby.”

Her eyebrows lifted slightly. “Shy—”

I put my fingers over her lips then put my hands under her ass as I slumped some in the sofa. I began helping her bounce on my dick, and I swore the shit felt like I was about to shoot cum right through this fucking condom. The pressure was building, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to hold out much longer. The way her pussy was gripping me and lubing me with all its glory, I’d be lucky if I held out another minute. “Shy, please don’t cum yet. Fuck!” she said between pants.

I closed my eyes and bit my bottom lip, doing my best to hold that shit in. It was a good thing I did, because I always wanted to make sure she was pleased first. I refused to be selfish, even in this moment, although I knew we would be getting it in again after dinner. As I bounced her on my dick and watched the cream leave her, she screamed. Her orgasm had taken ahold of her and had its way. She nearly fell off my lap.

I released her ass and allowed her to lay on my chest while I delivered swift jabs to her sweet spot. “Brittany... fuck! I’m about to nut, baby.”

She barely responded as I grabbed her ass and stroked her fast and furiously then fired off into the latex. I kissed her head repeatedly, loving every moment of her existence. Gratefulness flooded my being that God would bless me with a woman so damn perfect. As I panted from the intense fucking, I heard a light snore leave Brittany. I chuckled as I rubbed her back, doing my best to lull her into an even deeper rest.

CHAPTER 12

*B*rittany

“ALL I WANNA KNOW IS, HOW IN THE HELL Y’ALL GET married before us?” Alexz said to Dylan as soon as we had all walked into Mr. Berotte’s house.

“Because we don’t need all that fancy shit you want. I wanted Skyler to have my last name before the baby made her grand entrance,” Dylan replied.

I shook my head at the two of them. Alexz could pick an argument with anyone. She and Ax had been barely talking to each other this past week at work, but today they seemed fine. When I’d asked her what the problem was, she told me about that bitch, Chanell, pressing charges on her. I couldn’t believe she’d actually done that, knowing all the dirt she had done to Dylan. From what I understood, Chanell had until Monday to make a decision whether she wanted to proceed or not.

Skyler had found all kinds of footage of her shoplifting. I didn’t know how she went about knowing where that heifer shopped at, but I was sure Alexz was grateful for her. If Chanell didn’t drop the charges, then Skyler would turn in the footage for her to be prosecuted as well. Hopefully, this would calm Alexz’s hot ass down.

After going to the kitchen to see if Mrs. Anissa needed help with the food, I came back to the front room to see Skyler sitting in a chair in the middle of the room. I frowned slightly

until the music started. “The Nasty Song” was playing, and I couldn’t help but shake my head. I could only imagine what Mrs. Anissa’s face looked like as I listened to the lyrics. I forgot all about that though when I saw my man strolling with his bruhs. A couple of Dylan’s line brothers had come to the marriage, so there were four of them total.

My lips parted as Shy squatted to the floor and rolled his shoulders while staring at me. That shit was so damn sexy. I always liked to watch the Kappas shimmy, but now that my man was one of them, I would never get enough. He was supposed to be in the background, because Dylan was supposed to be the focal point for his woman, but the way Shy was ticking, he stole the damn show. Dylan frowned and looked back at him, when Alexz yelled, “Do that shit, Shy!”

It was the moments when I came over here that I wished I would have pledged. Everyone had pledged something, except Mr. Berotte, Mrs. Anissa, and Jamel. Alexz had tried to get me to pledge before I graduated, but I wasn’t trying to pay thousands of dollars to be with chicks I didn’t even fit in with. Her line sisters were bourgeois as hell. After that, I wasn’t interested in getting to know any of the others. While I was smart enough to know not to stereotype the entire organization based on a few bad apples, I didn’t have the energy or the interest in meeting anyone else.

After the song went off, Shy made his way to me. I put my hand to his cheek and pulled him to me for a kiss. His phone began ringing, and after looking at it, he looked up at me and said, “I need to take this outside. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.”

I knew why. There was no way he would be able to hear anything that was going on in here. Alexz and Chad were going back and forth, as always. “Dylan got married today, and that was a special dance for his wife. Today ain’t the day of the dawg. Accept that shit and sit down somewhere.”

“You always got some shit to say. Why can’t you just shut the fuck up sometimes?”

My eyebrows lifted. Things had never gotten that heated. All the men stood, including Axton. He moved Alexz behind him as Chad lifted his hands. "I'm sorry I snapped on you, Alexz. I gotta go."

I didn't know what was going on with him, but whatever it was, it had to be heavy for him to leave early or speak that harshly to Alexz. Mr. Sheldon, Isaiah, and DJ followed him outside as Axton put his arm around a stunned Alexz. Dylan sat next to his wife and rubbed her belly. She was so beautiful. Her nose had spread just a little, but she was still tiny. The only thing that had gotten bigger was her stomach. I thought she was going to topple over at some point from carrying all that weight.

Their love was beautiful to watch, and I could only hope that mine and Shyrón's love was comparable to theirs. He was everything I was hoping for... everything I wanted Lamar to be. He was a little upset that I had gone back home this morning. While I enjoyed being in his space, I needed to transition in my time. It wouldn't be long though. Plus, I needed to start boxing my things... again. I was so sick of moving.

Shy didn't understand where I was coming from, but he accepted my decision. Since I moved here over ten years ago, I had to do things for myself. I'd been independent for a long time, including while I was with Lamar. At first, he tried to contribute, but the past year had been me doing everything. I was trying to dispel the rumor that a woman needed a man to make more money than she did or that she wouldn't give a man who was trying a chance.

Lamar was really trying to make a life for himself when we met. He was working at a lube shop. He wasn't making a lot of money, but all I cared about was that he was making a decent living for himself. When he got fired, that shit went downhill. Months later, he became a security guard at the mall. That shit paid less than the lube shop, and he kept it for himself. The only things he contributed to were the grocery bill and gas for my car every now and then.

I supposed I'd zoned out, because I never saw Alexz leave out or Shyrón come back in. He was headed right to me with a mean mug that made my insides quiver. When he got to me, he damn near snatched me off the sofa and led me to a back room. I was nervous as hell. *Was he breaking things off with me for some reason?* I didn't know what I had done to have him so angry.

After he closed the door, he looked at me and said, "You are moving in with me today. Period. I don't wanna hear no shit about you not ready or you need to transition. You can be mad all you want, but you'll get over that shit soon enough. I already called my boys to help you get shit done and into a storage facility. It's about ten of those muthafuckas, so it shouldn't take but the rest of the day to get it done."

"Shy..." I said, wondering where all of this was coming from.

He cut me off by shaking his head. "Naw. No lip, just action. Let's go."

I sat on the bed with a deep frown on my face. "What was that call about?"

"Brittany, we ain't got time to talk about that shit right now. Let's go. I'll clue you in once we're in the car."

I refused to move. He slid his hand down his chin and chuckled then walked out of the room, leaving me there. That shit pissed me off even more so. Why couldn't he just tell me what was going on? He was not going to order me around like I was damn kid. *Been there, done that.* I had no intent on doing that shit again. Being with Lamar taught me about all the things I *didn't* want in a significant other. This was one of the things.

I knew Shy had an authoritative personality already, but I needed him to tone that shit down with me. I had done nothing wrong. I tried to be open with him about everything, although I was nervous about that. He was being evasive, and I didn't like that. I deserved better. When I stood from the bed to go see where he'd gone, Alexz came inside.

“What’s going on? Shy just burned off.”

“He left me? Are you serious?”

“Yeah, and he took your house keys.”

“Your brother is going to make me cuss him out. I try not to go there because that ain’t me, but I’m so close to it. He snatched me up and brought me in this room, demanding I move in with him today. All I can think is that he got some bad news in that phone call. I asked what was going on, and he wouldn’t tell me. So when I refused to leave this room without information, he walked out.”

Alexz pulled her phone from her pocket and called him, only for her call to go unanswered. This was bullshit. She grabbed her hair with both hands and let out a growl. She was just as frustrated as I was. “Chad is under so much stress at work, he’s bursting at the seams and snapping on people and shit. Now Shy is acting like a damn fool. He can usually hold shit together and contain his anger. Girl, you bring out something else in that man. I’ve never seen him this way.”

“Well, he needs to direct that anger at the person that caused it and not me. I’m tired of taking shit from men. I’m fucking sick of it. I feel like I’m becoming someone I’m not, and I can literally feel my guard going up. It seems I need to be in self-preservation mode right now, and I hate that. I thought he was the one... I really did. This shit is making me rethink that.”

I flopped on the bed, and Alexz sat next to me and put her arm around me. “This was supposed to be a happy day for Dylan and Skyler. I don’t know what’s going on, but let’s go out there and try to make today about them as it should be. Okay? We’ll deal with Shy’s bullshit later.”

I nodded, and we stood from the bed and left the room. Dylan was sitting next to Skyler, still rubbing circles on her stomach, and he was saying something in her ear. Her mother and sister were sitting on the other side of her. When Isaiah came inside and pulled Lexi, Skyler’s sister, from her seat and led her outside, all eyes were on them. It was obvious that she

and Chad were feeling each other, although Chad was the one playing hard to get or something.

Alexz cranked up the music and came back to the room, dancing. Skyler smiled at her and stood to dance with her. Watching her do their stroll had me nervous. It looked like she was going to drop that baby at any minute. After watching with a huge smile on his face for a minute, Dylan stood and helped Skyler to her seat. I supposed that meant she had done enough. He gently rubbed her cheek as she poked her lip out.

He kissed her lips and helped her to her feet once again and slow danced with her. It was beautiful. Axton and Alexz joined them, then Mr. Sheldon and Mrs. Anissa. The lone tear fell down my cheek, and I quickly wiped it and cleared my throat. I was hurt. Surely Shy knew that wasn't a proper way to address me. He had to know that I wouldn't take too kindly to his approach.

I stood to go outside and get a breather, and Isaiah blocked my path. "Come on, sis. Let's dance."

He grabbed my hand, gently pulling me back to where everyone was dancing. The last thing I wanted was to get too close to Isaiah and have Shyrón to come back and think something was going on. Hopefully, he would know that I would never stoop so low, and neither would his brother, but I didn't know what frame of mind he was in.

Isaiah kept his distance as an up-tempo song came on. *Thank God*. I just wanted to get out of the funk I was in, not knowing if Shy would even come back for me. I would have to get Alexz and Axton to take me home. We continued dancing, and I did my best to smile as Chad and Lexi came inside and joined us. That was a new development. Maybe there was hope for Chad after all.

As we continued dancing and having a great time, I heard my phone ringing in my purse. I was never one that had to always have their phone on them. Unfortunately, these days, I didn't feel like I was that important to anybody but myself. Whoever was calling could most likely wait until I felt like answering. I didn't want to talk to anyone. Everyone in my life

that was close to me had hurt me... Lamar, my parents, and now Shy. Alexz was the only constant, and she was here. So it wasn't like it was her calling me.

I continued dancing with Isaiah, only to hear my phone ringing again. I rolled my eyes and went to it to see it was an unknown number... more of a reason for me to ignore it. Within seconds after it stopped ringing, it started again. *Ugh!* I answered with an entire attitude. "Hello!"

"Britt, we need to talk."

I remained still and quiet, trying to figure out why in the hell Lamar was blowing me up. Instead of responding to him, I made my way outside where it was quieter. "Hello?" he said.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry for blowing up your phone. I know you don't answer numbers you don't know, and you have me blocked. I needed to talk to you about your parents. I went to your new apartment to talk, but you weren't there. There's so much I need to tell you."

"We can talk, but I won't be alone. I don't trust you."

"That's fair. When can we meet?"

"Any day after five."

"Can we do Monday?"

"Yeah. Where?"

"Riverfront Park? Is that cool?"

"Yeah."

I ended the call, and I immediately knew why Shyrón had gone into beast mode. Lamar had been to my apartment, and only God knows how he found out where I lived. Shy could have told me that instead of bolting out of here like my place was on fire. Although Lamar had hit me, I still didn't see him as a threat, especially since I knew where his anger was really coming from... what was fueling it. I wasn't stupid enough to meet him alone, but again, I wasn't afraid. Shyrón would have

to be a man of my past if he couldn't understand how I wanted and needed to be handled. Anything less was unacceptable.

