



*think*



*i might*



*(need you?)*



*Love Sisters Book 2*  
(A WRIGHT FAMILY SPINOFF NOVELLA)

*christina c jones*

I THINK I MIGHT NEED  
YOU

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# SYNOPSIS

Joia Love is all about... well, Joia. Her primary interests right now are how creative she can get with her video camera, how much weight she can bench press, and her social media brand.

A man doesn't even factor into her top five.

*Especially* not Theodore Graham, the ex-boyfriend committed to becoming her next boyfriend. Teddy's charm and funny demeanor aren't limited to his videos, and he's fully prepared to pull out all the stops to rekindle their college romance.

In the midst of a shocking revelation, Joia is just trying to process it all, while Teddy is trying to secure his place at her side.

She may not *want* a replay with Teddy, but as it turns out... she might *need* him after all.

"I Think I Might Need You" is book two in the Love Sisters Novella series.

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Before I wrote this book... I couldn't find the energy to write ANYTHING. I already knew what Joia's storyline would be, had spoken about it with friends, etc.

I was ready to create.

Maybe not this, but ready to create something.

And then someone came for my integrity. For my imagination, for my creativity, for my intelligence, for my passion, for my LOVE for this work and this community.

It was paralyzing.

But I managed, by... putting it on a love...story.

My first *thank you* is to my therapist, who'll likely never see this, but still.

My husband and kids, for being a light that I needed.

Next is my friends who I talked to about it, who were just as outraged (LB maybe more LOL) as I was, and understood that allegation for what it was - bullshit. Reassuring me that I wasn't crazy, encouraging me to see this as... bullshit.

I'm so, so grateful.

My betas, for taking the first look at these words and giving their feedback, pointing out my mistakes and laughing with me about this project. It means so, so much.

The readers... y'all... thank you for rocking with me. Thank you for laughing. Thank you for leaving those reviews and connecting with these characters.

It means the world.

Thank you.

Happy Reading :)

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# ONE

JOIA.

**I** ain't gotta copy off of no chick  
*If you listen to me, you already know this,  
Van only got time for her own shit  
I know you mad about it hoe but don't trip  
You only pressed cause you don't get what I get  
But come here baby let me drop some knowledge  
Your track record can't touch what I did,  
And you'll never be hot like me, bitch.*

“Joia, I know you’re going through it right now, but I need you to play another song, or I’m about to bounce,” Jaclyn insisted, throwing the comb she’d been using to help me remove my braids down on the table. “Nobody *really* thinks you copied that lil wack ass girl, except the people who *want* to have a problem with you anyway. Hell, I’m the one who gave you the idea for that video anyway.”

I rolled my eyes at her assertion – I’d decided to do a time-lapse video after seeing a random one of a plant reacting to being watered. It had come up on my timeline while I was scrolling social media. Jaclyn had been with me while I mused out loud about what I could do, and her exact words had been:



“Your ass don’t do nothin’ but work out and meal prep and play in makeup anyway, so it may as well be that.”

And so, I *had* filmed myself putting together my meals for the week – along with the other people I did them for – and then sped it all up to just a few minutes of video, set to music from a friend of mine who was an up and coming artist. People *loved* the video, to the point that it ended up trending – and then here came some random ass girl accusing me of copying her concept.

I’d never seen even a *second* of her videos before.

So, yeah... Vanity was really talking to me with *Don’t Trip*.

I’d been pissed off for almost two weeks.

“I get what you’re saying, but... she came for my integrity with that shit! Hopped in my inbox talking about *I know you saw my video Joia!* She –”

“*Called you by your fucking name, like you even fuck with her like that to be addressing you that way and assuming you saw her shit,*” Jac finished for me. “Yeah, I know. I’ve heard this spiel like twelve times. We get it, you’re pissed.”

I *was* pissed.

I was so, *so* pissed.

“But, you also did nothing wrong, and homegirl needs to focus on her audience instead of trying to police your shit – as if *all* of you fit motherfuckers on the internet don’t meal plan in the same damn containers, with the same damn terminology, with the same lil nasty ass chicken and broccoli.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Excuse me?”

“Fine.” She sucked her teeth. “So your food isn’t nasty, but all the other shit is true. She was bugging, and so are you – let’s move on. This braid takedown is the shit you *should* be filming.”

I laughed. “Oh girl I am, you don’t see the camera setup over there?” I pointed, and Jac flipped me off once she confirmed what I was saying. “I may be pissed, but...”

“A hater won’t ever stop the *Love* show,” she finished for me again.

Indeed.

I’d luckily already filmed other content that had been published since the controversy with the meal prepping video, but hadn’t been able to get out of my own head enough to do anything else since. I’d come to a conclusion, however, that I couldn’t let that drama hold me back – especially when I knew I hadn’t done anything wrong. I’d planned to do several of these timelapse videos, each one focused on a different aspect of my life, while still being related to the usual content of my super-popular social media accounts.

So I was *going* to do my damn videos.

A hater won’t *ever* stop the *Love* show.

I kept working and so did my younger sister, Jaclyn. Now that she was freshly graduated from college and had a little extra time on her hands, I hadn’t hesitated to recruit her help taking down the braids that had secured my natural hair underneath my sew-in weave.

“You’re lucky I love you, Jo,” she whined. “My hands hurt – you should just get it loc’d, like mine,” she said, securing a handful of my massive hair with a ponytail holder. There were only a few braids left to undo.

I frowned at her, and shook my head. “You know I have commitment issues,” I reminded her, as my phone chimed. I grabbed it from the table and held it up after reading the notification across the front of the screen. “It’s Jem. Her plane just landed.”

“She wants us to pick her up?”

I nodded, sticking the metal end of my comb into another braid. “Yeah, so we gotta get a move on – I’ll just toss my hair into a ponytail when we finish, then we can head out.”

So that’s what we did.

We, meaning *me*, because we were at my apartment, and would be returning there – Jemma was coming off yet another

trip, this time to Argentina, and was only here for a few days. Her book launch was this coming weekend, at *Tones&Tomes*, a local bookstore we all frequented. From there, she was off on tour around the world, promoting her book about solo travel and cooking and... hoeing.

Her words, not mine.

In any case, it didn't take us long to scoop her up and bring her back to my apartment, where she was staying for the duration of her trip. It *also* didn't take her and Jac long to decide they wanted to eat junk food and drink – and it didn't take much convincing to get them to agree to do it all on my live stream, for an episode of *Live with the Love Sisters*. Something we didn't get to do very often, since these days we were rarely in the same place at the same time.

“So what are we talking about today guys?” I asked, once I'd gotten the camera set up, and started the live stream. Already, the number of people who were watching live was climbing past a hundred.

“I don't know about y'all, but I'm trying to hear about whoever Jem met in Argentina. I know she got her a fine one,” Jaclyn said, settling into her seat at the table, where my phone was set up to include all three of us in the frame. She took a sip from her lemonade and watermelon vodka combo. “Spill it bitch. With all the details, come on.”

“*Oooh*,” I mused, nodding. “That's where Steph Foster's fine ass – no disrespect intended to his beautiful wife – is from. He got a look-alike back home?”

Jemma shook her head, sending her braids gliding across the back of her shoulders as she grinned. “*Nope*,” she said, sipping from her drink – the same thing Jac was drinking. “If these people wanna hear about *my* hoe-tivities, they gotta read my book.”

“Yes,” I laughed. “How Jemma Got her Back Cracked, out in three days at *all* major retailers.”

“Oh *shit*, that's good!” Jemma giggled. “How come you didn't give me that when I was asking y'all for name

suggestions?!”

“Sis, I been working on that for like a month, I’m not the funny one in this trio,” I reminded her. “That’s your baby sister over there.”

“My bad,” Jac shrugged, topping off her drink from the bottles on the table. “You know I was busy trying to graduate, I didn’t have any extra brainpower. Your title is good as it is though, you did well.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, smiling at Jemma. “I’d want to read it even if I didn’t know you.”

*Speak, Play, Grub* was described as “*a Black woman’s guide to culture and cuisine, language and leisure, introspection and intimacy around the world*”. I couldn’t think of a better way to describe the many, *many* stories she’d relayed to Jaclyn and me in the years since she’d randomly quit her job and decided to explore the world.

I made sure to name drop the book by the *real* title, then got up to grab a bottle of water while Jemma answered the questions people were asking about it in the live stream. When I sat back down, Jac nudged me.

“The people want to know why you’re drinking water while we’re over here getting lit,” she said, taking a very pointed sip from her drink as I unscrewed the top on my bottle.

I shook my head. “Too much sugar for me – I’ve already got this little pudge that won’t go away.”

Jemma and Jaclyn *both* nearly choked on their drinks.

“A pudge *where*, Jo?!” Jemma exclaimed, laughing.

I sucked my teeth and stood, pointing to what as – to me at least – a distinct rounding of my belly.

Jac and Jem exchanged a look, then laughed again.

“Lawd, here you go – girl that’s just a little gas,” Jaclyn chuckled. “Lift your shirt.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“Just do it,” she insisted, so I did.

“*See!*” she exclaimed. “Girl, you’ve got a damned sixteen-pack of abs talking about a *pudge*.”

“*There’s a pudge*,” I maintained, laughing with them now. Maybe I *was* being ridiculous. But still. “My leggings are fitting tighter, and my hoe clothes don’t look like they used to,” I told them, sitting down. “No matter how clean I eat, no matter how many damn crunches I do – it will not go away!”

“Okay... maybe you’re pregnant,” Jemma offered, making me sputter and choke over my mouthful of water as I shook my head.

“No. *Nah*. Nope. *Negative*.”

Jaclyn laughed. “You don’t sound sure at all, could you think a little harder?”

“I haven’t even... been engaging in the activity necessary for conception,” I said. “So, *hell nawl*,” I added again, then looked into the camera. “Do y’all see how they do me? It’s cause I’m the middle child, I know it is.”

“*Mmmhmmm*,” Jemma snickered. “I’m just saying, I feel like you’re brushing the pregnancy option off a little too easily, when it would explain what you’re talking about. And you’re talking about *too much sugar* in the alcohol.” She sucked her teeth. “Shit seems mighty convenient to me, Jaclyn.”

Jaclyn wagged a finger in the air. “You know what – she did have a *stomach bug* a few weeks ago. I think Jo-Jo is gonna be a mommy.”

“*Oh my God*,” I laughed. “The *stomach bug* – which *was* a stomach bug was *months* ago. I am *not* pregnant, stop playing with me!”

“Prove it,” Jac dared, lips pursed as she stared me down.

I threw my hands up. “How the *fuck* am I supposed to prove I’m not pregnant right now?!”

Jemma’s eyes went wide, and she jumped up from the table. “Oh I got you boo,” she said, going for her purse. When she came up with an unused pregnancy test, still in the little

foil packaging, me and Jaclyn both tipped our heads to the side.

“Okay, why is *your* ass walking around with a pregnancy test at the ready?” I asked, and Jemma shook her head.

“Uh-uh. Worry about yourself. Go take this.”

“I don’t have to pee.”

Jaclyn sucked her teeth. “As much water as you drink, *Miss Fit Bitch*, I *know* you stay drug test ready. Girl go take that damn test.”

I blew out a stream of air through my nose and then stood up, snatching the test from Jemma as I stomped off to the bathroom, already knowing what the damn thing was going to say. Still, this was good ass content – nearly two thousand people were watching the live stream when I walked away.

Knowing my sisters would keep the audience entertained, I peed on the damn stick to prove them wrong, then put the protective cap over the end before I slid it back into the little packet it came in. I washed my hands, then brought it back to the table with me smug as hell to hand to Jemma.

“As you requested,” I quipped, returning to my seat.

“I knew you had to pee,” Jaclyn laughed. “How long we gotta wait? It’s two minutes, right?”

Jemma nodded. “Probably just one, cause of the time it took her to get back. I bet it’s twins,” she said, grinning at me. “I mean looking at how you’re carrying.”

“Oh, fuck you,” I giggled. “You know, I wonder if my abs are overtrained...”

Jac shrugged. “Or you could just be constipated. You always *have* been full of shit, you know.”

“I really cannot stand *either* one of you,” I said, rolling my eyes as Jemma held up the pregnancy packet with a grin, wiggling it in her fingers.

“*Showtiiiime*,” she sang, sticking her tongue out at me as she pulled the test from the packet. I expected her to play it up

since we were live, teasing me about what was surely a negative test.

Instead, her eyes bulged wide, then shot up to me, then to Jaclyn, before she handed the strip of plastic to her.

Neither said anything.

“Okay,” I laughed, shaking my head. “This is some Oscar-worthy acting, but come on. Stop playing.” I reached across the table, pulling the test from Jaclyn’s hand to show the camera the “*negative*” sign.

Only... there wasn’t a *negative* sign.

It was a plus sign.

“*Holy shiiiiit*,” I whispered, dropping it on the table like it had suddenly grown hot in my hands. Somehow, that seemed to spur my sisters into action, while I sat there frozen.

Jemma grabbed the test, while Jaclyn grabbed my phone, smiling into the camera.

“Thank you for tuning in to *Live with the Love Sisters* – the first episode of our scripted series, all scenes dramatized for your enjoyment. Good night.”

She shut off the phone and looked at me, eyes wide.

We were all wide-eyed as fuck, together.

Jemma was the first to break the silence, giving me an awkward smile as she held out the test.

“Umm... told you so?”

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## TWO

JOIA.

“**T**o’ up, from the flo’ up?  
*Nah fuck that, it’s time for the glow up.*  
*Don’t need no consensus, don’t need no permission*  
*They can watch us grow up*  
*You wanna be that bitch?*  
*Well okay bitch it’s time to show up.*  
*We ain’t tuckin’ our tails no more*  
*Oh nah baby, we about to blow up.”*

Vanity’s pseudo-female-empowerment anthem blasted in my ears as my feet pounded the treadmill at full speed – one last sprint, one last push to completely wring me of energy after the heavy lifting I’d done at the gym today.

Not that it was going to make any type of difference.

Not when I was growing a baby.

I... still wasn’t even sure how that shit happened.

I mean, I knew how it happened, but I didn’t know *how* it happened. I’d been single for damn near six months at this point, and my sexual encounters since then were basically non-existent. Last I checked, you couldn’t get pregnant from



heavy-petting, and even *that* disaster of a date had been a few months back.

I was happily focused on my career, working on opportunities that would stretch beyond social media. I had my sisters, I had friends, I had a little box in my bedside drawer that could more than deliver on any of my sexual needs.

I wasn't thinking about a *man*.

And I damn sure wasn't thinking about a *baby*.

*Did you get drunk and have a fling or something?  
Sleepride the dick? Immaculate conception?*

*Shit.*

I finished my cooldown and climbed off the treadmill, trudging all the way to the showers. Even in this private gym, it felt like everybody was looking at me – some of them *definitely* were, because even though it was a thriving college town, Blakewood could still feel small.

*Especially* with all my business in the streets.

On the internet, I could easily pretend it never happened, ignoring any comments or questions about it. Of course, that wasn't stopping anyone from asking, but the last thing I had any capacity for right now was strangers invading this aspect of my life.

As if that live stream hadn't invited them *right* in.

I really could kick my own ass for that.

I never – *never* – would have taken that test so cavalierly, and definitely not live with thousands of viewers, if I'd considered pregnancy as even a loose option. And I knew it wasn't a false positive, because Jaclyn and Jemma had gone out to get more tests, which I'd promptly taken, hoping for a different result.

They all said the same damn thing.

My parents were finally getting their damn grandbaby.

After my shower, I dressed in sweats and a hat, hiding the bulk of my face behind oversized sunglasses. Seemingly

overnight, I'd developed a whole host of new symptoms related to my... condition.

My breasts and back were aching, I was over the top exhausted, and all I wanted to do was eat my way through one of the two gallons tubs at *Dreamery*.

Of course, that could've all just been my obsessive research talking.

It had started with me making sure it was okay for me to go to the gym – I *needed* that outlet for all this mess, or it would drive me crazy. I'd quickly gotten a “yes” about that, but of course I hadn't stopped there. Once I started, I ended up awake until three in the morning, reading horror stories about women who hadn't known they were pregnant until the baby was *literally* coming out.

So... when I thought about, I'd gotten lucky, I guess.

I was halfway across the parking lot, on my way to be obsessively early for my prenatal appointment at University Medical Center. My cousin, Joseph Wright, was chief resident there, but I was more concerned with getting to his wife, Devyn. Nothing against Joey, but having my male cousin examining my pussy wasn't *quite* something I wanted to do, but I was more than comfortable with Dev.

I would *not* be live-streaming the appointment this time.

“Yo, Joia!”

The sudden sound of my name nearly made me jump out of my skin, and I glanced around the parking lot, heart racing. Alarm was *quickly* replaced with annoyance when my eyes landed on the source of that unnecessary loudness.

*Theodore Graham.*

Damn him for looking as good as he did.

I'd read something about baby hormones making you crazy horny, so I attributed my suddenly hard nipples to that, and *not* an overwhelming attraction to all six feet, ten inches, two-hundred-eighty pounds of Teddy. Although, that *had* always been part of what drew me to him, even back in

college, where we'd first met. He was a big, sprawling sort of man, the kind that was distinctly... climbable.

And boy did I want to plant my pussy *right* at the top of that tree.

He was wearing a frown as he strolled toward me, dressed like an ad for a summer issue men's magazine. I'd never admit to him – hell it hurt to admit it to myself – but he looked damn good too, in his casual loafers and floral print shorts, with the matching button-up undone enough to show his chest. The mint green base of the fabric popped against his dark-brown-sugar skin, making it glow.

He looked *goodt*.

Yeah, with the “t” on the end.

Real goodt.

“Joia, I really can't believe you – I thought we were better than this, baby.”

He stopped in front of me, smelling like cedar and linen.

*Shit.*

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked him, crossing my arms to hide my nipples, which were so hard they were showing through my damn sweatshirt.

He pursed his lips. “Don't play that shit with me girl, you let another nigga get you pregnant, like *I* wasn't supposed to be the one to ruin your Summer. That's cold as hell, Jo.”

“I will fucking *kill you*,” I threatened, as a grin spread across his face. “You're *not* funny!”

Teddy clapped a hand to his chest like I'd wounded him. “Why you gotta take it there?”

“Why *you* gotta take it there?!” I countered. “This shit isn't funny.”

“My bad, baby. Tell me what you need.”

“I *need* you to stop calling me baby. We broke up *eight* years ago. I'm not your baby.”

“But you’re about to *have* a baby,” he explained. “I’m just feeling a little sentimental, that’s all. I ain’t even know you were fucking with anybody like that.”

*Because I wasn’t.*

“Why does it matter to you anyway?” I asked.

“Cause I was getting ready to make my move and get your fine ass back, girl,” he declared, narrowing his eyes at me.

“What makes you *ever* think I would want you back like that? Do you not remember why we broke up? It only takes me *once* to get disrespected, and guess what – you had your chance.”

He sucked his teeth. “Man you always bringing up the past, like a nigga ain’t changed between now and then.”

“I don’t know what you’ve done between now and then, other than be a goddamned fool on the internet. If you say you’ve grown up, good for you. But a *relationship* between you and me? That was never going to happen, baby or not,” I explained, which was honestly more than he deserved.

I’d *loved* Teddy.

Loved the hell out of him.

Yes, we’d been young, but we’d also been cute as hell together, me as a cheerleader and him a rising star on the football team. We were *that* couple.

Or so I thought.

Until I found out he’d been telling his homeboys and teammates I was *not* his girl.

I was just somebody he was smashing.

*I* may have been in love, but he didn’t give a shit about me – not enough to claim or respect me.

And now he wanted to act like I was the lost love of his life?

Nigga *please*.

“Daaaamn?” he grunted. “That’s really how you feel?”

I looked up into his handsome face like I was squinting into the sun – those pretty eyes and pretty white teeth, that lush beard and full lips... I'd get burned if I looked too long.

“Yeah, Teddy – that’s how I feel. I don’t want to collab, I don’t want to date, and I don’t even want to be friends, honestly. We can be cordial when we see each other, but that’s it. I wish you the best though, seriously. But I have an appointment to get to,” I told him, swallowing hard after my somewhat harsh words.

I *wanted* to be past this shit with him, but his tendency to *not* give me any space if we were near each other made it hard. Maybe time would’ve made my heart grow fonder if there’d been a little absence, but it seemed like he was *always* there.

We were even peers online.

We’d agreed not to make our status as exes a thing online, but we hadn’t kept it secret either. Because of that, people regularly asked about Teddy and me being a “thing” – a small annoyance that added to the bigger ones.

Like him asking to collab with me.

Because of our shared interests in fitness and nutrition, there was honestly some overlap between our audiences. But other than that, I was hair and beauty, while he was sports commentary and comedy sketches.

We were as far apart as we could be.

There was no reason for us to make things more than what they were.

“An appointment for the baby?” he asked, and I nodded. “Cool. Well... I know you think I’m not shit and all that, but... good luck with all that, aiight? I think you’ll be great as a mother.”

I smiled. “Thanks, Teddy.”

I turned and made my way to the car, blowing out a deep breath once I was tucked into the driver’s seat. I buckled my seatbelt and pulled out, heading for the hospital as Teddy’s last words replayed in my head.

Making me panic.

I'd barely accepted the fact that I was pregnant... I hadn't even factored in the obvious endpoint, if everything went like it was supposed to.

I was going to have to *mother* this thing.

*Shit.*

“**W**ow. Wow. *Wow.*”  
“Yeah.”

“*Wow.*”

“Mmmhmmm.”

“It's like... a whole ass baby.”

“Yep.”

“Like a for real baby, not...a blob. Or like, the little jellybean with feet thing. That's... a baby.”

“Yes, Joia. It's a baby.”

I turned my gaze from the – utterly *fucking* ridiculous – image on the ultrasound screen to Devyn, who was pressing the imaging wand to my still mostly-flat belly. When she realized I was looking at her, she looked at me, and we looked at each other, like Diddy and that nigga with funny hair from that meme.

I was waiting for her to tell me somebody was playing a *really* intricate joke on me.