CHAPTER 13

S

hyrón

I LET MY FEAR BLIND ME. IT GOT IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT AND took full control of my emotions and actions. When Ali called and said Lamar had gone to Brittany's apartment, I lost it. All I could imagine was him hurting her. Had she been there, there was no telling what would have gone down. I was tired of letting her make stupid decisions. The logical one was for her to move in with me where she would be safe. I fucked up.

I needed her to trust me though. I would never be that vague and aggressive for no reason. However, I supposed I could see her point now. She didn't know me well enough to trust me. She didn't understand my mannerisms. I'd done something I said I didn't want to do, and that was force her to do what I wanted her to do. We'd gotten all her things moved. Her furniture was in storage and all her clothes, toiletries, and other personal items were at my house.

She seemed to have more scrubs than any other clothes. I would change that if she let me. After this, I wasn't so sure she would. I'd put all her clothes in the guestroom, because I was more than sure that if she showed up tonight, that was where she would sleep. I went back to my dad's house to find the place empty. He and Mama Nissa were in the kitchen cleaning up. I knocked on the back door then walked in.

Mama Nissa gave me a soft smile then kissed Dad and left the room. I was more than sure my dad wanted to talk to me

about what happened earlier. “Hey, son. Have a seat.”

“Hey.”

I did as he said and waited for him to join me. While I was close to Chad, when it came to matters of the heart, I would much rather talk to someone who had experience in the subject. My dad gave the best advice... always had. After turning the light off on the other side of the kitchen, he came to the table and sat at the head of it. “What happened?”

I ran my hand down my chin and said, “Her ex showed up at her place, and I lost it. I’ve never had fear control me that way. I moved her into my place without her consent. When Ali told me he was there, I realized my biggest fear was her getting hurt or worse. I didn’t know how to communicate that at the moment. I only came to that realization later. What if I lost her?”

“I don’t think you lost her, son, but you will have to open your heart up to her. You’re in love with her. A man will only resort to a level of desperation over a woman he loves. I could see it in your eyes when you stormed out of here. It was worse than the look in your eyes when Alexz was going through the bullshit with Knowledge. Apologize and explain to her how you feel. Brittany is like my daughter already, and I know she will understand. But you can’t leave her in the dark like that. You could have told her something... given her a hint that something was threatening her safety.”

“I was so angry. I couldn’t even verbalize anything but demands. I suppose that’s something I need to work on if I’m going to be in a relationship, huh?”

“Absolutely. She just came out of an abusive relationship. She doesn’t need to feel like she just fell into another one.”

I nodded as I was quickly reminded of what she’d said about jumping from the skillet to the frying pan, and how I’d gotten all bent out of shape about it. I felt small as fuck. The *last* thing I wanted her to feel with me was abused. I didn’t want her to be afraid of me either. “I’m going to assume she left with Alexz?”

“Yeah. They were supposed to be going to her apartment. I suppose when she sees there’s nothing there to go to, she’ll be going to your house.”

“Okay. Well, I better get going,” I said as I stood from my seat and watched him do the same.

“Be careful, son. Work on your delivery.”

“Yes, sir. Thanks for the talk.”

“You know I’m always here whenever you need to talk.”

I shook his hand then hugged him, allowing myself to feel the love of my father. Although I’d lost my mother, I was beyond blessed to have a strong and wise man like him in my life, guiding me in the right direction. When I got to the back door, he said, “Oh, and every man for himself tomorrow since we cooked here today. Brush up on those cooking skills and cook for your woman.”

I smiled slightly. It seemed I was the only one of his sons that just seemed to be able to do it all or at least knew someone who could do what I needed done. I was extremely resourceful and smart. So like Isaiah had, I learned to throw down in the kitchen. Hopefully, Brittany would want to talk tonight when or if she got there. We were falling into our relationship with ease until today. We’d gone and gotten our blood tests done this past week and just enjoyed one another’s company and energy. I could have thrown all of that away with my actions.

When I got back home, I pulled into the garage and hurriedly made my way inside. I wanted to create an atmosphere that would be conducive to my words. Dad was right. I was in love with Brittany, and I refused to let her walk away from me without a fight. After setting the flowers on the countertop that I’d stopped and gotten at the store, I went to the bathroom and ran hot water in the tub, knowing they would probably be here soon. I pulled her sweats, T-shirt, and undergarments from her drawer where I had organized them. She loved wearing that around the house.

As I went to the kitchen to pour her a glass of wine and fix her a bowl of fruit, the perfect song came to mind. "Lose You" by Kenny Lattimore would express everything I wanted to say. Her feelings were valid, but I didn't treat them that way. *Why would I do something to lose you?* The words to the song echoed in my mind. I brought the fruit and wine upstairs then quickly showered.

Since it was slightly chilly outside, after moisturizing my skin, I put on flannel pajama pants instead of shorts. I didn't want to have to turn the heat on just yet... not unless Brittany was cold. I had a fireplace that I didn't mind burning either. Texas was on some different shit with this energy bill. Ever since that freeze almost two years ago, the light bill had skyrocketed. Besides, if I had my way, I would be able to keep her warm tonight.

I slid on my flip flops and headed to the kitchen, then turned the player back to the Kenny Lattimore song. I poured myself a drink as I heard a car pulling up my driveway. That had to be her and Alexz. Maybe they had gone to take Axton home before coming here. Hopefully, when Alexz saw me, she would take a hint and leave. I took a gulp of my Hennessy then stood in the middle of the floor, shirtless, waiting for Brittany to enter.

I decided that looked too weird, so I went back to the kitchen and played with her flowers. I was so damn antsy I didn't know what to do with myself. After starting the song over for the third time, there was a knock at the door. I had it on repeat, but the ending was mostly instrumental, and I wanted her to hear the words.

Nervously making my way to the door, I rubbed my hands down my pants. This was new territory for me. I had never been nervous about talking to a woman. When I opened the door, she and Alexz were standing there with frowns on their faces. I moved to the side and allowed them inside. "I'm packing a bag to stay at a hotel."

She walked past me, continuing toward my bedroom as Alexz walked closer to me. "She's pissed. Why would you think it was cool to come at her that way? Then you moved all

her shit without her consent? That's bold and controlling as fuck."

"Can you give us some time alone?"

The frown lifted from her facial expression, and she tilted her head to the side. "You okay?"

I shook my head. "I fucked up, and I don't wanna lose her. I need to be open with her, and I can't do that with you standing there."

"Okay, okay. I'm going to the car just in case she still wants to leave."

I swallowed hard, hoping that she would change her mind after she heard what I had to say. I grabbed my cup from the countertop and took another healthy swig as she made her way back to the front with her duffel bag. "Where's all my things? I was sure you would have put them in your room. Where's Alexz?"

I walked closer to her and asked, "Can I please talk to you?"

"You had an opportunity to talk to me, and you blew it. I can't stand being in your presence right now. We can talk some other time."

"I can't let you dismiss me like that, no matter how sorry I am for what I did and the way I spoke to you. I'm sorry, Brittany."

She remained silent as I stepped even closer to her. I grabbed her hand, and, surprisingly, she allowed me to. "Ali called and said that Lamar was at your new apartment, peeking in windows and shit. I wasn't just angry."

I swallowed hard as I fought to get the right words out. "I realized that I was so overcome with fear, I allowed it to control my words and my actions. Him hurting you or worse would kill me. Just the fact that he once slapped you and tried to manhandle you is enough to warrant that fear. I'm scared to lose you, but my actions may have caused me to lose you anyway. That wasn't intentional. I would never knowingly do something to lose you."

Her hand was trembling in mine... or at least I thought it was her hand. It could have very well been my hand that was trembling. "My dad helped me to realize something very important... something special. He said a man only reaches that level of desperation for someone they love." I turned my head away from her, then stared back into her widened eyes. "I love you, girl."

Instead of waiting for a response from her, I led her to the guest bedroom to show her where all her things were. "I figured you wouldn't want to be in the same room with me."

I left her in the room and made my way back to the kitchen. Her silence was driving me insane. Her decision on whether she would stay or not was eating me alive. Going back to my drink, I gulped down the rest of it then poured more and sat at the table. I stared at that cup for forever it seemed before I heard her making her way down the hallway.

I stood from my seat to see her with a full duffel bag on her shoulder. I closed my eyes briefly, because a nigga felt like he wanted to cry. Going to the countertop, I grabbed the flowers and gave them to her without a word. I couldn't believe she was going to leave after I'd poured my heart out to her.

She took them from me and stared up at me. "Your words were nice, but I still can't say. Honestly, Lamar used to say shit like that to manipulate me into staying. You said you were nothing like him, that y'all were on two different playing fields. Football is football. In other words, you're both playing the same game, you're just more professional with your bullshit."

She walked to the door, and I followed behind her like a lovesick puppy. She was the first woman I ever fell in love with, and I fucked it all up. I followed her outside, and before she could leave, she turned to me and said, "You don't love me, Shy. You don't hurt people you love. Your excuse about being afraid was just an excuse. That is who you are, and I'm not cool with that."

“I know it’s fucked up... what I did... I’m the controlling egomaniac I portrayed earlier. I don’t express my feelings often. I love you, Brittany. That shit is real. But this shit is on me, so I’ll let go, no matter how much I don’t want to. Let me know when you want me to get your things moved back, and I will have it done.”

She turned away from me and went to Alexz’s car as I watched... feeling brokenhearted. This didn’t go the way I hoped it would. I was hoping she would have been kissing my lips by now and admitting she loved me too. Tomorrow was a bust, and I knew I would be holed up in here alone. *Fuck my life.* It was still somewhat early, so I called Chad to see if he wanted to get out. “What’s up, Shy?”

“You wanna go hangout at Pour?” I asked as I walked back inside the house.

“Yeah. Meet you there in about thirty minutes.”

“A’ight.”

I needed to engage in mindless behavior, and I knew Chad could use the outing as well. He was under so much stress on his job he was about to lose his mind and snap on the first person that came for him, like he did with Alexz earlier. I wasn’t even in the house when it happened, but I could only imagine the look on her face when he told her to shut the fuck up. Zay said that Axton had squared up for a moment, like he was ready for whatever.

That was the muthafucka I needed with my sister. I was glad she found the right man for her. Now if only I could find the right woman for me. *Brittany is the right woman for me.* I slid my hand over my face then went to my bedroom to get dressed. Somehow, I would have to get over the fact that I fucked up. It just wouldn’t be today. I would wallow in depression and defeat then accept it like a man and move on.



WHEN I GOT TO POUR 09, THE SHIT WAS JUMPING. I SAW Chad walking in as I parked. I was surprised he and DJ hadn’t

gone out before I called. They usually hung pretty tight. When I got inside, I saw him sitting at the bar. Making my way over to him, I bumped a couple of people along the way. That was just how packed it was. I hated being here when it was this crowded, but whatever.

Before I sat next to him, we slapped hands. “I guess Brittany didn’t fold.”

“Naw, she didn’t. I don’t wanna talk about it though. You and Lexi finally talking though, right?”

“Yeah. She already had plans tonight, so I told her not to break them on account of me. We could hang tomorrow and get to know one another since we aren’t having Sunday dinner.”

“I’m happy for you, man. It’s about time you give her a chance.”

“Yeah. We’ll see.”

“So what’s really the deal with women in their twenties?”

“Honestly? Nothing. It was a lame excuse I came up with not to talk to her. She reminds me of someone that I used to love... my first love. They look a lot alike. That was why I was staring at her so hard that day months ago. For a second, I thought she was her. Then after taking her outside, I realized I was attracted to who I thought she was and the fact that she reminded me of Jana. It was stupid. Now, I’ve begun seeing things that make her look different, and I’m still attracted to her. Since she was still single...”

He shrugged and just let me silently fill in the rest of his sentence. “That’s what’s up, bruh. I’m happy for you. DJ didn’t want to go out?”

“Naw. He had a date. He’s seeing a woman named Shavozz. They just kicking it right now, but he likes her. This is like their third date, I think.”

“Damn. It seems like everybody finding love.”

“Love? You in love with Brittany?”

I rolled my eyes. The nigga could always put shit together fast as hell. “Yeah, but it don’t matter since she left me. Pretty much told me I was full of shit and left with Alexz. I didn’t bother to tell Ali to follow her. I’m trying to respect her wishes and just move on. I fucked up.”

“Nigga... you don’t ever respect nobody’s wishes. You better go get your woman.”

“I already tried. I even admitted to her that I was in love with her, and she still left. So, I’m gon’ back off.”

“That shit don’t even sound right. How them words tasted coming off your tongue?”