*Had to be.*

“*How?*” I asked, finally, when she just kept staring at me with that same blank ass look, giving me nothing. “This is stupid. Right? This is stupid. *How* did this happen?”

Finally, she snickered. “Well, sometimes when a man and woman—”

“I know *how* I got pregnant, Devyn, I'm saying there is a full-blown fetus on that screen!”

She nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, there is. It’s right there. I see it. Judging from these measurements your baby is right in line with about eighteen weeks.”

My eyes bulged. “*Eighteen?! Isn’t that halfway through the fucking pregnancy?!*”

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

“How are you so calm right now?” I asked, pushing the wand away from my belly to clear the image from the screen, and stop the steady throb of uterus music from the speaker.

Devyn’s eyebrows lifted. “Cause *I’m* not the one having a damn baby. Got enough of those already.”

“*Devyn!*”

“*Joia,*” she shot back, immediately, laughing. “Listen, it’s not uncommon for women to not know they’re pregnant until fairly late. You’ve been my patient long enough that I know your cycles tend to be irregular, and you told me a little bit ago that you’d had light bleeding every month, even though you’re obviously pregnant – that’s not uncommon either. I remember you having the “stomach flu” a couple of months ago. That was probably morning sickness – lots of very lucky women don’t suffer from it very long. You’ve never been pregnant before, and you’re incredibly fit – that’s why it took a while for you to start showing at all. *None* of this is surprising to me.”

“Well that’s great for you, but *I’m* about to start screaming,” I told her.

She laughed as she grabbed my hand and squeezed. “Please do not start screaming in this room,” she asked. “I understand it’s overwhelming, but I hope *you* understand... you’re going to be perfectly fine. The baby looks great, you look great, your bloodwork was great. And you have a family who is going to look out for you at *every* step, okay?”

I pushed out a deep sigh. “Um... okay. Okay,” I repeated, shaking my head. I could say it all I wanted, but the truth of the matter was that the shit didn’t *feel* okay.

It felt... nonsensical.

“You have to start taking prenatal vitamins, *today*,” Devyn told me, getting back to business. “We may be starting late, but we need to get you on track with all of that. I’m assuming no drugs, right?”

I nodded, blankly. “Uh... right. Just my usual protein supplements and vitamins... but I’ve eaten brie, and I’ve drank in the last... shit, *five* months. Five fucking months. I’m *five* months pregnant. I’ve been in a hot tub, and I... hell, I went zip-lining two months ago! And, and... hookah! I’ve been at—”

“*Joia!*” Devyn insisted, squeezing my hands again. “Calm down, okay? You should cut those things out now, but please hear me when I say that your baby looks perfectly fine.”

“But you don’t *know*, right?” I countered, my heart racing as I looked her in the eyes. “There’s all kinds of stuff that you don’t know until the baby is born, and I’ve... probably already poisoned it, and ruined its’ life, and—”

“You *cannot* think like that,” she interrupted, her tone soothing. “The baby looks fine, like I said. In two weeks, we’ll bring you back in for the “big” scan, okay? And if you’re really concerned, amniocentesis is an option, but it’s risky, and I do not think it’s necessary. We’ll test everything that we can without doing anything too invasive, and if there *is* something wrong, there are so many amazing surgeries and treatments and therapies and *whatever else* your baby might need. We’ve got you.”

I pushed out a deep breath, trying to calm myself down before I nodded. “Okay. *Okay*. I hear you,” I said, nodding again.

“Good,” Devyn smiled. “Now... have you told the father yet?”

“What?”

She raised an eyebrow. “The *father*, Joia. Does the father know you’re pregnant?”

A lump caught in my throat as my brain rolled back nineteen or twenty weeks, the time I would’ve had to conceive



– right around the beginning of the year.

Maybe New Years?

*Or maybe New Year's Eve...*

Shit.

*Shiiiiit.*

I remembered the party.

I remembered the drinks.

I remembered wanting to end the old year with a bang.

I remembered starting the new year *getting* banged.

“*Fuuuuck*,” I groaned, covering my face with my hands as everything came in startling clear for me.

“Oooh,” Devyn hissed. “That bad, huh?”

I pushed out a sigh, shaking my head as I dropped my hands to meet her gaze. “You have *no* idea.”

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## THREE

TEDDY

“Wow, nigga, she really got you in your feelings, huh?” my cousin jeered over my shoulder. He was obviously talking about Joia’s face on my cell phone screen, and I didn’t even bother hiding the shit either.

She *did* have me in my damn feelings.

So much so that I wasn’t paying any attention to the oversized computer screen in front of me, where we were supposed to be editing our latest skit. That shit was due to go live tomorrow, but I was much more concerned with what Joia had going on.

*Damn.*

*She really about to have that nigga’s baby.*

Even after we broke up, I’d always kinda kept an eye on her – mostly because I couldn’t believe how fucking stupid I was, letting her get away.

Well... *pushing* her away.

Top three mistakes in my *entire* life.

Cause now, I had to watch her get older and finer, and watch other niggas get the experiences with her that should’ve been mine. There had been this one moment where I thought I maybe had a chance, but then... next thing I knew, her ex was back in her face, dancing in her videos and shit.

And now she was about to give him a kid.

*Damn.*

I really lost the love of my life to *Happy Feet*.

That shit was hard to swallow.

I looked up at the computer screen just in time to see myself giving the camera a disturbing small smile, just before I turned and shot a basketball from all the way across the court. It had taken a bunch of repeats to get that shit right, but we eventually did, editing in a bunch of extra shit the ball did at the rim before finally going through the hoop for the game-winning shot we were parodying.

I couldn't tell if the shit wasn't funny or I just wasn't in a laughing mood.

"Looks good to me man," I told Len, so he could finish the editing without me holding us back. I got up to leave the "editing suite" – the second bedroom in my apartment – so I could grab something to eat.

I was still staring into my fridge when Len joined me in the kitchen.

"I could've told you ain't shit in here," he said, loud as fuck for no reason as he settled at the counter with his laptop. "I'm about to order some wings."

"*Bet*," I nodded, grabbing a beer instead, and handing him one too. I was quiet as I cracked it open, draining half of it in one gulp.

Len shook his head, lips pressed into a straight line as he looked at me. "You, my friend, are pitiful."

"The fuck you talking about?" I asked, leaning into the counter behind me.

"You walking around here sad as fuck over Joia instead of... just fucking getting her back."

I scoffed. "She's pregnant, bruh. You know she's about to get back with that nigga, that's how it goes."

“You talking about Dalton?” Len sucked his teeth. “You really admitting you don’t have more juice than *that* nigga? That’s sad.”

“It ain’t about *juice*,” I said. “I *know* Jo – she’s gonna try to make a family with him.”

Len shook his head. “I’m telling you, *nah*. Dalton’s wack ass played her to the left in that interview like they were just fucking. Sound familiar?”

I gave him a gas face behind that shit. Me and Len were family – had been tight since the playpen and stayed that way through college, so he knew *exactly* how the shit with me and Joia went down.

“Yeah, it’s familiar – if I did basically the same shit, why would she deal with me if she won’t deal with him?”

“Cause it’s still fresh with him,” Len explained. “We were kids back then man – we’re coming up on thirty in a year or two. I bet if you dig down, she’s not even really mad about that shit like that anymore.”

I shrugged. “Even so, it doesn’t change the fact that she’s having his kid. What I look like trying to push my way into that situation?”

“You look like Russell Wilson swooping in to be a family man,” Len laughed. “What your wack ass wants to be anyway. Just don’t let her name that baby Dalton, please.”

I chuckled. “You wild for that shit Len,” I told him, shaking my head.

According to him, this was simple math, but from my purview... it was anything but.

Just yesterday, in the gym parking lot, she’d made it clear she didn’t want shit to do with me, so the idea of pushing myself between her and the father of her child? The chances of that going in a way that was even remotely favorable for me were shaky.

*Real* shaky.

“All you gotta do is get the public on your side – you should make a video about her. *Yeah*, that’s it right there.”

My head popped up, tuning in to Len’s words. “*What?*” I asked, frowning. “Man, *hell* nah. *Helllll* nah. Joia would hate that shit.”

“But her fans would eat it up,” Len insisted. “I’m telling you – you look like a superhero swooping in to save her and the baby from a fuckboy like Dalton. Your followers go up, *her* followers go up, everybody gets invested in seeing y’all become a happy family and shit. Then all you gotta do is sit back, watch her come around. Next thing you know, y’all got a joint brand, sponsored by Nabisco and shit. You see it.”

“*Nigga*,” I groaned, wrinkling my nose. “You realize you’re suggesting I use the internet into manipulating her into fucking with me?”

He gave me finger guns. “So you feel me. Let’s get it. What’s step one?”

“Step one is you *never* saying this shit out loud again,” I laughed. “You’re the *last* person I would ever take advice from on anything to do with women.”

He frowned. “I get all kinda pussy my friend, you could stand to learn a thing or two from me.”

“Didn’t you have to take like two weeks’ worth of antibiotics to get rid of—”

“*Whooooaa!*” he interrupted, shaking his head. “That’s a low blow!”

I laughed. “Nah, what it is, is the truth. I don’t need you to teach me *shit* about women.”

“Aiight man, you got it,” he told me, in a tone that clearly indicated he didn’t think I did.

There was a difference between me and Len though – he thought it was only right to plow through the growing list of women that social media notoriety had put in our sphere of influence. I wouldn’t front like I hadn’t enjoyed the attention

too, but I was a lot more reserved – a lot more *careful* – than Len was.

Hell, I was surprised no one had popped up yet with *his* baby.

I couldn't front – part of me wondered if my hesitation to dive face deep into that pool of women and get a comfortable backstroke going was because of Joia's constant presence in my peripheral. If we were just regular exes it would be easy to move on, but the overlap in our careers, in a city the size of Blakewood, made it impossible to really forget each other, like exes usually would.

Her ass was always *there*.

Randomly in the grocery store, or not so randomly at an influencer event, even on trips for certain brands. I couldn't get on social media without seeing her face – amplified by the fact that I'd chosen to follow her, but still.

I hadn't even called the agent I'd been put in touch with by Justin Wright.

*The Justin Wright.*

Because he was her cousin – a tidbit I hadn't realized until later. When she and I were together, he hadn't yet become *the* Justin Wright, so I didn't know him. And we never did make it to the point of introducing families, so there was no reason for him to know me.

He was already a big deal by time she and I reconnected on social media. When I saw him, months back, around Christmas, I wasn't even thinking. Well, I *was* thinking – about myself, and what he could maybe do for me. I didn't want to act a fool on the internet forever – it was fun, and I made decent money, but I was trying to get into something with some staying power.

So I talked to him, briefly.

He gave me the card.

I walked away.

And then remembered the video Joia had posted from Thanksgiving dinner with her family. Her *whole* family.

The Wrights included.

So that was the end of *that*.

I couldn't have her - or anybody else for that matter - thinking I was using her as a come-up.

*That* wouldn't fly.

While Len ordered up the wings and shit, my mind was somewhere else - several places at once, to be honest. I forced myself to push Joia out of it, focusing instead on what I *should* be a lot more pressed about.

My *job*.

“Ay, when was the deadline for that *WAWG Fresh* pitch contest?” I asked Len. “Still not for another few weeks, right?”

Len looked up from his laptop and nodded. “Yeah... you thinking about it again? I thought you were off that?”

I shrugged. “Shit... maybe not.”

It definitely wasn't an opportunity to brush off. WAWG - We All We Got - was a huge Black media company, featuring a full-blown television network. They'd just introduced a web presence, *Fresh*, and they were looking for talent. Writers, singers, artists, you name it - they were looking for everything. Part of that search was a pitch contest for streaming content and web series.

Well... contest wasn't quite the right way to frame it, since they'd made it clear they weren't choosing just one thing. There was plenty of room at the table... if only I could decide what the fuck to bring.

I got big laughs and viral shares for the parodies and shit online, but opening it up to a wider audience was a whole different beast. Trying to decide on one specific lane to brand myself in felt like trying to choose a favorite child... or at least, what I assumed it was like.

No way to choose a favorite without upsetting the rest of the crew.

“Aiiight,” Len said, giving me his full attention. “Let’s pin that shit down, bruh. What you got for ‘em? You on your Bernie Mac shit or your Billy Blanks shit? Stephen A Smith or Wayne Brady. What you got?”

“I got *nothing*,” I told him, truthfully. “I get a decent response for everything I put up, so how the fuck am I supposed to choose?”

Len nodded. “Okay, okay, I feel you. So... let me pitch something to you.”

My eyebrows went up. “Okay...”

“Picture it,” Len grinned, his eyes glazing over. “Me and you, road-tripping, seeing everything this beautiful country has to offer. Mountains, lakes, trees, desert... and ass.”

“Ass?”

“*Ass*,” he repeated, rubbing his hands together. “We ask the people to tell us the best strip club in every state, we hit ‘em up, judge for ourselves. I even have a name for it already – *Hoes Across America*. Tell me that shit ain’t an instant classic.”

I shook my head, chuckling. “You gotta get somebody else for that,” I told him. “*But*... I’m not opposed to your dumbass being on screen with me for this. Hell, we can get the whole family involved – the Grahams are some entertaining motherfuckers.”

“That we are,” Len grinned. “Come with it though, what you got?”

“Graham Table Talk. We sit around, shoot the shit, eat smores and shit.”

“Nah.”

“American Ninja Graham – I’ll wax the whole family on some gladiator shit.”



He shook his head. “Man ain’t nobody climbing no rock walls and shit. Gimme something else.”

“The Nigga – like the bachelor, but all the men in the family compete to figure which one of us is *that* nigga. Spoiler alert – it’s me.”

“Definitely not you, but we can write that shit down. What else?”

“Dancing with the Grah – nah, nevermind. I can’t sink to that nigga Dalton’s level. The Graham Race – my parents would be all over some global scavenger hunt shit. Graham Factor. Make everybody eat your sister’s potato salad,” I laughed, thinking about how hard Lachelle had gotten roasted about it at Easter.

“You trying to give me nightmares nigga?” Len asked, frowning as he put his hand to his stomach. “I was sick for a week behind that shit, and you know Chelle *still* swears “our palettes just aren’t refined enough”?”

I busted out laughing. “Nah, our goddamn *intestines* weren’t refined enough. That was some Becky-ass potato salad, cuz. Chelle gotta keep her ass off Pinterest and get in the family recipes.”

“She wants to try again for the fourth of July.”

I scoffed, shaking my head. “Hell nah – my independent ass won’t be in the blast radius this time.”

Len chuckled. “She’s using Big G’s recipe supposedly. No telling how it’s gonna actually go though.”

“You know what – *that* shit might be worth putting on camera. *The Graham Cookout Cookoff*. Challenges with our family recipes from our ancestors and shit.”

“Ain’t no way you’re serious,” Len scoffed. “Nixon would bring his ass over from *The Heights* and wash *all* of us in the kitchen.”

I shook my head. “Nah, him and Charlie too busy being Hollywood and raising all those damn kids. They don’t even cook like that anymore. Out of practice.”

Len sat back, a dreamy look on his face. “*Mm*. Charlie’s fine ass...”

“She’s family, nigga!”

He sucked his teeth. “By marriage, not blood, which means she’s fair game for my admiration.”

“That’s mad incest-y Len, but I’ma let you rock,” I told him, frowning. “Anyway – you writing this shit down?”

“Hell nah, it’s all wack,” he countered.

“It’s not *all* wack, and it’s called brainstorming, fool. I’m trying to put us on.”

Len waved that off. “Man, you know the Grahams ain’t gone act right. Unless you’re trying to make it a cage fighting thing.”

I tipped my head to the side. “Hmm. GGH – Grahams Got Hands. I’m kinda into that shit. And my moms still owes yours an ass whooping over Uncle June, so shit... we can probably make it happen.”

“You know my mama got fibromyalgia dude, that ain’t funny,” Len replied, giving me a sour face.

I nodded, solemn. “You right, my bad. Mama and Aunt *Shelby* should box.”

Len’s eyes lit up. “Yeah, there you go. *That’s* the match.”

My mom and her sister Shelby had been feuding since before I was born, and when they got in the same room, it was straight comedy. Jokes, fists, wigs – anything was liable to start flying, and it was the highlight of family events for me and my cousins.

It really didn’t belong on the screen though.

“I’m overthinking this shit, right?” I asked Len, and he nodded.

“Yep,” he agreed. “And you a funny dude Teddy, but when you get in your head... critical wack.”

I sat back in my chair with a sigh. “Damn.”

“You’ve got too much on your mind,” Len guessed – correctly. “This shit ain’t due for weeks, so don’t sweat it. If something comes to you, it comes, and if not, this wasn’t the opportunity for you. We gone eat these wings, pop some brews, and I’ma whoop ya ass in 2K.”

“Hashtag, self-care.”

“So you *feel* me,” he exclaimed.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “Let’s get this shit going.”

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## FOUR

JOIA

**W**ho the fuck doesn't know they're five months pregnant?

*How?*

*How?*

*How?*

That question had been playing in my head, on a nearly constant loop, since my appointment with Devyn. In those two days, everything seemed to have amplified again. Or... maybe I was just paying attention now, whereas before, when pregnancy hadn't even been a possibility, I easily wrote off every twinge, every ache, every little change to my body.

Now, I was obsessively hyper-aware of it all.

Fresh from the shower, I stared at my body in the mirror, no longer confused about my growing breasts and midsection. I shook my head, thinking of the months I'd spent kicking my ass in the gym and fervently avoiding sugar to combat those very changes.

My *Ms. Fit Bitch* nickname had been well-earned, and it was one I was proud of. Nevermind the fact that I'd *started* working out to get a little of what my sisters had naturally. Jaclyn had been blessed with the body type the internet referred to as *Big Fine* – healthy servings of beautiful curves. Jemma was naturally slim, with more than her fair share of ass

and hips, and perfect c-cup breasts that looked good in everything. She traveled the world eating all manner of carbs and spending *no* time in the gym, and yet... she looked like she did.

If I didn't have my ass in the squat rack multiple times a week, I wasn't *Ms. Fit Bitch*.

I was *Ms. Flat Back*.

With a lack of tits to match.

But I'd come to love it.

Even with my complaints and comparisons, I'd built a body that I loved, doing something I loved, and it was hard to accept what felt like a ridiculously sudden change to that. I'd worked my ass off for abs, and seemingly overnight, they were fading.

Maybe this was the type of thing that, if I'd known sooner, I could've prepared for.

I closed my eyes, scolding myself *again*, because seriously... *What the fuck, Joia?!*

I'd pushed it out of my head before, but the night of that party was so, *so* clear now. I'd looked good as hell in my little metallic mini dress and sky-high heels, not caring that I was towering over a decent portion of the crowd.

I was having a great time – exactly like you were supposed to in Vegas. *Bet on Black* was an organization started by the Drake family, with a focus on supporting and amplifying Black talent in a wide range of categories. I'd been excited as hell to get the invitation to their annual New Years' Eve party, knowing the exposure for my brand it entailed.

And it didn't hurt that they covered the travel expenses.

It was a party full of Black people all dressed up in shiny things – probably my favorite kind of party. Lots of familiar faces from the big screen, the small screen, the internet, the radio, and a lot of new people to meet too. Great music, good food, plentiful liquor. It was exactly what I needed coming off a fresh breakup.

I wasn't thinking about Dalton's ass *at all*.

I was laughing, talking, drinking, dancing, *no tears left to cry* and all that jazz.

But then, of course, because anything else would've been too good to be true... there *he* was.

"Dalton – what the hell are you doing here?" I asked, scrambling to cover myself with the oversized tee I'd laid out on my bed before my shower. I'd opened my eyes now, and was back in my room, just me and what apparently had decided *not* to stay in Vegas.

And goddamn *Dalton*.

My question seemed to pull him out of whatever trance my naked frame had put him in – he blinked, and held up his key ring.

"We broke up. Why exactly do you still have a key to my place?" I asked, not bothering to suppress my scowl as I moved to my dresser to retrieve a pair of panties. "And again, what are you doing here?"

He squinted at me – always with the stereotypical light-skinned shit, ugh. "You're not answering your phone, or returning messages."

"I don't have any missed calls or messages from you Dalton, because I blocked you on all possible mediums when we broke up. You don't exist to me anymore."

He frowned. "You don't think that's harsh?"

"You told *Sugar & Spice* magazine that you and I "weren't even like that" and "were just having fun", while also implying that my career wasn't good enough for you. And oh yeah – whatever bitch that was you described as your *dream girl*? Definitely didn't sound like me."

Dalton sucked his teeth, moving toward me as I pulled on a pair of jeans. "The chick doing the interview asked my preference, that's all," he offered as a rebuttal, like that made the shit *any* better.

“Yeah... and it sounds like you don’t *prefer* me, so I did us both a fucking favor.”

I let out a sigh of relief as the jeans easily buttoned over my stomach. I was using every bit of stretch they had, but still.

A win was a win.

“That’s your problem – you always tripping over what shit looks like, instead of what it is. We were good until I *said* some shit on an interview, trying to keep my female fans happy. That makes sense to you?”

I rolled my eyes. “Dude – I’m not about to rehash this with you. I felt disrespected, plain and simple, so I bounced. *Six months ago*. Give me my key, and get the fuck on. We don’t have shit to talk about.”

“You’re *pregnant*, Joia,” he said, his tone switching from annoyed to stern. “We actually have plenty to talk about when you’re having *my* baby.”

“I *love* how you assume it’s yours,” I shot back, propping my hands on my hips. “Do I *look* six months pregnant to you?” I asked, knowing I barely looked *any* months pregnant, let alone what most people would think of as six.

He scoffed. “Stop fucking around, you know *damn* well I’ve been in that pussy since we broke up. You weren’t fronting two months ago, or the time—”

“I didn’t fuck you two months ago,” I interrupted, with a fresh scowl. I *had* been guilty of doubling back to him in weakness, but it certainly hadn’t been two months ago, or even close.

Dalton’s lips pursed. “Joia... come on, we’re the only ones here. You ain’t gotta front.”