I chuckled and shoulder bumped him as I finally ordered a beer. I had already had more Hennessy than I should have before I had even got here, and I needed to be able to drive home. “Shut up, Chad.”

“Naw, for real. The Shyrón I know would go as far as setting up a fake ass robbery to make her come running back to him.”

My eyebrows lifted as I laughed. “How you gon’ throw my dirt in my face, nigga?”

He laughed loudly, just as he did every time he brought that shit up. I did that shit in my early twenties so I could pretend to save this chick so I could get the panties. That nigga never let me live that shit down. The horrible part about it was that the pussy was dry as fuck. It wasn’t even worth the trouble. That was probably why she was keeping the shit to herself. Niggas didn’t need company in the desert.

I took a swig of my beer as I listened to that fool laugh at my expense. Just since he talked to Lexi, he was in better spirits. Even Zay seemed to be in a good mood today. I was the only one still feeling like I lost my best friend. As I sat, nursing on my beer, Ali called. I was sure it was more bad news to further fuck up my mood. I grabbed the phone from the bar top and answered it. “Hello?”

“Nigga, you ain’t gon’ believe this shit.”

“At this point, I’m willing to believe anything. Hit me wit’ it.”

“Remember you asked me to look more into that nigga Knowledge and why he had all that shit on Alexz? Well get this. That muthafucka joined some kind of terrorist organization, and his real name ain’t Knowledge. That nigga name was Earl Riggs. Earl Riggs did time for attempted murder but ended up getting a murder wrap while in prison about ten years ago. Guess who reported the murder their first day on the job?”

I stood from the bar as I glanced at Chad and walked outside. I was wrong. I couldn’t believe the shit he was telling me. “Nigga, you saying what I think you saying? Chad busted that nigga his first day on the job? And why he didn’t get more time?”

“Yep. And he did. Clearly, Chad don’t remember that nigga. Plus, he’s changed his appearance a bit. He lost weight, grew his hair out, and has a beard now. His mama is Pakistani. He targeted Alexz to get back at Chad. He had a good ass lawyer that said it was self-defense, and he only got a couple of years tacked on to his sentence. When he got out, he changed his identity through the help of that terrorist cell he linked up with, and that was how he got all the intel on Alexz that he had. They are well connected, so I’m gonna keep guys near you, Alexz, Chad, and your pops. This shit is deep as fuck, and I can only hope that he’s done fucking wit’ y’all family.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck! I’m gon’ report this shit, because we gon’ need more than the streets to make sure we good. I need the law and all the manpower I can get to make sure our family is safe. Don’t let this shit leak to nobody. I don’t want any of them worried about this shit. You hear me?”

“You ain’t gotta worry about me. I got’chu.”

I ended the call, feeling more stressed than ever. However, I knew I needed to be vigilant and get this shit handled ASAP. If anything happened to anyone in my family, I would get in

that prison and stab that nigga in his neck with an ink pen and watch his ass bleed out.

CHAPTER 14

*B*rittany

AS I WALKED THROUGH THE OFFICE, WISHING I WOULDN'T have come back after my lunch break, Dr. Ax called me into his office. I didn't feel like talking. My weekend was shot to hell, and my nerves were shot about meeting with Lamar later. Plus, Alexz had me about to go crazy with her from waiting to hear whether Chanell dropped the charges or not. She was calling Skyler almost every hour. I was more than sure Skyler was rethinking her decision to handle this case for her.

When I entered his office, he asked, "If I needed you to work this Friday, would you? I know I try to keep y'all rotating like you used to do in Dr. West's office, but Jackie overbooked me this Friday... every fifteen minutes instead of every thirty, like we normally do on Fridays."

I wanted to roll my eyes. Monday through Thursday, we booked him every fifteen minutes, but on Fridays, we were usually working with a skeleton crew. "I guess. I ain't got shit else to do."

"Thanks. I appreciate you. I'll pay you extra for doing so."

I nodded and left his office, almost running into Alexz. "That ho dropped the charges!" she yelled as she brushed past me walking into Dr. Ax's office.

"You lucky. I was gon' let them take yo' fine ass to jail," Ax said as he stood to hug her.

That was my cue to leave. I went back to the nurses' station wishing I wouldn't have been so hard on Shy but knowing that I needed to be at the same time. It killed me to walk away from him Saturday night and pretend to not be affected by his admission. I wasn't in love with him, but I cared for him a great deal already. My heart had melted from his words, but I felt like I'd seen Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. While I knew I shouldn't compare him to Lamar, it was hard not to. I believed most people in relationships did it subconsciously anyway.

We took our experiences with us and chose what we would be willing to deal with in the next relationship based on a previous relationship with an entirely different person. Just because Lamar didn't fulfill his potential didn't mean the next man wouldn't, but I knew that I didn't want to chance that again, just like I didn't want to chance things with a controlling, aggressive man. Shy was both of those things.

Whenever Lamar and I would get into it, he used to tell me how much he loved me and promised to do better, only for things to get worse. The last few months of our relationship, he had stopped apologizing. He knew he didn't mean that shit anyway. I was done with the lies, broken promises, and unfulfilled potential. I was tired of being abused... mentally, physically, and emotionally and being treated like I wasn't worth shit. Shy took me back to a place I swore I would never return to.

As I looked over the chart for our next appointment, I saw a bouquet of flowers heading our way. I was more than sure they were for Alexz. Although they worked together, Dr. Ax often had flowers delivered for her. Their love was so sweet it was damn near sickening. The receptionist set the bouquet on the countertop in front of me as I stared up at her smiling face. "These are for you, Brittany!"

I frowned. "Thank you."

Her smile faded somewhat as she walked away. I didn't really talk much to these women in here, other than Alexz. It had taken me almost a year to warm up to the ladies in Dr.

West's office. I pulled the card from the stem, knowing they were from Shy. When I read it, my heart sank to my feet.

As hard as this is for me to do, I wish you well. I hope I didn't sour on your stomach and that we can still be cordial whenever we see one another. Love, Shy

I took a deep breath, resisting the urge to cry, then moved the flowers to the corner of the desk. After sliding the card in my pocket, I checked the time to see our next patient should be arriving in a few minutes. I left the desk to make sure the room was together and sanitized then went to the front to see if he'd arrived early. There was no point in making him wait if he was here.

Although Shy was giving me what I thought I wanted, I didn't feel any satisfaction from it. When I broke up with Lamar, I felt free. This time, I felt anything but. I felt shackled and bound like I was being held against my wishes. I believed I knew why though. I'd taken his heart captive and didn't give it back. He loved me, and he'd given me all of him in his own way. I just hated that his way didn't work for me.



AS I SAT ON A BENCH AT RIVERFRONT PARK, I WAS TREMBLING like a leaf. While there were people out here walking, I still felt alone. I'd planned for Shy to be with me, but after what happened Saturday and then getting to my apartment to find that shit empty as hell, I was done. He'd even cleaned out the refrigerator. I was so pissed I didn't even bother telling him that I spoke to Lamar.

I checked the time to see that Lamar was five minutes late. That was no surprise. He was never concerned about anyone else's time or how he was inconveniencing them. It was always about him. "Hey, Brittany."

I nearly hopped out of my damn skin. He scared the hell out of me because it seemed like he'd dropped from the sky. I didn't speak back. I only glared at him. He walked around the bench and sat on the far side of it. He lowered his head, and

instead of wasting time like I expected him to, he got right to it.

“The reason I never wanted to go with you to Natchitoches to visit your parents was because it reminded me of hurtful times in my childhood. I never cared to know who your parents were or anything like that, because I never planned to meet them. When I was little, my parents sold me to another family after they adopted a little girl. I remember the day like it happened yesterday. The little girl they adopted had been with us for a couple of months. I would play with her all the time. Suddenly, things changed.”

He ran his hand down his face. He didn't know that I already knew where this was going, and I refused to tell him a word of it until he was done. “My mother started packing all my things and told me I was going on a trip. I was excited, thinking we all were going. However, when the couple showed up to get me, I was confused. I had an entire fit. They dragged me away from the only family I knew and loved and took me to live with them in Texas. Once we got here, to soothe me, my new mom told me I could change my name to anything I wanted.”

He looked out at the water reflectively as he recalled the details of his trauma. “I couldn't think of anything right away. So when we went to a Lamar baseball game, I decided that I would change it to that. Eventually, I got used to being with them and learned to love them as my parents. I was only four years old when they got me.”

I stared at him as he struggled with everything he had to say. This was hard for him, and I could imagine why. “When I met you, Brittany, I thought you were the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. I was happy that you even wanted me, being that you were doing so much better in life than I was. I was determined to do my very best. I fell in love with you. I still love you. It wasn't until about a year ago, when we first moved in together, that I suspected something wasn't right. I overheard you talking to your mother, and her voice haunted me. It took me a couple of months to put it together, but I

realized that you were the little girl I used to play with. Your parents are the same ones that sold their only son.”

I took a deep breath and asked, “Why didn’t you tell me back then?”

“I didn’t want to lose you that way. Plus, I didn’t know the fuck how. It was selfish, but I wouldn’t have been able to take you just walking out without giving me time to detach. While we technically weren’t related, I was sick to my stomach, because it felt like I was in a whole ass relationship with my sister. I knew I couldn’t continue a relationship with you, but I didn’t want the truth to hurt you either. In my mind, I figured if I started being less than what you expected from me, you would eventually leave me, and it would help give me the detachment I needed. When you wouldn’t leave, my behavior kept escalating. I’m so sorry for hitting you. That shit haunts me still. I never wanted to hurt you, Brittany.”

I could feel his sincerity as he spoke. The tears were falling down his cheeks, and I couldn’t help but scoot closer to him. Grabbing his hand, I lightly rubbed it between mine. “I already knew, Lamar. I found out when Dad ended up in the hospital. I knew I needed to talk to you because I felt like my mother wasn’t telling me the whole truth. I feel like she knew all along who you were and didn’t say a word. I’d shown them your picture. She said because you’d changed your name, she didn’t know at first, but I feel like that was a lie.”

“So you wanted to see if my story would match hers.”

“Yeah. She made it seem as if you knew who I was. That made me feel like you were torturing me because of them. She said you were going to kill me.” He frowned hard as he stared at me, but he didn’t say a word. “After thinking about it, I didn’t believe that. You could have killed me a long time ago if you wanted to. We were together for four years and living together for a year. Why would you wait that long if that was your agenda? It just wasn’t adding up.”

“I could never do such a thing. However, I realized I was punishing the wrong person. I finally decided to go to Natchitoches and confront them about what they did. Your

mother looked as if she'd seen a ghost... like she didn't think I would remember or find them. When my mama died, I packed all her shit up. There was lots of paperwork that they signed for me. Everyone's names and copies of their driver's licenses... I decided to take my frustrations out on the right people."

"Did you push him down the stairs, Lamar?" I asked as he stared at me.

"Yeah, but it was an accident. I'd gone up the stairs to get him because he refused to face me. Your mom was on my heels, pulling at me, trying to keep me from going up there. I wanted him to look me in my eyes and admit what they did. I wanted him to tell me that they were justified in breaking a kid's heart. He came out of the room, and we started arguing. He pushed me, and I pushed him back. He lost his footing and fell down the stairs."

We sat there quietly in his confession. I honestly didn't know what to say. Here I was thinking I was a victim of abuse, and technically, I was, but there was a much deeper issue going on under the surface that I knew nothing about. My experiences were masking a deeper pain that Lamar refused to say. His heartbreak was so mind boggling and devastating that he didn't want me to experience heartbreak in that manner. I could only imagine that the revelation of who I was had been tormenting him as well.

He would much rather me experience the heartbreak of falling out of love with him than the heartbreak of knowing that we couldn't be together due to no fault of our own. This shit was deep, but it wasn't as hard for me to deal with as it was for him, and I could learn to appreciate him for that. I once loved him, and had I found this out then, it would have broken me into pieces.

"I'm sorry for all that you endured. Thank you for trying to shield me from it. I was familiar with the type of heartbreak you put me through. Not the abusive parts, but I knew what it felt like to fall out of love... to realize that the person you once thought the world of had fallen off the pedestal you'd put them on. I endured it longer than I should have. If you knew all this,

why were you begging me to take you back in the voicemails?”

“To assure you that it was nothing you did wrong. I love you, and I would love to still be with you had it not been for this.”