“Nobody’s *fronting*. I haven’t even *seen you* since we ran into each other at the BSU Valentine’s Day mixer thing. And I didn’t fuck you *then* either,” I told him.

His gaze went to the ceiling, eyes narrowing as he thought about it. “Damn... you know what...”

“No, and I don’t want to,” I told him, closing the distance between us to pull his key ring from his hand. I knew exactly which one it was, still on the black ring I’d given it to him on, so I had my key off before he could protest. “Get the hell out of my apartment, Dalton,” I said, tossing the rest of his keys back to him. “I’m still processing this news myself – I am *not* about to discuss it you, on any level, and you can’t make me.”

He stared at me for a few moments and I stared right back, honestly prepared to kick his ass if he didn’t leave. Dalton and I were the same height, damn near the same weight, and I knew for a fact I was more of a beast in the gym than he was.

I liked my odds, honestly.

“We *will* talk about this shit *soon* Joia – you really don’t have an option,” he warned, as he turned to leave.

“Yeah, kiss my ass,” I called after him, then followed behind to make sure he’d actually left before I locked the door.

*Shit.*

I had enough to worry about without him popping up unannounced. I could only deal with one mistake at a time, and he was furthest from my priorities, especially when I didn’t need his trifling ass involved in any aspect of this pregnancy.

He wanted to downplay what he’d done, but as far as our relationship went, it had been an extinction level event for me.

Growing up in the Love household meant knowing how to take a joke, knowing how to roast back, knowing not to take yourself or others *too* seriously. Room for flexibility and all that. It also meant watching my mother and father – and my uncle and aunt – love each other fiercely, without ambiguity. I wanted the same thing for me.

Both of my parents drilled into us to never let anybody make us feel unworthy, or unwanted, in *any* capacity. On a job, in a friendship, in a relationship – there was always room to walk away.

So I did.



I was willing to argue and make up. Willing to apologize when I was wrong, to forgive if needed. Willing to put in work when it wasn't always pretty – those things had been modeled for me.

I was *not* willing to be denied.

Instant fucking deal breaker.

What Dalton *didn't* want to acknowledge is that we were the *height* of serious with each other when he gave that interview, just after Thanksgiving. He ate with my family, played with my little cousins, drank with my father. We were looking for a place together.

I *loved* him.

I was good with not mentioning him in my videos, or posting selfies and shit – I didn't want the internet in my business that much *anyway*. I was fine with him dodging questions about who he was dating, or being vague. I wasn't stupid, I knew it was part of the business. Sure, he was a professional dancer and choreographer, and got paid good money from big stars to amplify their stage. But his *fame* came from the internet – videos of him dancing went viral, women lusted over him, paid to attend his pop-up classes, and all that. There was value in him appearing to be attainable.

And that was *fine*.

But then that interview came.

And instead of simply dodging the question about me, he rolled his eyes. *Adamantly* denied being involved with me, in a manner that made it seem like it was ridiculous that he'd choose me. He went on a tangent about the internet making stuff up – and turning “anybody” into a faux celebrity they could link with a *real* one.

It was clear which of us he thought belonged in each role.

Honestly, I was done there, but then the kicker came – this *stupid* fucking game they always played at the end, where the guest built their “dream girl/guy”.

*Petite. Quiet. Curvy. Nympho. Caramel Skin. Homebody.  
No Weave.*

It was like he was *trying* to describe the polar opposite of me.

And he expected me to... take it?

*Wrong bitch.*

I heard my cell phone chiming from my room and rushed to check the screen, answering immediately when I saw that it was Jemma.

“I know I’m running behind,” I told her before she could start on me. “I’m on my way, I swear, I just got interrupted. Dalton popped up out of nowhere.”

On the other end of the line, Jemma sucked her teeth. “*Ugh.* I’m assuming he wanted to talk about the baby? He *is* planning to step up, right?”

“Not ready to discuss, Jem,” I reminded her. I loved my sisters, loved my parents, and I knew they had questions, knew they wanted to support me, but like I’d told Dalton – I needed a minute to process the shit myself, without any input other than the doctor.

I still didn’t even fully believe this mess was happening.

So before I heard what *everybody else* thought I should do, or should’ve done, or wanted... I needed to figure it out on my own.

“Oh *fine*,” Jemma sighed. “Anyway – I was actually *hoping* you were still home. I need you to bring me a different pair of shoes – the ones I wore for the party are killing me.”

I chuckled. “Ah, perils of a bad bitch. You have another pair in your luggage that would work, or you need me to bring a pair of mine?”

“Do you even really need to ask?”

“Nah.” I thought back to what she was wearing as I moved to my closet and looked around. “Nude sandals with a chunky heel work? Three inches?”

“Sounds perfect. Thanks little sisterrrrr,” she sang.

“You’re welcome. I just have to finish getting dressed and do my face, then I’ll be heading to the bookstore. Do you need anything else? A coffee? Gum? A bowl of weed?”

She laughed. “All of the above honestly, but I’ll settle for just the shoes. And your face in the place. *Hurry.*”

“I’m coming,” I promised before we exchanged goodbyes and hung up. Jemma’s book had launched today, and she was already freaking out about her climbing Amazon sales rank and the preliminary reviews. As far as I knew, the reception so far had been positive. I hadn’t expected anything else though – Jemma’s social media presence was nothing to sneeze at. She was popular, and well-liked.

And honestly, the book was good as hell.

She had *nothing* to worry about.

I took off the tee-shirt I’d donned because of Dalton’s presence, replacing it with a bra to support my aching breasts – a brand new purchase, since I’d finally given up on trying to make the other ones fit. This one was a pretty, delicate thing made of ultra-soft lace that I topped with a sheer button-up. With my high-waisted jeans, and the hem of the shirt hitting me at the hips, you couldn’t even tell I was pregnant.

Other than my swollen face.

Jaclyn swore I was imagining it, but *I* could swear I was filling up like a balloon. So I took the little extra time to do some contouring on my face, giving some definition where there was none anymore, and taking my hair down from my puff to let it hang around my face for even more camouflage.

Not that any of that mattered, when *everybody* knew.

All because of that stupid live stream.

The whole embarrassing thing had been downloaded and shared countless times, for everyone to see. And the thing was, they didn’t even know yet just *how* mortifying it actually was.

But they’d know in about four months when I popped up with a baby.

Hell, before then, when my midsection morphed into a watermelon.

I pushed out a sigh, and left the mirror alone, focusing on getting myself out the door, with the shoes Jemma had requested. As much as I wanted to just crawl in bed, there was something much more pressing on my agenda.

Supporting my sister.

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## FIVE

TEDDY

“Ay, ay, ay – make sure you get the sandals in there boy,” I shouted to Len, posing in front of the grill with the long-handled fork in one hand, spatula in the other.

My mother shook her head as she walked past us, peeling the protective film off a brand-new bottle of bubble solution for the group of kids running around the yard. “Theo, you see what you’ve started?”

She wasn’t talking to me – she was talking to my father, who’d come to join me on camera as Len streamed live from my phone. His hands were full, hefting a huge container of seasoned ribs he was getting ready to put on the big grill in the backyard, in preparation for something my mother’s church was hosting the next day.

He’d just bestowed me with a privilege I’d been waiting on my whole life.

“Aiight, stop playing and come on son,” he called, turning his attention back to his duties as grill master. “Time to put the ribs on.”

I grinned right into the camera, cocky as fuck as I nodded. “For those of you who may not understand the gravity of this moment, let me break it down for you – being the one to put ribs on the grill isn’t something to take lightly. It’s an art to this shit, and I been observing my whole damn life – never got

to touch the ribs. I had to put in the time, you know? Mastering the perfect seasoning rub, the perfect sauce. Taste testing. Studying cook times and heat zones and grease splatter, all that. Dedicated myself to the swine, you heard?”

I switched hands, using one to hold up my shirt so the live viewers could see the words across my stomach. “Y’all see this shit? This is dedication – *Rib Life*.”

“Lil’ boy you’d better not have tattooed *Rib Life* across yo’ stomach!” Mama hollered from across the yard.

“I didn’t choose the *Rib Life*, the *Rib Life* chose me!” I answered her, wagging my tongue at the camera since the shit was obviously done in washable marker. “I got the Jesus sandals. I got the crew socks. I got the fork *and* the spatula. I got the muhfuckin’ *tongs* over there, just waiting on me, I’ma flip the *shit* outta these ribs.”

My dad laughed. “*You gone do what now?!*”

“*I said*, I’ma flip the *shit* outta these ribs,” I replied, easily going along with his call-and-response. “But I gotta put ‘em on first, so come on, let’s do it. Len, make sure you get in here real good, make sure you pick up this sizzle.”

“Oh we ready, we ready for it, come on,” Len encouraged, walking with me to join my father at the grill.

My father had already put the ribs down on the outdoor counter, and now he held up his hands, stepping between me and the grill. “Hold up there young buck. You need one more thing.”

“Oh *God*,” my mom muttered as she passed us again, going back inside. “A house full of fools.”

“Before you touch this grill,” he continued, like she hadn’t said anything. “I bestow onto you... the hat.”

“*Ohhhh shit*,” Len exclaimed, as my father removed his hat – a faded red BMW – Black man working – hat I’d given him two decades ago as a birthday gift, purchased with money I’d earned trimming hedges around the neighborhood. It was tattered and stained with God knows what from the *everywhere* he’d worn it. Fishing trips, hiking, water parks,

cruises. You name it, that hat had been there, and hadn't been washed the whole time.

I was excited as a mothafucka for him to put in on me though.

*Backward.*

“Yo. Yo,” I said, nodding at the camera as I choked up a bit. “This is... man... y'all, look at my motherfuckin' *drip* right now!” I roared at the camera, hitting them with a little spin so they could take it all in. “Y'all can't take it – I *know* you can't take it. This is high-quality Black dad swag, uncut, premium, *you see it.*”

“They gotta inject this shit straight into the veins, yo,” Len agreed, gassing me as my father cracked up, and my mother watched from the screen door into the kitchen, straight-faced.

“Are you fools gonna put that food on the grill or not?” she asked, sounding annoyed at my antics, but she would be the first person to hit the “like” button whenever I posted a clip from this.

“Anything for you, Mama. *Anything* for Selenas!”

“*Anything for Selenas!*” Len repeated, prompting her to roll her eyes.

“Don't be calling me by my first name, y'all ain't too old for me to make you go get a switch!” she warned, pointing between us. “Even you, Theo.”

My father grinned. “I'll go get it right now, long as it goes both wa—”

“*Naaaaah!*” I yelled, waving my hands. “Ma'am, sir, this is a Wendy's!”

“I'm too young for this kind of content,” Len chimed in. “There are laws against this.”

“There's gone be some laws against your *butt* if those ribs aren't ready by tomorrow,” Mama said, giving us the stink eye again.

“That don’t even make sense, Mama. Why you always saying stuff like that?”

“I’ma make sense upside your head if you keep questioning me.”

I looked straight into the camera. “*See?*”

She was serious though.

And it was getting later in the day, damn near sundown – we *did* need to get these ribs on.

“Listen to that – y’all hear that fuckin’ *sizzle?*” I asked the live audience as I carefully lined up slab after slab on my dad’s big custom grill. “*Grah-ams baby back riiiiibs,*” I sang as I finished, admiring my work. “Aiight y’all, let me drop some knowledge on you. If we were talking wine, I’d be your *sommelier*, but we ain’t that fancy ‘round here, so this is from Theodore Graham Jr, your official *Grill-melier*. Barbecue ain’t just about the taste, aiight? It’s the taste, the tenderness, the texture, the *aroma*. Y’all smell that right now? Nah, you don’t, but it’s fuckin’ delightful, trust me.”

On the other side of the phone, I watched Len glance at his watch, and then his eyes went wide. A moment later, he was giving me the “wrap it up” signal.

*Damn, what time is it now?*

I couldn’t check my own watch, but I went ahead with what he was prompting me to do.

“Aiight y’all, it’s been real. Ribs are on, and now they need their privacy and all that, so we gone let them do what they do behind closed doors and I’ll make sure to update y’all with the finished product. Later.”

I gave the camera a one-handed salute as I held my shirt up again, and a few seconds later Len lowered the camera, giving me a thumbs up to let me know I was no longer live.

As soon as I was clear, I looked at my watch, immediately understanding why he’d reacted like he did to the time.

I was off schedule.



I'd come over here to check in with my parents and do the grill thing with my father – the live stream was impromptu. I hadn't, however, intended to stay as long as I did. Not when I'd been contacted and recruited by Toni Wright as “press” for Jemma Love's book launch.

*Tonight.*

“We gotta head out,” Len said, returning my phone, and I nodded.

“Already on it,” I answered back, extending a hand to my father to say goodbye.

“Come by in the morning to get a picture of these ribs – and pick you up one of these pretty young church girls,” he suggested, accepting my hand. Before I could say anything, he used his free hand to retrieve his hat from my head. “*What?*” he asked, in response to my open mouth. “I know your ass didn't think I was *giving* you my hat.”

“But the... you *bestowed* it!”

“I *be-loaned* it,” he chuckled. “I was helping you put a lil bit of... what you call it? *Drip* on your show.”

“I see you Uncle Theo,” Len laughed, dapping him up. “We might have to get you in on this a little more often, I like the improv.”

“You young niggas ain't the only ones know what's going on,” my father quipped, turning to go inside. “Ask about me.”

Len and I shared a laugh about *that* shit, then went inside to say goodbye to my mother. A few minutes later, we were headed out – I was dropping him at his own place, then heading to mine to try to make something happen in the... *forty-five* minutes I had before this book launch party started.

Before I was back in the same space with Joia again.

With her fine ass.

All the Love sisters were fine, but Joia was a special kind of beautiful – though I could be biased. That pretty ass copper skin, those cheekbones, those lips, long ass toned legs, all that hair, and those deep brown eyes that could get a nigga lost.

Hell... we'd been broken up for years and I was *still* mesmerized.

With Len in the car, my thoughts couldn't drift too far, not with his constant stream of commentary and questions. Once I'd dropped him off though, I was free to let my thoughts wander... straight back to Joia, of course.

In fact, the more I thought about it, the more Len's dumb ass advice from the other day seemed... less dumb. Yeah, Joia might be inclined to make a family with Dalton's ass because of the baby, just because it seemed like the simple, best option.

So... maybe I should give her a better one.

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## SIX

JOIA

**H**e smelled like ribs.

Not the wack, chain restaurant stuff either. His aroma was smoky, mouthwatering... real ribs. Even over the smell of books and magazines and champagne, his scent prevailed.

Just a whiff at first.

Calling me.

I turned around and there he was, hugging Jemma, his cell phone camera pointed at both of them as he rattled off details about the book, telling people where to purchase, what it was about, all that.

It was great promo, honestly – so good that I wasn't even mad about him being there. Toni had pulled me aside to warn me about it, but Jemma had already broken the news that morning.

“Protecting my energy”, she'd called it.

I appreciated both of them for looking out for me like that, while also not letting the personal shit interfere with good marketing decisions. It would be different if it were Dalton, where the offense was much deeper, and still relatively fresh. Sure, I'd told Teddy I didn't want much to do with him behind our breakup, but honestly... *honestly*... I was pretty over it.

I wasn't bothered by his presence.

At least, not in the sense of being angered by it. I was *plenty* bothered – nobody else seemed to notice that he was carrying the scent of a Summer cookout, but I sure did, and it was making me hungry as hell. And looking at him was making me *horny* as hell.

He'd always been handsome, and every detail of his face was well-imprinted in my mind. Still, for some reason, his smile was doing extra things to me tonight – his lips, those beautiful teeth, the way his eyes damn near disappeared, getting lost in his cheeks. It wasn't just the mechanics of it either – when Teddy smiled, it made you want to smile too, which could be dangerous.

That smile, that charm... it was how he'd gotten me in the first place.

I really didn't need to get snared again.

“*JoJo*,” someone behind me sang, and I turned just in time to catch a glimpse of Reese's face before she pulled me into a hug. I returned the gesture easily, rocking with her back and forth, and grinning when we finally parted. “So... are you feeling okay?”

I nodded, already knowing what she was asking. Reese was one of my biggest fans – and another of my cousins, since she'd married Jason Wright. This was my first time seeing her in person since accidentally announcing my pregnancy.

“I do feel okay,” I told her. “Just processing.” I stepped in, bending a little to tell her what no one besides Devyn knew as of yet. “I'm already eighteen weeks in.”

Her eyes bugged wide as she turned to meet my gaze. “Are you serious?!” When I nodded, she touched her own belly – *much* more pronounced than mine. “Joia, that's only like two months behind me!”

“Yeah. *Yeah*.” I blew out a breath. “It's... a lot to manage, mentally.”

She nodded. “Uh, *yeah*. The emotions that come with pregnancy are tough enough on their own, but to find out so suddenly, when you're *this* far along... girl...”

“So you feel me then.”

Reese laughed. “Uh, yeah. I do. Have you told the father yet?”

“No.”

Her eyebrows went up. “Are you... going to?”

“Yes. *Yes*, of course,” I insisted. “I’m just not ready to have that conversation with him yet. He can be a lot, and...”

“This is *already* a lot,” Reese finished for me, nodding. “You have time, so don’t sweat it... if you can help it. Your biggest concern right now is your health. Physically and mentally. Take care of yourself, Joia.”

I nodded. “I’m trying. I promise.”

Reese kissed beside my cheek – to not get lipstick on me – and then moved on, leaving me to think about what she’d said. She was seven or eight months along now, and she and Jason were *so* cute together. So happy and in love and *thrilled* to be having a baby, especially after their tragic loss of a pregnancy a while ago.

They’d wanted this.

*Prayed* for this.

And here I was halfway through it by accident, kicking myself about it.

*Shit.*

It wasn’t that I didn’t want children – I *did*. I’d thought about – dreamt about it – with every boyfriend I ever had, and a few I hadn’t. I just never pictured it happening... like this.

“Can we get everybody’s attention,” Toni said over the mic, bringing a bit of order to the crowded venue. “Thank you all so, *so* much for being here, to support Jemma and her new book. I know we’re having a good time partying, but it’s time to sign some names, and before that, Jemma would like to say a few words. Jemma?”

I watched, proud as hell, as Jemma approached the center of the room to take the mic from Toni. Happiness was just

*radiating* off of her, and when she started speaking, you could hear it all in her voice.

“So I’m going to try not to cry,” she started, fanning her face with her hand. “But y’all already know the deal, so I’m just gonna cry and talk, how about that?”

I made sure she was centered in the viewfinder as I pointed my cell phone at her, streaming her speech to my audience. As she spoke, I glanced around the crowd to pinpoint our family – every face I found was beaming with pride.

She’d *done* it.

Something she’d talked about for so long, and finally accomplished, along with everything else. This was working out to be a big year for the Love sisters – Jaclyn graduating from college, Jemma with her book release.

And... me with a baby.

I sucked in a deep breath, fighting back the urge for tears. My reasons were myriad – a mix of pride in my sisters, shared emotion with Jemma who was full blown crying now, and... something else.

Something not-so-pretty.

I was supposed to be pitching an idea to *WAWG Fresh*, which could be a huge opportunity for my career. My sisters and I had been planning a joint trip together, to Bali, at the end of Summer. It was occurring to me now that the trip wouldn’t be happening anymore – not with me at least.

All my little goals, all my plans for the rest of the year... rendered useless.

Pointless.

*Gone.*

As soon as Jemma finished her speech, I made sure I was one of the first people surrounding her for hugs – which meant I could also be one of the first to sneak away. I *hated* feeling like this, like I couldn’t even keep it together long enough to focus on Jem and her big moment, but I... I just needed a fucking break.

So I took it.

I made my way through the store, taking refuge in the quiet and solace of... the children's section. I folded all five feet, nine inches of me down into one of the tiny chairs and stretched out my legs, closing my eyes as I pushed out a deep breath.

And another.

And another.

Until finally, the urge to cry had passed.

For now.

“You practicing already?”

My eyes popped open at the sound of Teddy's voice. I looked up to find him standing in the entrance of the children's section, looking like a wet dream.

Or maybe just mine.

“Practicing what?” I asked, averting my gaze. Teddy had never been afraid of color against his deep brown skin, and tonight was no different – he was in a smoky-purple tracksuit made of sweatshirt material that clung to his strong biceps and stronger thighs and... *goddamn* he looked good.

*You're not supposed to like him, Joia, remember?*

“The mommy thing,” he explained. “Since you're in the kids' section?”

“Oh!” I shook my head. “No, I'm just... taking a moment.”

He scraped his teeth over his lip as he gave me a slow nod. “Aaight. You need anything, or you good?”

I took a chance on looking up, meeting his eyes. “Seriously? Why are you being all... cool? I know you're here for Jemma, but that doesn't mean you have to be nice to me.”

“You're the one who doesn't like *me*, Jo. It was never the other way around.”

“I don’t *dislike* you,” I told him, even though I’d definitely just scolded myself about this exact thing less than thirty seconds ago. I *wanted* to dislike Teddy, and for years, it had been very easy to stay in that mode. With me, there were only three shades to the way I engaged people – black, white, gray. I didn’t fuck with you, I fucked with you, or I was *extremely* neutral.

As an ex, Teddy had been on my “*IDFWU*” list since that fateful day on the yard.

But with so much else on my mind now, I... hell.

I couldn’t find it in myself to keep acting on the “*active hostility*” part of my grudge.

Teddy’s reaction to my claim of *not* disliking him was a cringe of active disbelief, which I couldn’t blame him for, considering our last interaction, in the gym parking lot.

And the one before that, just a few weeks ago, when I’d cursed him out for daring to ask me if I wanted to collaborate on a fitness video tag together.

I could see now where I’d maybe overdone it a little.

“You might be the first woman to ever be *nicer* once the pregnancy jumps off. Baby got your emotions hitting a little different, huh?” he asked, grinning.

Before I could tell him just how much he was pushing it, my stomach spoke up, growling loud as hell to complain about my current lack of dinner.

Teddy’s face pulled into an amused frown. “Damn. You want me to go grab you something?”