I immediately thought about Shyrón. If I could understand Lamar and why he did what he did, then understanding him should be just as easy... if not easier. Everything Shy had done was to protect me. That man was in love with me, and I was too damaged to even see it. What I thought was me being cautious and trying to prevent repeats of hurtful behaviors was actually me being judgmental and making horrible comparisons. In my heart, I felt... no, I knew that Shyrón wasn't an abuser, and I owed him an apology.

They were both trying to protect me in their own way. While their ways may not have been ideal for me, I needed to establish how I expected them to treat me. I allowed it for so long with Lamar until I overcompensated with Shy and didn't give him any leeway. I needed to get to him now.

I stood from the bench, and Lamar did as well. “Thank you for this. Thank you for telling me the truth. I'll deal with my parents later. I have somewhere I need to be. I dropped the assault charges, by the way.”

I hugged Lamar, and when I pulled away, I could see the shock in his eyes. Before I could walk away, he said, “Thanks, Britt. I'm surprised they hadn't caught up with me yet. Good luck with Shyrón. He's a good guy, and you deserve someone who will spoil and protect you. I love you, Brittany.”

I smiled slightly and nodded then took off walking toward my car. Shyrón was who I needed to be next to... close to. When I got to my car, I noticed a car pull out of a parking spot and approach me. I hurriedly got in my car because, suddenly, I was nervous as hell. *What if Lamar really is trying to kill me and this talk was a smoke screen?*

The car stayed parked there, blocking me in. I was scared as hell. Remembering what happened to Alexz nearly a year ago, I shrank to the floor. I could barely fucking breathe under

this steering wheel. Moving the seat back, using the button on side of it, I could stretch out a little more. My stomach was too compressed. *Shit!*

It felt like I had been down there forever when there was a knock on the glass. I glanced up to see Shyrón. I felt like I could cut flips. Pulling myself from the floor, I unlocked the door then sat in the driver seat. I placed my hand on my chest as he opened the door and squatted so he could see me. He grabbed my hand and kissed it. “You okay?”

I shook my head then got out of the car and fell into him. “I’m so sorry, Shy. I was so wrong for the way I left you Saturday night. Just because we had a disagreement with how you chose to protect me shouldn’t have negated who you are in my life and how much I care for you. It shouldn’t have caused me to see you differently when I know exactly who you are and how you move.”

“I was wrong too. I’m so sorry, baby.”

“Who was in that car?”

“Ali.”

“He’s still following me?”

“No, but I never told him to stop following Lamar. When he saw you with him, he called me. I got here as fast as I could.”

“Can we go home?”

He leaned over and kissed my forehead as he rubbed circles on my back. “Hell yeah, Britt.”

CHAPTER 15

S

hydrón

“SO HOW DOES IT TASTE?”

“It’s really good. Thank you. I didn’t know you could cook this well.”

“Girl, I’m a jack of all trades.”

She giggled as I moved around the kitchen, cleaning my mess. I’d cooked a Tuscan chicken pasta. It was my first time trying the recipe, but it looked good as hell. Plus, I added shrimp and more vegetables to it. It was delicious, if I had to say so myself. I’d made it this morning before going to work. It wasn’t like I could sleep anyway.

When Ali called me and said Brittany was at the park and Lamar was there too, I nearly lost my shit. I left the office quick as hell. He told me that they were only talking and were sitting on a bench with some space between them. I figured they were having the talk that I was supposed to be a part of. Maybe it was something they were supposed to discuss alone.

I would have been sitting right between them, mean mugging his ass. Had he said something I didn’t like, I would have punched him right in his mouth, and nobody would have been talking at that point. She seemed like she had gotten some understanding about what they’d spoken about. I hadn’t asked what they talked about. Had she wanted to tell me, she

would have already. I would wait for her to bring it up. If she didn't, then it wasn't for me to know.

That shit was hard as hell though, because I was nosy as hell, especially if I already knew part of the story. I needed to know the rest and how everything turned out. However, the most important thing was that she seemed at peace. "Thank you for the beautiful flowers," she said softly. "Were you really going to let me go?"

"I was going to try because I felt like that was what you wanted. I laid in this house all day yesterday... in the room where all your things are, thinking about how I could have done things differently. Given your past situation, I should have been more sensitive to what you needed from me. After thinking about how I did things, I was ashamed. So... I decided that maybe I wasn't good for you. I sent the flowers to tell you goodbye and that there were no hard feelings on my end."

I turned away from her because I was feeling way too sensitive. I'd even shed a couple of tears last night, and that shit had me more confused than I had ever been. I even found myself in the store buying a vanilla scented Air Wick to put in my bedroom. I missed Brittany like crazy. While I had been feeling her for a long time, my feelings for her now were off the Richter scale. The love I felt for that woman was beyond myself.

When I felt her arms slide around me, I felt the tingle crawl up my back. She rested her palms on my chest and her head on my back. "Thank you for showing up for me today. All I could think about was what happened to Alexz earlier this year, so I did what you'd told her to do. I was scared as hell. The talk with Lamar went well though."

She pulled away from me, and I turned to stare at her as I put the spoon in my mouth to lick the sauce from it. When she didn't say anything else, I said, "Well that's good. Maybe now you know the truth."

"You're not going to ask what we talked about?"

"I figured if you wanted to tell me, you would."

“Shy... really? Listen. Please don’t change who you are. The Shy I know would be all in my business trying to figure out what time the first word left his lips.”

I chuckled. Maybe she knew me better than I thought she did. “Then what’chu waiting on? Spit it out. It’s killing me not knowing.”

She laughed as she went back to the table and had a seat. Once I joined her, she explained everything her mother had said, then went into detail about what he said that contradicted what her mom told her. I could only shake my head. That was bullshit on her parents’ end. However, they had been good to her, and she felt like she couldn’t totally turn her back on them. I didn’t offer any advice or my opinion on the subject, because in my mind, I would have told them to kiss my ass. Who did shit like that? Give up a child because it wasn’t the sex you wanted... Why not just adopt from the beginning?

I grabbed her hand and kissed it as she went back to eating her food. Having her back in my home was surreal. I had just wrapped my mind around the fact that she wasn’t coming back, and I’d fucked up for the last time. I stared at her as she chewed her food, and I could see her cheeks redden. She turned to me and smiled bashfully. “What?” she asked shyly while putting her hand in front of her mouth.

I smiled slightly and shook my head. “Something wrong with me staring at the woman that just does it for me? I love you, and I’m happy to have you home.”

She blushed harder. “Shy...”

“Naw. You ain’t gotta say it back.” I slid my fingers down the side of her face and down her arm as I admired everything about her. “I’m good with you being here to let me love you... for now.”

She chuckled. It had been right at a month or so since she left that nigga. I wasn’t expecting her to fall for me that quickly, but I didn’t expect it to take terribly long either. I wasn’t feeling his explanation, but if that was good enough for her, I would let it go. *He was trying to make her leave him.* Punk ass nigga could have just left her if that was the case...

left without an explanation instead of hurting her the way he did. She would have been hurt regardless, but it didn't have to be because he was abusive to her. People were weird, but I supposed I had my hang-ups too.

Once Brittany was done eating, I grabbed her plate and took it to the kitchen to clean it out and put it in the dishwasher. When I looked back at her, she was watching me. Mimicking her soft tone, tender-sounding, higher pitched voice, I said, "What?"

She laughed loudly. "I do not sound like that!"

"Yes, you do."

She laughed more, then lowered her voice to mimic mine. "Something wrong with me staring at the man that just does it for me?"

I chuckled as I started the dishwasher. When I turned to make my way back to her, she was taking off her shirt. I stopped in my tracks and watched her pull it over her head. I loved her breasts. They were the perfect size... not too big, not too small, just enough for me. She stared at me with longing in her eyes. She needed me to give her that welcome home dick. I didn't have the slightest problem obliging her.

As I made my way to her, I pulled my shirt off and dropped it to the floor and pulled my dick out of my shorts. She wanted to play. "Keep on. You gon' fuck around and end up sliding down my raw dick."

She gave me a cynical smile then pulled a condom out of the pocket of her sweats and waved it in front of me. "I was prepared."

I licked my lips as she pulled her sweats off, letting me see her lace panty and bra set. She turned her back to me, and when I saw it was a thong, I got to her in record time and slapped her ass. She hissed then bent over the table as she held up the condom. I snatched it from her with the quickness and strapped up, but for some reason, I didn't wanna just fuck her. "Brittany, can I make love to you, baby?"

She stood up straight, and I could see the tears that filled her eyes. As soon as she nodded, I scooped her up in my arms and headed to my bedroom. My heart was light, and I wanted to show her just how true my love was. There were no maybes about my love, and while I knew words were great, I also knew that actions were greater. I planned to take my time with her and cherish her body. I wanted her to release to me... letting go of her insecurities and dispelling her hesitancy.

When we got to my bedroom, I set her on the bed and took off my shorts and underwear. As I stared at her, I could see the goosebumps appear on her skin. That shit was a turn on in itself. Knowing that my gaze had that effect on her let me know I had buried myself deep within her already. The attraction was strong, and there was nothing either of us could do to change it... nor did we want to.

“I’m glad you’re back, baby,” I said softly as I went to my knees and slid my hands up the sides of her legs.

“I should have never left, Shy.”

After licking my lips, I kissed the inside part of her knees, one after the other a couple of times before journeying higher. Her thighs were soft and smooth, and for a moment, I didn’t think my hands and lips would ever part from them. However, that shit between her legs was screaming at me to get at it. The way her pussy was swallowing that thong was a sight to see. My dick felt like it was about to explode just from looking at it.

I spread her legs wider as she moaned softly. The cream at her opening had me doing things I wasn’t ready for though. I stood to my feet and slid my dick right past her underwear into paradise. She tried to wrap her legs around me, but I knew if that happened, there was no way I was going to leave her confines until I nutted.

I held her legs down by gripping her thighs and resting some of my weight on them. “I swear this the best pussy I ever had. Real shit, Brittany. Fuck, girl!”

I pulled out of her slowly as I trembled from the intensity. My dick was screaming to get back, because that taste I’d

given him just wasn't long enough. The connection was necessary at this point, but I needed to taste her. Her pheromones were strong and demanding me to absorb every bit of it in every way.

I pulled her thong off while staring into her eyes. *Damn, I love this woman.* As I pulled it off her feet, I kissed the tops of them. I stared at her thong in my hand then brought it to my face and rubbed it over my nose and mouth as I allowed a low growl to leave me. I was a fiend already. Grabbing her foot, I brought it to my mouth and kissed it then began toying with her big toe with my tongue.

She squirmed in the bed as I made my way up her leg. When I got to her honey pot, I couldn't even go slow. I was on the hunt, and my prey was well within my reach. When my lips and tongue touched her clit, she rested her hands at the back of my head and arched her back as she said, "Yeeeesss, Shy. Show me you love me."

I made sure my tongue touched every crevice of her pussy, gliding it and stopping to suck in places, then went back to her clit as my fingers penetrated her. Starting a steady rhythm, I slowly sucked her clit into my mouth and showed my love for her, as she requested, until she came on my lips. It was like that shit was my strength because not once did my jaw muscles hurt or my tongue get tired. I was living to please her. If that was my sole purpose in life, I would be cool with that.

When her tremors died down, my tongue ventured to her ass. I'd never even entertained a woman in this area before, but nothing was off-limits with her. Licking her toes was a first for me too. Brittany had all of me, and she didn't even realize it. No woman had ever accomplished that feat. Going back to my knees, I was ready to enter my happy place once again, but Brittany sat up and said, "Come fuck my mouth, Shy."

My eyebrows lifted. I wasn't shocked that she wanted to suck my dick, but I was shocked at the way she said it. She wasn't usually that forward... or nasty. She pulled the condom from my dick as I straddled her chest. This shit was about to be on. Hopefully, I didn't get carried away and choke the shit

out of her. When the head of my dick slid past her lips, I couldn't stop the frown that graced my face.

That shit felt good as hell against the roof of her mouth. As I looked down at her, she stared back at me, making me feel all the things she refused to say right now... she was scared to admit. She loved me too. I understood why she was holding back, but my plan was to make her forget all about her past pain with Lamar. I wanted her to experience all the pleasures that being with me could bring her.

As she sucked my shit, I grunted as I felt my nut surfacing. I knew there was no way I would be able to hold it... not with the way the head of my dick was being stimulated. "I love you, Brittany, but I don't want to nut all over you."