“From the catered stuff?” I wrinkled my nose thinking about the way my body had instantly revolted against the table of food as soon as I ventured too close, and shook my head. “Nah. The smells were making me gag.”

He shrugged. “Okay.” Instead of walking away, he came in closer, taking a seat across from me at the table – with his large body, it was even more ridiculous than me folding myself into one of the chairs. “So what do you want instead?”



As soon as I inhaled, I caught another whiff on the BBQ scent clinging to him, and moaned out loud before I could help it.

“Damn,” he said, a smirk spreading over his soft brown lips. “If I’d known a new cologne was all it would take to get you to make that sound, I would’ve pulled this shit out long ago.”

“No it’s not your cologne,” I told him, shaking my head. “It’s something else. Like...charcoal and heaven or something.”

“First of all, charcoal and heaven is real specific,” he said, laughing. “Second, I took a shower, so how are you even still smelling all of that?”

I shrugged. “I guess it’s the pregnancy thing. Got my senses all discombobulated and heightened like I’m fucking Spider-Man or something.”

“Well, pregnancy *is* a very superhero type of process, right? Something grows inside of you for nine months, you push it out through your pussy, and... *bam. Waah, waaah, somebody put a titty in my mouth!* You gone tell me that’s *not* some superhero origin story shit?”

I laughed. “That’s definitely a way to think about it, but I can’t say that’s the specific angle that was on my mind. Really wasn’t thinking about it like that.”

“You have to start thinking about it though,” he said. “You’re not going to have forever before its time to give up your titties, Jo. How long *do* you have, actually?”

I sighed, shaking my head. “I really don’t want to talk about that, actually. I’d much rather talk about where you’ve been that has you smelling like hickory-smoked deliciousness. That’s what I’m trying to hear about.”

“Nah,” Teddy grinned. “You don’t know nothing about this. And you don’t want to know nothing about this. You’re not ready for it. You can’t handle it.”

“Okay, so see *now*, I’m especially intrigued because you’re talking about I can’t handle it, but I’m gonna show you that I

can handle it, if you stop playing, and put me in a position *to* handle it,” I responded, suppressing a grin. We used to have a *lot* of fun with this silly ass cyclic conversation style, back when I was sneaking him into my dorm past curfew to cut up with friends.

He sucked in a slow breath through his teeth. “You think you can handle it? Like *for real?*”

“I know I can handle it! *What?*”

“Okay, okay, aiiight,” he nodded. “I want you to know, I wouldn’t do this for just anybody. But. I’ma put you on. I’ma put you in touch with what’s got me smelling like I’m smelling. Come on. Let’s go.”

So... I went.

Was I hungry?

Hell yes.

Was the smell of BBQ really enough to make me get in the vehicle with Teddy to head to some unknown place?

... also hell yes, apparently.

I didn’t even have to think about it very hard.

Jemma was more than occupied with fans and friends and family, so the likelihood she’d miss me was low, especially with the party heading into hour three. As far as I was concerned, I was free to chase down the scent that had my mouth watering.

*Is this really who I’ve become?*

Not even a week ago I was telling Teddy how I wanted nothing to do with him. Now, I was climbing my pregnant, hungry ass into the passenger seat of his truck – an oversized, chromed-out blue monstrosity that was scarily identical to what he’d described to me as his dream vehicle back when we were dating in college.

I couldn’t believe I remember that.

Honestly though... there was a lot I remembered about Teddy, including the fact that he was always going out of his

way to get me anything I wanted or even needed. I was pretty sure *that* made finding out he hadn't been claiming me as his girl hurt even more.

How was it that when he was in my face, he was the sweetest, most attentive guy in the world, but when I wasn't around, he could act like I meant nothing to him?

When it happened, part of me wanted to overlook it. But then I remembered the advice that my mother had given me and my sisters back when Jemma first started dating, two years before I could even think about it, and Jac wasn't even a teenager.

*“Whatever you overlook now, you'll be overlooking for the rest of your relationship. Maybe for the rest of your life. If it doesn't feel right, don't you dare let that nigga slide, or he'll treat you like his own personal waterpark.”*

So I hadn't let it slide.

Not then, and not anytime after that.

I didn't pay much attention to the music that Teddy started in the truck, opting instead to focus on him – taking him in, in a way I hadn't in so, so long.

The serenity on his face as he leaned back in the soft leather of his seats, completely relaxed as he navigated traffic. The slight flex in his bicep, highlighted by the delicious fit of that sweatshirt as he easily piloted every turn. The soft cursing he did under his breath when one of the other drivers made a stupid decision, the mean-mugging he did when he passed them up, practically daring something to pop off.

*Wow bitch are you really getting turned on by your ex-boyfriend driving?*

*Are you serious right now?*

I looked away from him.

I *had to*, before my hard nipples and damp panties drove me crazy.

My eyes narrowed as I took in our surroundings, noticing that we weren't remotely close to any of the commercial areas

in Blakewood, and were instead cruising through a tree-lined, residential neighborhood.

“Uh... where exactly are you taking me?” I asked, peering out the window as he pulled into one of the driveways.

He smirked. “You said you wanted the BBQ, so... here we are.”

He turned the truck off and climbed out, coming around to my side to open the door for me. As soon as I stepped out, with his hand at my back, the smell of lingering charcoal hit me.

I looked up, meeting his gaze. “This isn’t... you didn’t bring me to your house, did you?”

“Nah, not *my* house,” he said, even though I watched him choose a key from the ring in his pocket and push it into the spot on the door. Strangely, I didn’t feel nervous at all following him into the house once it was unlocked.

Well... I didn’t until he yelled, “*Mama! You still up?*”

My eyes almost bugged out of my head as I gripped his arm. “*Mama?!*” I whisper-yelled. “*Seriously?!* You really brought me to your mother’s house?!”

He shrugged as he pulled me further into a home that looked like something straight from a home-décor magazine, except with definite black touches. Instead of figurines or dishes, the glass-doors cabinets held copies of *Jet* magazine and vinyls from Stax records, and Malcolm X, Martin, Coretta, Michelle, Barack, Beyoncé and Serena Williams had places of honor on the wall of framed pictures, mixed in with everyone else like they were family.

I didn’t get a chance to look as hard as I wanted, due to footsteps on the stairs.

“Lil’ boy I done told you about coming in my house hollering like you don’t have any – sense,” a woman yelled, and I turned to see animal-printed house-shoes and pedicured toes on the way down the staircase. “I’ma knock you upside the—oh! *Oh*. Well... hello.”

There was an instant shift as Teddy's mother made it to the last steps from the bottom – far enough down to see me standing there with him.

“Um... hi,” I said, stepping forward, with my hand extended, because I didn't know what the hell else to do. She was a beautiful woman, with Teddy's deep brown skin and apparently his smile, which she aimed back and forth between me and him.

“Who is *this*, son?” she asked, ignoring my hand to pull me into a hug.

*Damn, does everybody in this family smell good*, I wondered, trying not to be a weirdo by inhaling, but she smelled like sweet potatoes and macaroni and cheese in the *best* damn way. In any case, she hugged like my own mother, who gave amazing hugs, so I melted right into it and hugged her back.

“Mama, this is Joia Love, another influencer here in Blakewood,” Teddy explained. “And... we dated for a while back in college before I messed it up.”

Me *and* his mama looked upside his head like he was crazy.

*Why would he say that to her?*

“Why would you mess up with this pretty brown girl Theodore, I could have some grandbabies by now!”

Mentally, I shot daggers at him, hoping he wouldn't feel the need to tell her I was pregnant – I'd survived one mama-powered interrogation from my own – I wasn't sure I'd make it through another.

“Chill, mama,” he said instead, brushing it off. He did give me this annoying-ass smirk before he turned and started walking to another area of the house though, and of course I followed. “Joia's sister had a book launch party tonight, but the food was wack. I told her I could take her somewhere with some top-tier grub.” He stopped walking, turning to his mother with mischief in his eyes. “I mean... unless you don't really have any extras like that.”

His mother's head reeled back like he'd slapped her. "Excuse me? Boy I know you must be playing." She hooked an arm through mine. "You hungry, baby? Teddy and his daddy put some meat on the grill, and then I've got some yams, greens, cucumber salad, baked beans, potato salad, macaroni and cheese, some black-eyed peas, corn on the cob, some green tomatoes, squash casserole, a pound cake, a pecan pie, a cheesecake, you tell me what you need baby and I'll make you a plate, okay?"

What I... what did I need?

Tell her what I needed?

I... I needed... *all of it*.

My eyes welled with tears at the thought of that plate, and I blinked hard, trying to keep them at bay, because that was... that was... *crazy*, right? I loved good food as much as the next girl, but I'd never been *emotional* about it.

Until today, apparently.

When I couldn't bring myself to speak for fear of bursting into happy tears, Teddy grinned from me to his mother. And then, as if he was reading my mind, he opened his mouth to say what I couldn't.

"She'll take a little of everything."

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## SEVEN

TEDDY

“O hhhh, you got you a bad one there don't you boy,” my father jeered, slapping me on the shoulder as he reached past me to grab a pair of tongs.

Joia was just on the other side of the patio doors, eating in the kitchen while I helped Pops take the rest of the meat off the grill. I wasn't afraid to leave her with my mother – wasn't afraid of the conversation that might happen. My mother wanted grandkids too bad to say anything too embarrassing, for fear of scaring Joia off. I didn't bring women home, so I already knew what was brewing in my mother's head – hell, it was the same thing I was hoping for, honestly. And from her facial expressions, I figured Joia wouldn't say too much either, even if my mother asks her to elaborate on that whole breakup situation I mentioned.

She didn't want to talk about it, and didn't want to encourage anything.

I definitely should *not* have mentioned that Joia and I used to date, but what was done was done now. All I could do was react to the situation as it was. And as it was, I had a feeling that showing Joia some of the best parts of me - by which I meant my parents - would only endear her to me even more.

A plate of my mother's good ass food could endear anyone.

“*Had* a bad one,” I corrected my father, shaking my head.

I couldn’t blame Joia for still being salty about the way things ended between us.

I was stupid.

I was stupid as hell.

But I was also *young* as hell when that shit went bad. That *had* to account for something when it came time for her to consider making us a thing again. And I *definitely* planned on making her consider it.

Bringing her to my parents’ house was a good first step.

“How did you mess that up?” my father asked, turning to me as he closed the grates on the grill to put the fire out.

“The usual stupidity,” I told him, truthfully.

There was no point in fronting about it to my father.

“Must not have been too bad, if she let you bring her out here,” he said, giving me an encouraging nod. “Any woman let you bring her to your mama’s house, that means you still got a chance with her.”

“Well, in fairness, she didn’t exactly know I was bringing her here. So I don’t know how well that applies.”

“She knew you weren’t taking her to the burger joint up the street,” my father laughed. “And she didn’t go running in the other direction when your mama came downstairs in those slippers either.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, I guess that’s a pretty fair point. But I’m saying – I’m just going to take it easy. Take it slow. Not read too much into anything, you know? I messed up with her, so I know that’s going to take some time to get back. To get her to trust me again, after what I did.”