When I tried to pull away from her, she placed her hands on my ass, pulling me back to her. Feeling her nails dig into me like she was enjoying this shit as much as I was, set me on a new high. I leaned over her and gave her more of my dick, feeling her gag on my shit. Shit down there got wetter, and I didn't know what she did, but it was like her mouth enlarged itself, and she was taking more of me.

"Fuck! I'm 'bout to paint the walls of your throat, Brittany. You want that shit?"

Our test results had come back clear, so there was no reason why she couldn't take it, other than she just didn't want to. In response, she gave me that gawk gawk 3000, and I couldn't handle that shit. My chirren ran wild down her throat like Bébé's Kids. Once I finally recovered, I stared at her as she played with my balls like didn't shit just happen. "You like surprising me, don't you? The fuck was that? You tryna be my nasty freak too?"

"I'm trying to be your everything, Shy."

I eased off her and slid the condom back on. I had to get back in her pussy immediately. When I got between her legs, I lifted one of her legs and pushed it to her as I entered her slowly. I gave her all of me... feeling my balls rub against her ass. She looked to be holding her breath. "Breathe, baby. Open that pussy up for me."

As I held my position, I began sucking her nipple, trying to get her to relax. It wasn't like this was our first time, so I wasn't sure what was going on this time. I began stroking her slowly, and I could feel her relax some. Bringing my gaze back to hers, I could see the tears building in her eyes. "Tell me, Britt. Tell me."

I didn't know what she would say, but I knew there was something she needed to say. She was holding back and if at any moment, this moment was the time to bare her heart to me. To lead by example, I said, "All of me belongs to you, girl. Do you realize the significance in that? You are the only woman that can get whatever you want from me. No one compares to you."

I wiped the tears from her eyes as I stroked her slowly, making her feel me. She swallowed hard then moaned out her satisfaction for what she was feeling. "I can feel your love every time you touch me, Shy. I can see it in your gaze. I can hear it in your words. I could taste it in your cum. I can smell it in the vanilla fragrance in here. My senses are all overwhelmed, and I don't know how to express it... Oh shit! I'm about to cum!"

She squeezed her eyes shut and allowed the tears to flow from her. As difficult as it was to do, I kept my pace steady as she poured her heart out to me. My heart was mush, and I was glad that she could feel my love. My intent was to show and prove. To know that I accomplished just what I had set out to do... to know she was feeling me completely was a bit overwhelming.

When her tremors died down, she opened her eyes and stared at me. I could see her love for me plain as day. "What else?" I asked.

She continued silently staring at me as I increased my pace and intensity. I was putting in my best work to reach new depths, figuratively and literally. The longer she was silent, the harder I went. "Say it, Britt," I said as I plunged into her.

Her moans were becoming screams as I dived into her repeatedly, causing her hips to lift from the bed and her to

slide to the headboard. She was going to have a hell of a headache in a minute, because I refused to stop until she fully expressed herself. I slammed my hand against the headboard as I dug into her. She was a fucking trooper to take all I was dishing, but I was going to break her. I could see it in her face. “Fucking tell me that shit!” I yelled at her.

She was practically in a sitting position trying to get away from me. I yanked her back to me by her hips and continued drilling into her when she finally yelled, “I love you! Fuck! I love you, Shy! Shit!”

She came all over the fucking place. I could feel it on my thighs. I slowed my pace and lightened my blows as I stared at her. I gave her my tongue as I rested my sweaty forehead against hers and kissed her with every ounce of love I had in me for her. Brittany was like an all-consuming fire that had devoured me, but I wanted her to admit that I had been the same... that I *was* the same to her as well.

When I pulled away from her, I could see the look of freedom in her eyes. “How do you feel?” I asked her.

“At first... stupid for feeling the way I feel already.”

I pulled out of her, turned her over to her stomach, and lifted her hips to me as I reentered her garden. “What about now?”

“Like the shackles have fallen off me. Like I’m no longer... in... bondage. Oh shit! You gon’ make me cum again.”

“Cum as many times as you want to. No more holding back, baby. We grown. Give me all of you. Every piece of you... good or bad. I can’t survive with only part of you.”

My nut was rising once again, begging to be set free. I stroked her roughly as she tried to bury her face in the pillow. Refusing to allow that, I grabbed her by her hair so I could hear her screams. “Shyyyy! Oh... shiiiiit!”

She released her orgasm to me, and I didn’t have a choice but to release mine too. Her pussy sucked every drop from me, causing me to collapse next to her, panting uncontrollably for

a moment. She rolled into me, and I enveloped her in my arms, ignoring how hot I was. This woman had my soul and was practically in control of my next breath. I couldn't push her away. I would deny my needs and wants every time to appease hers. "I love you, Brittany Davis. I love the fuck out of you."

"I love you too, Shyrón Berotte. All of you."

CHAPTER 16

*B*rittany

“BABY, WAKE UP.”

I groaned as Shy gently shook me and kissed my shoulder. It felt like I had only been asleep an hour. “Shyyyy, baby, I’m tired. You can get more of me tomorrow.”

He chuckled. “I just thought you’d want to go to the hospital with me. Skyler is in labor.”

My eyes popped open, and I excitedly hopped out of bed and ran to the other room to find something to put on. I could hear Shy chuckling as I slid on a pair of scrubs. He’d fucked me and made love to me all damn night, and there was nothing my body wanted more than sleep right now. But I didn’t want to miss the arrival of Miss Mariena Sky Berotte. Because Alexz and I were nurses, we’d already discussed how we would get into that room.

Wearing scrubs was a part of the plan. They wouldn’t know whether we were staff or family or both. I giggled at the thought as I slid my top over my head. “Why are you wearing scrubs? You know what, never mind. That shit has Alexz name all over it. All that scheming.”

“Don’t hate because you didn’t come up with the idea to get us in.”

“Whatever. Let’s go welcome our niece to this shithole we call Earth.”

I chuckled as I slid on my Crocs then went back to his bedroom to grab my purse and badge. When I rejoined him, I noticed he was only in a T-shirt and some wind pants. It wasn’t often that Shy left the house dressed down. He was still sexy as ever. He grabbed his shades to cover his weary eyes. “Ain’t nobody told you to be going for the gold tonight.”

“Girl, you gon’ learn. I go for the gold every time, but it’s your fault. When you had my Bébé’s kids sliding down your throat, I knew it was gon’ be on a different level tonight.”

I laughed so loud. It was too early for this shit. Two o’clock in the morning wasn’t the time to be acting so awake and alive. My body was saying so, but here we were. “Shy... Bébé’s kids? Really?”

“Hell yeah. My shit wild and uncontained. They don’t die, they multiply! You better be glad you can’t get pregnant that way or you would be having multiples.”

I could barely breathe I was laughing so hard. Shy wasn’t normally the jokester, but maybe I was bringing out his playful side. I liked that. I followed him to his car, and the soreness in my legs hit me out of nowhere. This nigga must have thought I was barbie doll size. My legs were in so many positions, even I was confused as to how I got that way. I didn’t know my body could bend like that.

After he opened my door, I got in and took a deep breath. This had to be the best decision I’d ever made. While it was spontaneous... it wasn’t. We’d been feeling one another for a while, even while I was still with Lamar. I just never expected to be here with him this way so soon after my breakup.

When he got in the car and pulled out of the garage, we headed to St. Elizabeth Hospital. As he drove, I brought my hand to the back of his head and just rubbed it. His ears had gotten red, and he turned to glance at me. “You keep rubbing my head like that, our niece gon’ have to wait.”

“Shy, you ought to be tired.”

“You tapping out on me?”

“Hell yes. I’m worn out, and my legs are sore... but if you give me a massage, I may consider going another round.”

“Yo’ ass nasty. I’ll rub on your beautiful body all day. So I guess you gon’ be busting that pussy open for me.”

I giggled at his dirty ass mouth. I swore, he was like the hood niggas I read about in books. They said whatever the hell they wanted to say and moved quick as hell in the relationship department. I supposed fiction often imitated real life. Shy wasn’t from the hood though. He was an educated thug, and I loved that about him. “Now who’s the nasty one?” I asked as I slowly shook my head.

He kissed my hand as a smirk graced his lips, but he remained silent until we got to the hospital. I was so excited I was about to open the door myself. As I reached for the handle, he said, “It’s not too late. You wanna get fucked up, I see.”

I frowned, trying to figure out what he was talking about. “Huh?”

“You don’t open doors when I’m with you. I’ll fuck you right here in this car in this parking lot to remind you of who slanging dick in this relationship.”

A soft moan slipped from my lips. He bit his bottom lip, flashing me his grill, then got out of the car. This nigga... he turned me on with almost everything he said. Once he opened my door, we walked hand in hand to the hospital entrance and made our way to the third floor.

When we left the confines of the elevator and journeyed to the waiting area, there was a woman in there with a baby slinging attitude and daggers at everyone close to her. Dr. Ax looked to be over it already. Shy greeted his brothers and Mr. Sheldon as I did the same. “Can I go in to let her know we’re here?” Shy asked.

“Yeah. We’re just out here so she can rest a bit. She hasn’t dilated completely yet,” Mr. Sheldon responded.

“Who all in there?”

“Just go in there. You’ll see when you walk in,” Chad said then chuckled.

Shy gave him the finger then grabbed my hand once again and led me to her room. When we walked through the door, I noticed the light was off. Dylan was in the bed with her, and I thought that was so sweet. They both looked to be asleep. Alexz, Mama Nissa, Skyler’s mom and sister, and a man that I assumed was her father were all in the room.

I noticed that he was talking to Ms. Patricia, and she didn’t look too happy about it. We went to the bedside, and Dylan immediately opened his eyes and shook Shy’s hand as I kissed Skyler’s forehead. Not wanting to disturb her, I headed over to Alexz and Lexi. Lexi had a frown on her face, and I was sure it had everything to do with her dad being there. Of course, I knew all the family drama, and that was when it hit me.

The woman in the waiting area was the woman that had the baby from him. That baby looked just like him. Why the hell he brought his woman here was beyond me. Maybe that was one of the reasons why everyone was so tense. When I sat next to Alexz, I hugged her and kissed her cheek. “Hey, sis. Everything okay? Y’all look tense.”

“Shit almost got real in here when that bitch walked in this room with my dad,” Lexi answered. “Actually, we didn’t too much care to see his ass either, but having her here made it worse. They had Sky’s blood pressure up.”

I slowly shook my head, glad that we missed the drama. When the door swung open, I knew we hadn’t missed out on all of it. “Julius! I’m ready to go to the hotel, and your son is restless!”

If looks could kill, that woman would have dropped dead. There were several pair of angry eyes on her. Lexi bolted from her seat and went straight to that woman and slapped her in the mouth. There was no talking beforehand or hesitancy, which let me know she had *been* wanting to do that. “Bitch, my sister is resting. I know you see that.”

I could tell she wanted to hit Lexi back, but she couldn’t because of the baby. I glanced over at Shy, and he was

standing, I supposed just in case he had to break them apart. Skyler's father stood and made his way to her. When he did, Lexi said, "Get this filth out of here... that includes you."

That man looked so damn miserable, but he brought that shit on himself. When Skyler moaned, we all turned to her to see Dylan rubbing her stomach and his face close to hers. She was nodding as I saw his lips moving. Shy walked over to me and Alexz and kissed our cheeks. "I'm going to the waiting area. It's too much estrogen in here."

Alexz rolled her eyes, and before Shy could leave, she said, "That other bitch, Chanell, dropped the charges."

"I knew she would. She don't wanna do time. She got a kid to support."

He winked at me then left the room. Although I knew since earlier, I hadn't gotten the chance to talk to Alexz about it. I looked over at her and said, "So you don't have to worry about fighting bitches off your pretty ass, huh?"

She brought her hand to her mouth as her face turned red from trying to hold in her laughter. After pushing me, she whispered forcefully, "You make me sick!"

I shrugged as a slight chuckle escaped me. As we talked quietly amongst ourselves, a nurse entered the room to check on Skyler. After she was done, she turned to us and said, "Only two of you besides her husband can stay."

Alexz frowned as Mama Nissa stood and headed to Skyler's bedside to kiss her. I stood as well. It was obvious that the nurse was waiting on us to make a decision, but Alexz wasn't budging. "Two of our sisters are nurses. Can they please stay?" Skyler asked.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but the room just isn't big enough."

"What about just one of us? I'll leave out," I responded.

I wasn't family. I knew Alexz wanted to be in the room for more reasons than one. She'd been having a rough time since her abortion and, for some reason, I felt like being in here might help her. Seeing life come into the world could help her

get through her images of dead babies when she met her beautiful niece.

“Okay. One more.”

I walked to Skyler’s bedside and said, “I’m sure you will knock it out the park. See you and your precious baby in a little while.”

“Thank you, Brittany,” she said right before a contraction hit her.

I quickly got out of the room so they could get set up for delivery. When I got to the waiting area, Shy stood and grinned. “So that getup didn’t work, did it?”

“It had nothing to do with my attire. The room wasn’t big enough for all of us.”

I playfully poked my lip out as Shy kissed my head. “We’ll meet her soon enough.”

“That we will, and I can’t wait.”



MARIENA SKY WAS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL DOLL I HAD EVER seen. While her complexion hadn’t fully come through yet, just by the color of her ears, I knew she would be Dylan’s smooth chocolate complexion. She had a head full of black wavy hair like him too. I was standing near the door when the action started, because I just couldn’t bear being all the way in the waiting area. The moment her cries filled the air, tears fell down my cheeks. Childbirth was something I always wanted to experience, but thankfully, it hadn’t happened yet.

I was thankful because I hadn’t met my one until now... the man I would be proud to have a child from. As I stared into her dreamy eyes, I was filled with a longing to make things right with my parents. I knew this was something that I needed to do, regardless of how I felt about what they did to Lamar. I wasn’t God, nor did I have a hell to put them in. They were wrong as hell, but I was more than sure that they knew so too.

That was why they'd kept it a secret from me and even lied to me to try to lighten the blow.

It was amazing how a baby could make you have a change of heart or soften it at the least. Although I already knew I needed to make things right on my end, just holding this precious life in my hands made me want to stop avoiding it. I stood from my seat and was about to give the baby back to Alexz, but Dr. Ax said, "No, we need to go. As beautiful as she is, we all have jobs to get to in a couple of hours."

I chuckled then gave the baby to Dylan. The look of pride on his face made me smile. I could feel the happiness that exuded from him. I kissed Skyler as she smiled and promised I would be back later to check on her and their nearly seven-pound bundle of joy. After bidding farewell to everyone else, Shy grabbed my hand and led me out of the room. We were quiet for a little while before he said, "She's so beautiful. When Chad and Zay heard her name, they literally shed a couple of tears... so did Dad. I've never seen the men around me all look so vulnerable at once, especially Dad and Chad."

"It was a beautiful sight though, watching the five of you... well six with DJ, all look vulnerable around that beautiful Berotte princess. Seeing your dad hold her was the icing on the cake."

"Yeah. He looked so emotional but happy. The way Mama Nissa comforted him through it was touching as well."

Seeing Shyrón so softhearted was bringing the emotions out of me. I swiped the tear from my eye then looked up at him as we waited for the elevator. "Can you go with me to Natchitoches this weekend?"

The elevator door opened, and we stepped on before he responded. "Yeah. Looks like I'm not the only one feeling all sensitive and shit."

"There's nothing wrong with feeling sensitive, baby," I said as I pulled him to me by his beard and kissed his lips.

As I tried to pull away from him, he held me tighter and said, "Don't make me stop this elevator, 'cause I will."

“I believe you.” I giggled as he kissed my neck. “There is no way either of us will make it to work today. I know you make your own schedule, but Dr. Ax ain’t finna be salty with my ass for not showing up.”

“His petty ass.” Shy chuckled and grabbed my hand as we exited the elevator. “Because I know you value your job, I’mma let’chu make it. But when you get off, I’mma give you that massage you asked for and put that ass right to sleep.”

“Mm. I look forward to it.”

CHAPTER 17

S

hyrón

“SO GO AHEAD AND GET ALI TO WATCH THEM MUTHAFUCKAS for me.”

I frowned at Zay as we chilled out at Pour 09. All of us had gone out to have a good time. Dylan was at home with his family, but the rest of us were teeter tottering on the verge of being lit. Jamel and Arrow didn't join us either since it was the middle of the week and they lived in Houston. They usually only engaged in these activities with us on the weekends.

“What muthafuckas?” I asked, confused as hell.

“Remember the case at my job that I told you about? I'm gonna write their names down. Keep this shit tight, because I can get fired for this.”

I frowned harder. “Zay, look at who you talkin' to. I ain't Chad's loud ass,” I said as I glanced at him and DJ acting a damn fool.

“You right. My bad. I just can't get nobody to take a serious look at them without proof. I feel it in my soul that he fucking with that lil girl, man. I know that's his baby that she's now carrying and her mama covering that shit up. It disgusts me, but more than anything, I can see the hurt in that girl's eyes when I stare at her. She used to stare at me like she was communicating silently. Now, she avoids my gaze. I know that's her mom's doing, because she switched counselors.”

“That’s fucked up,” I said as he slid me the bar napkin with their names and address on it. “I’m gon’ call Ali tonight and get him on this. I’ll get him to meet me at the house so we can talk about it in person.”

“Thanks, man. How are things with you and Brittany?”

“They’re good. For the first time, I changed the air fresheners in my house to vanilla.”

His eyes widened. I’d changed the one in our bedroom first, but then I found myself replacing every one of them. I wanted Brittany to feel at home. She was the woman in my life, and it was time I let go of my mama in that way. I still had the scent of lavender in my offices at home and at work. Now that Brittany was living with me, it was her home as well. I couldn’t have her feeling smothered by my mother’s memory or the hold it had on me.

“That’s big, Shy. Mama’s memory will live on in your heart. I know you don’t remember much about her, so for you to let go of that is big. You were her baby though. Even after Dylan was born, it was like the two of you clung to one another. You had the makings of being a mama’s boy for sure. I believe that’s why you became the total opposite. She was no longer here to nurture you and spoil you.”

I smiled at him. Choosing to take the focus from me, I asked, “What about you? Have you gotten to the woman you love yet?”

He frowned slightly. He didn’t have to tell me that he loved her. I could see it all over him. He’d been loving Joyy a long time. I believed it started out as guilt, but he’d always cared for her. His obsession with her wasn’t healthy, though, if she didn’t want to be bothered with him. As I stared at him, I realized his attention was somewhere behind me. “Hold that thought, bruh.”

He stood from his seat and walked over to a beautiful caramel complexioned, curvy woman. I watched her face redden when she saw him. That had to be her. I didn’t know what he said to her, but I could see the tears building in her eyes. He turned away from her and walked away while she

stared at his back with a longing I'd never seen. Within seconds, the expression left her face, and she picked up her drink and downed it.

She was just as tortured as he was. As soon as she put her cup down, she took off in the direction Zay had gone. My attention was stolen by the fools barking and "Atomic Dog" blasting through the speakers. I rolled my eyes and realized my time was up. Without Dylan being here, I was the lone Nupe in the place... that was until I saw Luke at the bar. I wanted to pull an Alexz Berotte on his ass and just walk up to him and knock him the fuck out for trying to drag my brother.

I went to the bar and sat right next to his ass and ordered a drink. His light bright ass turned red as hell as he said, "What's up, frat?"

I looked over at him but didn't respond. I just wanted him to know that I saw his weak ass. When the bartender brought out my drink, he said, "Come on, man. You know Dylan was wrong as fuck for sleeping with my wife."

"He was, but yo' ho ass wife was the only one you should have been concerned with. Trying to fuck my brother job up was crossing the fucking line. If I could get away with it right now, I'd show you how to properly drag a muthafucka you got issues with. Just know yo' time coming though, 'cause I don't forget shit."

He stood from his seat like he wanted some static, so I stood as well. The minute I did, Chad was on me like white on rice. I'd throw Luke over that fucking balcony railing. My family was my everything, and I'd go to jail for protecting and defending them. I didn't have bitch in my blood, and Luke was about to find that shit out since he wanted to pretend like he didn't know.

"That weak ass muthafucka ain't worth it," Chad said.

As my lip and nose twitched like a mad dog, I saw Luke walk away while I was distracted. Axton joined us and said, "I see where Alexz get that shit from. Cool out, killa. Think about all those kids at the Boys and Girls Club that look up to you."

I took a few deep breaths as DJ joined us then snatched up my keys from the bar. I dropped a bill for my tab and did just what Axton had suggested. I'd just spoken to those kids earlier today, and if they found out I fucked somebody up, my words would mean nothing. My credibility would be shot, and my reputation would be destroyed. While I hadn't been as involved in community activities for the past month or so, I knew they still respected me. I had too much to lose by scrapping in public. Luke was still gon' get fucked up though.

DJ walked me to my car to make sure I didn't run into Luke again. We didn't talk much, because he was always fooling around with Chad and his shenanigans, but we were cool. "Listen man, you gon' have to control that temper before you find yourself in a situation. You too smart for that shit."

"Yeah, I know. But you know how I am when it comes to my people. I ain't crazy though. I was gon' provoke him to strike first before I slung his ass over that railing."

DJ slowly shook his head as he chuckled. "Maaaaan, you *are* crazy."

I chuckled too. As we walked, I saw Zay and his friend standing outside of his car in a heated discussion. They didn't look to be arguing, but they looked to be purging. They needed that. Hopefully, they could move on from this. When I got to my car and was about to get in, DJ shook my hand and said, "Chad needs a good talking to also. Lexi ain't gon' wait for him to get his shit together much longer. I overheard her talking about going chill in Houston with some nigga. He fucking around with other women too."

I shook my head. "That nigga trying so hard to be hard. I don't understand it. But until he really talks about what's bothering him, he gon' be a loner. You and yo' lady good?"

"We still in the talking phase, but we good. Be careful going home, man."

"A'ight."

I closed the door, and no sooner than I took off from the parking lot, I saw Luke's punk ass. I picked up my phone and

called Ali. “What’s up, nigga?”

“Meet me at my house in fifteen minutes if you can. I got a couple of things we need to talk about.”

“Yeah,” he answered and ended the call.

Luke’s response didn’t sit well with me. I was gonna give him a reason to swell up in the chest. This would be Ali’s getting out of the game lick... Luke and this fucking child molester.



“YOU MUST HAVE BEEN SLOW AT THE OFFICE TODAY.”

“Yeah, it’s been quiet for the past couple of days. How you and Mama Nissa been doing?”

“We’re good, son.”

When I got home last night, I talked to Ali for about ten minutes about what I needed to take place then went inside, took a shower, and fucked the shit out of Brittany. When she got off today, we would be leaving for Natchitoches. I could see that she was a little antsy this morning when she left for work. I just hoped that everything went according to her plans when we got there. Playing clean up wasn’t my preferred occupation, but I didn’t mind playing that role for my loved ones.

I’d come by to talk to my dad since we hadn’t been spending much time together. I used to stop by almost every day, but ever since his wedding, I’d backed off a bit. I had a new obsession... Brittany Davis. I didn’t just come here to check on him. I realized I was clinging to the memories here and that, on the inside, I was lonely as hell. I didn’t know how Chad and Isaiah were maintaining being single for so long... Well, I knew how Chad was maintaining.

He partied a lot and fucked around to keep himself busy, especially since DJ had been seeing this woman. Now that I was locked down with Brittany, he only really had Zay to hang out with. The problem with that was that Zay wasn’t really

into the party scene. I didn't really like him going out by himself, especially with this new info about Knowledge AKA Earl Riggs.

After taking a seat on the porch with Dad and enjoying the breeze, Dad asked, "How are things with you and Brittany?"

"They're good... real good. We're perfect for each other. I actually wanted to talk about Zay."

My dad nodded. "Yeah. He's going to be okay, I think. We talked last night, briefly, about a woman named Joyy. He has to let go before he drives himself crazy. He's said everything that he wanted to say to her and heard everything that she had to say. If she still doesn't want to be bothered with him, he needs to walk away. The counselor in him won't let him do that though. He thinks something more serious is going on with her."

"Something like what?" I asked with a frown on my face.

"I don't know. He wouldn't say what he was thinking, and you know I don't push. If Zay wanted me to know exactly what he was thinking, he would've told me. Once he's for sure about what's going on with her, he will probably share. I'm not as worried about him as I am about Chad."

"Yeah. I'm going to have to make time when we get back from Natchitoches to talk to him. DJ said that he and Lexi only talk every now and then. It's something going on with him, but he's always deflecting."

"He does that well. Out of all my children, he's the only one that refuses to talk. I used to think that Dylan would be the one that harbored everything, but he proved me wrong. If DJ doesn't know what's going on with him, that really worries me. I do know that he was having some issues at work with some employees. I don't know what's going on exactly though."

I slowly shook my head. Choosing to change the subject, I asked, "So how does it feel to finally be a PaPa?"

A huge smile broke out on his face. "Like nothing I've ever felt. I'm going to see my little Na-Na later."

“Na-Na?”

“Yeah, but watch it. That’s my nickname for her. Only me and Anissa can call her that. Y’all have to find something else.”

I chuckled. “I’mma let you have that. I think I wanna call her Ree-Ree.”

“That poor baby ain’t gon’ know what her name is.”

I laughed, and he did as well. Mariena was going to be the most spoiled baby ever. She was the first grandbaby on both sides of her family. This poor child was going to be ruined.

“Oh! Hol’ on though. I was ready to strangle Skyler’s daddy and his bitch... sorry, Pop... his woman.”

“Naw, you was right. I don’t usually go there, but I ain’t never witnessed no disrespectful, ratchet shit like that. But you know what? For what he did to his wife, he deserve that shit. I’m just glad that Patricia was able to move on from that. She and Anissa have become really good friends. That’s who she’s with now. I wanted to hook her up with my friend from the gym, but Nissa said that Patricia said she’s perfectly happy with being alone right now.”

“I guess I can feel that after being treated that way for so long. He destroyed a beautiful family. Whereas Skyler has kind of released forgiveness for him, I don’t think Lexi has.”

“I don’t think so either.”

“I thought I was gon’ have to intervene after she popped ol’ girl. She hotheaded like me and Alexz. We don’t play that shit,” I said as I chuckled, thinking about Chanell and Luke’s punk ass.

Dad rolled his eyes. “Y’all are two peas in a pod. Alexz is just a little more reckless than you.”

“I know. I’m tryna impart my wisdom on her and teach her how to effectively fuck somebody up under the radar.”

He shoved me in the arm and laughed. “Man, get the fuck out of here.”

I missed times like these with my old man, where we could just laugh and talk about shit. He was my best friend. Ali was more of my business partner than friend these days. I wasn't complaining about that shit though. Chad had his own shit going on now, and Dylan had a family. Everyone was moving on with their lives, and I was happy about it. Brittany and I were embarking on what could be a beautiful relationship as well.

"Alexz don't need to know shit. That will give her a reason to do more shit. Speaking of her... she finally set a definite date. She's having a spring wedding. March. Poor Ax got his work cut out for him. That's my princess, but man... she a whole ass movement."

I laughed loudly as I said, "Who you telling? But I think he got it. They work for each other."

"Yeah, you right. So what are your plans with the woman you love? I know it hasn't been long for her, but it has been a while for you."

"My only plans right now, Pop, is to love her beyond myself. That's it. When my heart tells me to move to the next level, I will. I don't want to make the same mistakes twice. I was just blessed that it worked out in my favor."

"I knew it would. Brittany loves you as much as you love her. I saw the two of you together a long time ago. You not as slick as you think you are. I peep shit too."

I laughed as I fist bumped him. "Okay, Pop. I hear you."

"Mm hmm. Just like I peeped how long she held the baby. That woman had a longing in her eyes. She's almost thirty years old. Her inner clock is starting to tick. So whatever your plans are, don't take too long. You know she will probably never say."

"I saw it too. You right. I'm gon' talk to her while we're on the road to Natchitoches today."

A baby? Hell naw. I wasn't ready just yet, but if Brittany was, I had better shift gears quickly. She wasn't ready to move, but I forced her hand. She could have whatever she

wanted from me, and I told her that much. Whether she would call me out on it had yet to be seen. What I *did* know was that I would have the time of my life practicing.

I sat in my seat, fidgeting somewhat, because I knew I needed to tell my dad about what was going on with Knowledge. I wanted to tell him when we were talking about Chad, but I was still warring on whether I should. However, if anybody could keep shit to themselves, it was him. I didn't like leaving him in the dark about things, just in case something ever happened to me. My dad chuckled as he glanced at me. "Thoughts about a baby making you that nervous, huh?"

"Naw. It's something else. I wasn't going to say anything, but I feel like you need to know."

He frowned slightly and sat up in his chair as he stared at me. "What's up, Shy?"

"I found out some shit about Knowledge." I glanced over at him to see his eyebrows lift slightly. "His real name is Earl Riggs. Ali found out that shit for me. He created a new identity after he got out of prison. The feds know about it and are keeping that shit hush hush. He's connected to a terrorist cell now and had targeted Alexz to get back at Chad. Chad was a witness to him murdering someone in prison and got a couple of years tacked on to his sentence. I think there's more to it though."

I'd found out more details when I reported the info I knew. When he got arrested again, they knew exactly who he was because they had to fingerprint him. His true identity popped up. While the FBI thought that we were safe, I wasn't as confident about that shit.

"What the fuck? How did you find that shit out?"

"Ali found out. I assume some shit popped since he's locked up again. They probably connected his alias to his true identity. So when Ali looked him up again, the records were connected."

"So what do we do? Does Chad know?"

“I don’t think he does. However, it would explain his behavior lately if he does. Ali has people watching out for us. Until I can get more info from the authorities, just be cautious.”

He sat back in his chair and rubbed his hand down his face. This shit was no one’s fault, not even Chad’s, but it was still fucked up that our family was in this situation. I could only hope that the FBI had all the intelligence needed to keep him in prison for a long ass time and to even take down the cell he was a part of. Terrorists weren’t in the scope of my expertise, but I would educate myself quick as hell to protect my people.

CHAPTER 18

*B*rittany

“HOW WAS WORK?”

“Work was work. I’m tired as hell to say that we only worked half a day today. How was your day?”

“It was good. I spent time with Pop, and before getting here, I dropped by Dylan’s to hold the baby.”

My heart fluttered at the mention of the baby. Thoughts of her made my heart light. I hadn’t been around a baby in years, but it was like being around Mariena renewed me. Shy had just picked me up from work, and we were hitting the road to go talk to my parents. While I wanted to be nervous about that, my heart was so at ease from being around such a beautiful baby, I couldn’t be.

I noticed Shy glancing at me as I smiled. Just the mention of that little chocolate doll did that to me. I’d been by their house every day except today, and I was already having withdrawals. “I wish I could have seen her before we left.”

“We’re still in Beaumont, Britt. If you wanna go see her, we can go.”

“Really?”

He chuckled and nodded repeatedly. I wasn’t sure if he was answering my question or if he was thinking about something. I’d been learning his mannerisms this past week,

and I noticed that he nodded when he was thinking about something and had come to some type of resolution. He got off the freeway and headed back to Dylan and Skyler's place as I giggled. I was too damn happy.

"When you wanna start trying?"

I frowned slightly as I turned to him. "Start trying what?"

When he glanced at me, it hit me like a ton of bricks. "Shy! A baby? You want a baby?"

He glanced at me again. "Quit playing, Brittany. I know you want a baby. I can see it whenever you're around Mariena and whenever I mention her."

"I could just be in love with her, Shy. She's a beautiful baby."

"She is. But I'm about to pull over, and I want you to look me in my eyes and tell me that you don't want a baby."

"You don't have to pull over. I want a baby... just not yet. I want to be married first. I want to spend time getting to know my husband as his wife and not just a girlfriend. And before you go there, I'm not ready to get married just yet either."

He rolled his eyes. "You think you know me."

"I know you're impatient when it comes to something you want."

"You right. Just know that you can always tell me what you want. I know I can be aggressive and demanding at times, but that gives you permission to be the same. I can take the shit I dish out."

I side eyed him while he chuckled. "I'm going to keep that in mind."

"I ain't scared, girl."

I chuckled as the excitement flooded me. We were at Dylan and Skyler's place. I reached for the door handle and quickly caught myself. Shy was staring right at me. "I know, I know. I don't wanna get fucked up in here."

“Good. You learning,” he said then got out of the car as I laughed.

I hadn't been this happy in a long ass time. Knowing that I had a man that would do his best to lay the world at my feet was overwhelming, but with time, I would be so used to it until I would expect it and nothing less. If I wanted him to marry me as soon as now, we would be on our way to apply for a marriage license before heading to Louisiana.

He opened my door, and the moment I stood, he pulled me in his arms. “Listen. You mean everything to me. Waking up next to you has been everything I imagined plus some. If you want the world, it's yours. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

He kissed my lips slowly, but I was on a mission. I pushed him slightly, causing our kiss to break. “I'm sorry, Shy, but I gotta get to my baby.”

“Ain't that some shit. I just offered you the world, and you pushed me out of the way to get to somebody else.”

“Don't do Mariena like that. Our Ree-Ree is worth more than the world.”

He chuckled and nodded in agreement. “You right. Let's go see our baby.”



THE NERVES THAT WERE ABSENT EARLIER HAD FOUND THEIR way to the pit of my stomach. I could barely concentrate enough to get out of the car. My hand was trembling as I held Shyrón's. There wasn't a whole lot that I needed to say... only that I was sorry for how I spoke to them and that I loved them... that was it. However, I didn't know how they would respond.

They hadn't once reached out to me since I'd gone off on my mama about what she told me. When I left Natchitoches, it was like they forgot I even existed. Although I had only called them once to check on Daddy's condition, they hadn't once

tried to reach out about the shit they dropped on me. I had no clue who my biological parents were or where I came from. Why wasn't my father involved, and where was my mother's family?

When we got to the front door, I rang the doorbell and waited as Shy gently rubbed my back. As the door opened, I took a step back. When my mother saw me, her eyes widened. I supposed she was surprised to see me after my last trip. "Brittany!"

She opened the door and pulled me inside, into her arms. I couldn't help but allow the tears to leave me as I felt her tears against my face as well. When she finally released me, she held my face in her hands. "I'm sorry, baby. There's no excuse to justify what we did. To keep it all from you once you were grown made it even worse. Once I realized who you were dating, I surely should have said something."

"Cassandra, who's at the door?" my father yelled from another room.

Before my mother could respond, she noticed Shyrón standing behind me. "Mama, this is my new boyfriend, Shyrón Berotte. Shy, this is my mother, Cassandra Davis."

She wiped her hands on her apron, then shook his. "I remember him from the hospital. It's nice to see you again, Mr. Berotte."

Shy nodded and said, "Likewise."

"Y'all follow me."

I'd forgotten that fast that they'd met already. Shy rested his hand at the small of my back as we followed my mama to the back of the house where my dad always sat. It was where he watched TV, ate, napped, and did whatever else he chose to do. When we entered the room, she said, "Nolan, look who's here."

He turned around in his seat, and when he saw me, he stood from his seat and pulled me in his arms as well. Feeling their love for me meant everything in the world to me. I introduced him to Shy, then we sat on the couch across from

them. I knew they wouldn't really go into detail about what happened in front of him, because they didn't know him, but there was no way Shy was going to let me drive the three hours here alone, nor did I expect him to.

After offering us something to drink, Mama sat in a chair across from us. My dad looked fine, like there were no serious injuries from his fall. Once I surveyed his body, I said, "It's good to see y'all. I felt I owed you an apology for how I spoke to you in my anger. I'm sorry. I love the two of you despite everything. While I was angry and hurt, it didn't negate the fact that you raised me in love and to be a responsible adult."

They glanced at one another, then Shy. I knew they didn't want to say anything in front of him, so I continued. "Shy is an attorney, and he knows everything. He was trying to protect me from Lamar when he found out. I broke up with Lamar before I even knew what was going on. Mama, you were the first to tell me. So I didn't have to hear it from anyone else before hearing it from you."

"We're sorry, Brittany. I'm sorry for making things worse by not telling you the whole truth. It was too late to try to make us not look as bad. The damage was done, and I should have owned up to it. We have information about your birth parents if you want it."

My eyebrows lifted. I could see the hurt in their eyes as I sat up in my seat. Shy grabbed my hand and caressed it as my mama left the room, I assumed to get the documents. The room was filled with an uncomfortable silence until she returned. "They wanted you to have this once you became an adult. We were afraid to lose you. We didn't want karma to pay us a visit, because of everything we'd done."

What the fuck? I thought my mom was dead and my father was absentee. "Whoever they are, they won't replace the two of you and who you've been to me... but I thought my birth mother was deceased and my father was in the wind. They're alive?"

They nodded while I glanced at the documents in my hand. I wasn't sure if I even wanted to know who they were or why

they gave me up. I set the documents on the table, swallowed my emotions, and chose to focus our visit on them, finding out how they were doing, and they asked questions about how I was doing and how Shy and I met. My heart was about to beat out of my chest. Yet another lie. *Would I ever know the whole truth?*

The rest of the visit was them getting acquainted with Shy, although he wasn't talking much. I knew he was here for me. He was not a fan of theirs after finding out about them. I could understand how he felt, especially coming from an extraordinary man like Mr. Sheldon. However, once Mama started cooking that sauce piquant, he was all the way in. Shy loved food, but soul food and Cajun dishes were his favorites.

By the time we were about to leave, my mama didn't want us to go. Shy had warmed up nicely and was raving about her food. When we got to his car and he'd gotten in, he turned to me. "Are you gon' open that? I think I want to know almost as much as you wanna know."

"I'm going to open it when we get to the hotel."

I chuckled because it looked like he wanted to snatch the envelope from me. Once we drove off, I pulled his hand to mine. "Thank you, Shy. I know it was hard for you to pretend to wanna get to know them. So thanks for doing this for me. I love you."

"Once I started talking, it wasn't as hard as I thought it would be. They are blessed to have you. It helped that the food was good."

I rolled my eyes and chuckled. "I had no idea you could be bribed with food."

"Food and pussy... your pussy."

"Yeah, you had better fix that, nigga."

"I got'cho nigga, short stack," he said as he chuckled. "I ain't no fool, baby. Tomorrow morning, we can find somewhere to eat breakfast, then shop for a little bit and head back. This was a good trip."

“That it was. I’m glad I came. Hopefully, whatever is in this envelope won’t change things. I’d like to think that if it would, they would have warned me so I wouldn’t be blindsided.”

“They were clearly missing you. I don’t think they would risk losing you all over again.”

“They nearly did, but I hope you’re right.”

“I know I’m right. Once you open it, if you wanna find them, you know I’ll help you. Are you gonna want to look them up before we leave?”

“No. The only way I would want to do that is if I know who they are. Honestly, that would be something if I know them and they were involved in my life all along. I remember them having a lot of friends when I was growing up. That was probably the reason she lied about their whereabouts in the first place. She knew I wouldn’t be gung-ho about searching for info on them if they were dead or uninvolved.”

My mind began filtering through the possibilities, and before we could get to the hotel, I turned on the cabin light and tore into the envelope. As I looked at the pictures and read the names on the documents, I released fresh tears, and my heart hopped in my throat. My biological parents lived right next door... Mr. and Mrs. Pete. They babysat me on multiple occasions and always showed me so much love.

“Well... do you know them?”

I nodded. “They are their next-door neighbors. I saw them almost every day. They even babysat me when I was little. I’d like to think it was a financial issue why they gave me up, because they didn’t have a lot. Jesus,” I said as I closed my eyes and shook my head. “Knowing that they were still a part of my life gives me so much solace, baby.”

“How about tomorrow, we take the four of your parents to breakfast before we leave?”

I brought my hands to my face as I felt a sense of peace and love flow through me. Knowing that all this shit was done was a huge weight lifted off me. Having Shy here to witness

and protect me from it all was even better. “Sounds perfect, baby. Let’s do that.”

He grabbed my hand and kissed it as we continued to our hotel. Tonight, I had a feeling that our lovemaking would be passionate and emotion filled. I couldn’t wait to get a dose of the consistency he’s always sold me... love.

EPILOGUE

S

hyrón
One month later...

“WHAT IT DO, REE-REE? HOW UNCLE SHY BABY DOING? Huh?”

“I never thought I could see you any more vulnerable than you were with Brittany, but this is a new record. Two women have you wrapped around their fingers. That’s okay though, because two women have me wrapped around their fingers too,” Dylan said as I played with Mariena.

I chuckled as she smiled slightly, waiting for me to keep talking to her. I honestly thought she was smiling at my grill. The shininess of it was probably making her think she was in heaven or that angels were playing with her or something. We were at my dad’s house for Sunday dinner. We’d all eaten already and were just chilling out. The women were all in the bedroom, going over wedding plans with Alexz. The time would be here before we all knew it.

Thankfully, us groomsmen didn’t have to do shit but get fitted for our tuxedo about a week in advance and have a bomb ass bachelor party for Dylan. I couldn’t be happier about being a man at that revelation. Chad had mentioned earlier how he was grateful for that shit as well. He seemed to be doing better and not as irritable. Hopefully, things were settling down at his job. He’d told me the entire security department was under the

microscope, but he couldn't tell me why. *Maybe he didn't know about Knowledge.*

Nigga said I was known for spilling shit around the family. I told him he could kiss my ass. I ride for my family. I was the fucking remedy around this bitch. Whenever anybody was in trouble or needed something done, they came to me, because they knew I could handle shit. Ali had been watching Zay's client and her family for the past month and had quite a bit of shit to report, especially since he was preparing to operate solely as Watchful Eyes P.I. Firm. Zay said he would ask for the info when he was ready to do something about it. He hadn't asked yet.

So if Chad's shit got bad enough, I knew he would tell me what was going on, because I could fix shit... just like Luke got fixed. Dylan didn't even give a fuck anymore. After he found out he wasn't the father of that baby, he was done with Luke *and* Chanell. I was too petty for shit like that.

"Can you give Mariena to Dad? I have something I need to talk to you and Dylan about right quick," Zay said.

I frowned slightly then did as he asked. Dylan glanced at me, questioning me silently. We used to give each other that look all the time when we were younger and about to get in trouble about some shit. I shrugged, and we continued following him until we were outside on the back patio. He turned back to us and asked, "What happened to Luke?"

We both frowned. Dylan spoke first. "Luke as in Chanell's ex-husband? Shit, I don't know, and I don't give a fuck. Why?"

I remained silent as they talked. Zay glanced over at me and said, "Y'all know I ain't supposed to be saying this, but that nigga was at my job Friday. He's dealing with a drug habit. He said he didn't even know how it happened or when, because he had no recollection of consciously using. He said it was just suddenly that he had flu-like symptoms: chills, nausea, and cold sweats. He said it was so bad, he'd begun trembling uncontrollably. Nigga went to the hospital and found out he had cocaine in his system, and his body was craving

another hit. How you not know you consumed cocaine? His cousin found out about it, and because he's a dealer, he supplied him with cocaine. Luke didn't have the strength to resist it. He was getting so sick, he was willing to use to feel better."

"He probably feeling sick from years of being a bitch. That shit done finally soured on his fucking stomach."

They both stared at me as I walked away. They knew I had something to do with that shit without me even saying so. I didn't give a fuck though. Ali had fucked up that nigga drink at a house party he was at. No cameras, no witnesses. I told Luke that I was gon' get at him. Now he trying to figure his life out... almost the same position he was trying to put my brother in over his trifling ass bitch. She should have been his only concern.

Before I could get back in the house, Dylan stopped me. When I turned back to him, he held his hand out, and I shook it as he pulled me in for a hug. He knew I would always have his back, no matter how much I fussed about it. Zay shook his head and went back inside the house after shoulder bumping me. He couldn't say shit, knowing that he was teetering on the edge of the law himself.

"Shy, I got a question. I just gotta know because I know you."

He chuckled as I frowned. I was under the impression that he was about to ask about Luke's ass. He knew I didn't give those types of details. "When y'all was at Axton's practice and you fucked Lamar up, did that nigga swing on you? Alexz said you had Brittany go inside to call the police and when they came back out, you were kicking that nigga. She said you had a mark on your face like he'd tried to get at you, but if I'm remembering right, that shit wasn't there the next day like it was when you and Knowledge got into it."

I smirked. That nigga didn't do shit. I'd done that shit to myself so I would have an excuse to continue fucking him up. Dylan didn't need to know that shit though. After Lamar hit Brittany, I wanted to kill his ass, but I knew I couldn't get

away with that shit without her suspecting me for it. Too much had already gone down between him and me.

“I ain’t got time to fool with you. I gotta get back to my Ree-Ree.”

“Mm hmm.”

When I walked inside, Brittany was sitting on the couch playing with our goddaughter, and everyone was talking amongst themselves. I went to her and stole the baby and gave her to Dylan. Just as Brittany was about to protest, I went to my knee. Things had been amazing between us. No arguing, no nagging... just pure bliss and satisfaction. That shit was nearly impossible to find these days. Brittany had been perfect, and I knew that she would be my wife eventually. I was beyond ready to get the ball rolling on that.

Her eyes widened as she slid from the couch to her knees. “Shyyy, what are you doing?”

“I mean...what it look like?” I pulled the ring from my pocket as I stared at her, and the entire room cheered. “I knew a while ago that you were my one. The only reason I waited was so that you would be more comfortable. You know I have a problem with waiting for what I want. You are who I want... who I need. Brittany Janay Davis, you got to be a whole lotta woman to put up with me... to be able to handle me. But shit, you did that and then some. You got a nigga soft as hell and willing to change his way of doing things just to be with you. I love you, and I wanna stop shacking up, girl.”

The room erupted in laughter. Brittany was red as hell, and the tears were streaming down her face, especially when Alexz flashed her phone at her so she could see that all four of her parents were watching through FaceTime. “I do enough shit wrong, but being with you is the most righteous shit I’ve ever accomplished. You do it for me, and I already know I do it for you. The question is if you ready to tell the world. I am, baby. I’m ready to declare my love for you to everyone I know. Tell me you will continue being the remedy to my every problem and struggle by officially being my ride or die. Will you marry me, Britt?”

She leaned forward and kissed my lips. “I’ve never been able to deny you. Why start now?” She held out her hand and spread her fingers. “Absolutely. I can’t wait to be a Berotte.”

I smiled and slid the diamond on her finger. “Don’t say no shit like that. We’ll be applying for that license in the morning.”

“Like hell! Y’all ain’t getting married before me! Dylan already jumped the damn gun!” Alexz yelled.

I rolled my eyes as Brittany laughed. After standing and helping her to her feet, I lifted her in my arms. “I know that’s your friend, but if you wanna get married this week, fuck Alexz and all her extensive plans.”

“I love her too much. We can get married right after her though.”

“Mm. A’ight. If you change your mind, I don’t mind shattering Alexz’s dreams for yours.”

“Nigga, shut up and put my sister down so we can see this ring! It better be her weight in platinum.”

After kissing Brittany again, I lowered her to her feet, and the women swept her away to get a glimpse of that big ass rock I slid on her finger. As I shook my brothers’ hands and my dad’s, I couldn’t keep my eyes off her. I knew I would have her eventually because I wasn’t shit without her. I was just glad she felt the same way. I came to the realization that the excitement would never wear off... not with her. Every day with her was a like a new high for the fiend in me. She was my remedy.

The End

If you did not read the author’s note at the beginning, please go back and do so before leaving a review. 😊

AFTERWORD

From the Author...

Shy was everything I knew he would be. This ninja was crazy as hell but smart to go along with it. He was a pillar of strength to his family and anyone close to him. I wasn't expecting him to go as far with Brittany as he did, i.e. moving her without her consent. LOL! He was everything though. Lordt! He loved hard, and he was serious about what he wanted. He knew Brittany was his, and he wasn't going to rest until she knew it too. His memories of his mom made me sad though. He was clinging to her memory, but his willingness to let some of that go to be healthier for Brittany was heartwarming.

Brittany's drama was totally unexpected. It wasn't in the plans. Lamar was just supposed to be a dog, and the story was supposed to move along with one maybe two more sightings of him. This foolishness with her parents... that shit was wild! But guess what? There was once an attempt of that very thing in my own family years back, according to one of my aunts. My grandfather just wasn't successful, because my grandmother stepped in and went got her and my other aunt back from the people he'd sold them to. Crazy, huh?

The drama in this book was ridiculous. The bullshit about Knowledge blew my mind as well. I'm not sure what's up with Fatima, but maybe you'll find out in Chad's book. Zay has a bit of drama going too with Joyy. So who's story do you think is next?

I really hope you enjoyed this story. As always, I gave it my all. Whether you liked it or not, please take the time to

leave a review on Amazon and/or Goodreads.

There's also an amazing playlist on Apple Music and Spotify for this book, under the same title that includes some great R&B and rap tracks to tickle your fancy.

Please keep up with me on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok (@authormonicawalters), Twitter (@monlwalters), and Clubhouse (@monicawalters). You can also visit my Amazon author page at www.amazon.com/author/monica.walters to view my releases.

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