The amusement on my father’s face turned to disapproval. “You weren’t out there sticking your dick where it didn’t belong were you? I know I taught you better than *that*.”

I shook my head. “Nah, wasn’t that. I may have... misrepresented the relationship. Made it seem like less than it



actually was.”

“Ah,” my father nodded. “Trying to keep your ad in the paper after it was already answered, huh?”

“*What,*” I asked. “What does that even mean?”

My father chuckled. “Oh you know what it means. Too much juice in your cup. You thought you was cool enough to have your cake and eat it too. But that girl in there wasn’t like one of the ones you were trying to impress, was she? Found out you weren’t doing right and dropped you, didn’t she?”

I frowned. “How did you know that?”

“Experience, son. Almost lost your mama the same way. Luckily for me- and you too, or you wouldn’t be here - I had enough cool factor to get her back.”

“Cool factor?” I chuckled. “You mean *swag.*”

“Whatever y’all calling it these days, I had it,” my father boasted. “And I had enough of it to get *my* lady back. The question is, do you?”

“Oh I’ve *got* the swag old man, don’t worry about that. It’s just...” I shook my head. “It’s a little more complicated than that with Joia.”

Pops whistled, shaking his head. “Complicated sounds like there’s another nigga in the picture,” he correctly guessed.

*If only you knew.*

“That’s what I thought,” he said. “You want to roll up on him? We can grab Len, grab your Uncle Bobby, and we can go. You know I’m *always* ready.”

“Nah, slow down Pops, that’s not necessary,” I laughed. “No need to roll up on anybody.”

“Okay so then what is your plan? Just being handsome ain’t enough to get the girl no more. You gotta do a lil more than that these days, and you already ain’t got no real job.”

“I *have* a job,” I defended myself. “But honestly... I don’t really have a plan. I just know I want her. All I really can do is be myself and show her that’s valuable.”

My father nodded. “Sounds like a good plan to me, son. Now go on in there and *be valuable*,” he teased. “I got the rest of this.”

Obviously, I took another few minutes to help him finish getting the ribs off, and stowed in the huge aluminum pans set up for that purpose. When he switched to cleaning his tools and stuff though, I did go, hoping that my previous assumption about how my mother and Joia would get along was correct, and I wasn’t walking into anything crazy.

Joia looked up with a smile when I came through the doors that led to the back patio, pausing with another forkful of food halfway up to her mouth.

“*Yo*,” she said. “This *food*. Your mother put her foot in this. Don’t tell my Mama I said that though.”

My mother and I both laughed.

“Don’t worry baby, it’s our little secret,” my mom said, beaming with pride as she got up from the table. “It was nice to meet you Joia, with your pretty brown self.” She turned to me with much less honey than she was throwing Joia’s way. “Teddy don’t you leave this house without cleaning up these dishes you hear me?”

I sighed. “Yes ma’am.”

She gave me the *I’m not playing with you boy* look, then shot Joia one last winning smile before she turned to exit the kitchen, leaving me and Joia alone.

“Tell me something,” Joia spoke. “How do you think your mom would feel about me taking like... a lot of that cheesecake home with me tonight?”

“My mother loves when people love her food, so I think she would be *very* flattered by that,” I told her, grinning. “And she’d probably make me go pull a switch from outside if I let you leave without it. I’ll get you a dish to take it home in.”

“Thank you,” she nodded. “This is all so amazing.” She went quiet for a moment, then looked at me again with a little smile. “Thank you for bringing me here. I needed this.”

I shrugged. “No problem. Whatever you need, I got you.”

For some reason, those words I’d intended as reassuring made the smile melt from her face, and she let out a little sigh. “Why?”

“Why not?”

She huffed. “Seriously, Teddy. Why are you being so nice to me?”

I thought about it for a second, then opted for what my parents had always insisted was the best policy. “Honestly... I’m trying to get back on your good side, Joia. There’s no reason after eight years that we shouldn’t be able to be cool.” The look on her face made me quickly correct myself. “I mean, at least I don’t... think so. I know we broke up because I was stupid but... I was a kid. We were kids, Joia.”

She put her fork down and looked at me. “Yeah Teddy. We *were* kids, that’s true, but... that feels like a cop-out. *You* messed us up, when it could have been *so* different. Why?”

I blew out a deep exhale through my nose. “I know you probably want some deep reason, some good explanation, but honestly... it just is what it is. Very simple. *I fucked up*. And I own that. But that’s all it is. I was just stupid.”

Joia pushed out a deep sigh and shook her head. “Yeah. I’m ready to go home if that’s okay.”

*Shit.*

“Yeah of course,” I told her, knowing there wasn’t anything I could say right now to make it right.

Not *right* now.

Fixing what was broken between us was going to take action, not words.

“Let me hit these dishes real quick, and get this cheesecake for you. And then we’ll go.”

## EIGHT

JOIA.

**Y**ou messed us up, when it could have been so different.

The ride back to my apartment was quiet as hell.

I had no idea what Teddy was thinking about, but *my* thoughts were consumed with that little statement, wondering if *that* was the root of my prolonged anger against him.

I believed him when he said he was just being stupid – it made sense. We were eighteen, nineteen years old. It was prime time for dumb shit, that was just how it went. But... I couldn't help thinking about what could've been.

We could be a decade into this thing by now.

The house, the kids, the YouTube channel featuring our cute ass Black family and pretty praline babies. Maybe a big ass fluffy dog. I hadn't met Teddy's parents before, but now that I had, I knew that I probably would've loved them as in-laws. And my parents would *love* Teddy.

But... it hadn't happened like that.

Because he was stupid.

Emphasis on *was*, since I was fully willing to believe he'd matured – more than just physically – into a grown man. But that didn't change the fact that back when we were together, I'd – perhaps naively – thought we had a future together, that didn't pan out. And us not being together had led to other

experiences – like *Dalton*. Which had led to the position I was in now.

*Very pregnant, in much less than ideal circumstances.*

*When it could've been so different.*

It... probably wasn't fair to put that on him. Nothing that had occurred in *my* life since he and I broke up was his fault – I was responsible for my own decisions, and honestly, I'd done some stupid stuff too. With a child on the way, it really felt silly to even be dwelling on this, and holding grudges. *Especially* when I knew what kinda village raising this child was going to take. I needed all the allies I could get.

Except Dalton.

*Fuck Dalton.*

I pushed out a sigh and closed my eyes, trying to clear any shred of negative thoughts from my mind. It must have worked a little *too* well though, because the next time I opened my eyes, we were in my building's parking lot.

“Wake up baby,” Teddy said, reaching across me to unclip my seatbelt. We were parked, and he was already on my side of the truck to help me out.

“Sorry,” I told him, shaking my head as I accepted his hand to get down from the truck. “I guess I didn't realize how tired I was.”

He smiled as he closed the passenger door. “Long day?”

“You could say that. Filmed a few brand videos, did some editing, took some promo shots. Read a bunch of pregnancy stuff, then it was time to get ready for Jemma's party, and Dalton came by.”

Teddy grunted. “*That motherfucker.*”

“Trust me, I feel the same way,” I laughed. “But I got rid of him, finished getting ready for the party, *went* to the party, then... got whisked away.”

He grinned at me as he pulled the front door to the building open, after I'd used my keycard to disengage the

lock. “I like that phrasing, *whisked away*. Makes me sound like your knight in shining armor.”

“Well...” I raised an eyebrow at him. “Isn’t that what you call yourself trying to suddenly be?”

“Just making sure you noticed,” he quipped, pressing the call button for the elevator.

I smirked. “Uh, yeah, I noticed. But I hope I don’t get whiplash from this drastic change. You weren’t trying to be in my face like this before.”

“You weren’t having a baby before.”

My cheeks grew hot as he stared at me, waiting for a response. But luckily, the elevator arrived, providing an escape.

A *momentary* escape, since he followed me into the elevator.

I pressed the button for my floor and kept my eyes straight ahead, trying to pretend I didn’t feel Teddy staring at me. Once we arrived, I hurried off, anxious to get out of the enclosed space.

“I’m not trying to freak you out,” he called after me. My footsteps stilled, and I waited for him to catch up. He rounded in front of me, taking me by the elbows. “I just...” he shook his head. “I don’t want you thinking Dalton is your only option.”

I frowned. “*What?*”

“With the baby,” he explained, bringing a lump to my throat. “That nigga can go on about his business, dance off the side of a building for all *I* give a fuck. You don’t need him. I got you.”

A smile crept onto my lips as I met Teddy’s gaze – there was *so much* sincerity in his eyes. “That’s really how you feel?” I asked.

He nodded. “*Hell* yes. No doubt.”

“Okay Teddy.” I returned his nod and looked away, trying not to give away too much of what I was feeling. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Hey, that’s all I can hope for. For now,” Teddy said as we finished making our way to my front door... which there really hadn’t been a need for him to walk me to.

I turned to him at the door, giving him the eye, waiting for him to say something. When he didn’t, I spoke up myself. “Why did you walk me all the way here?”

“Honestly?” he glanced up and down the hall, then moved in a little closer, tipping his head to the side. “I was hoping the vibe would turn in my favor just enough that I would get a chance to kiss you.”

My head reeled back. “Kiss me!?” I shook my head. “Teddy... We got along with each other for a few hours, and you’re already trying to make your way around the bases? You don’t think that’s moving kind of fast?”

He shrugged. “Nah. As a matter of fact, I feel like it’s kind of slow,” he admitted. “I’m looking at you right now like, *damn you really let eight years pass without trying to make that happen again? Nigga you stupid, you better get on that.*”

I smiled. “Yeah... it doesn’t exactly work like that.”

“Why not?”

“Because it just *doesn’t*.”

“But it could,” he insisted. “The way I see it, you and I are a done deal. Meant to be. This time apart was a setback. I want you; you want me... let’s make it happen, you know?”

“No, I *don’t* know,” I laughed. “You don’t get to just decide that I—*mmm*.”

Apparently, he *did* get to decide that we were starting something up again.

At least, that was the impression that I got from him grabbing either side of my face and luring his mouth to mine, pressing a kiss on me that took my breath away. I surprised

myself by not pulling back - I gave right into it, melting against his body as his tongue lapped against mine.

It felt natural.

It felt *familiar*.

Instantly, my body recognized and responded to the familiarity of Teddy's tongue in my mouth. My nipples were hard, panties wet all over again as he massaged his tongue with mine, pulling back to take little nibbles against my bottom lip, soothing them with his tongue before he dove in again.

A little gasp escaped my throat as he backed me into the wall in the hallway, his large body swamping mine as he devoured me with that kiss. His big hands went to my waist, gripping and pulling me against him, the impression of his hard dick against my stomach leaving no room for me to wonder exactly how he was feeling.

It was just my luck that the feeling was mutual.

I'd been feeling it before we left Jemma's party. Hell, from the moment I laid eyes on him in that *damn* purple. At this point, I wasn't sure if I could blame it on the pregnancy hormones. That extreme horniness that I'd heard about, it didn't seem like that usually kicked in until the *third* trimester.

I hadn't quite reached that milestone yet.

Nah, this was all Teddy and his fineness.

All *me*.

All my suppressed attraction to him, all my suppressed feelings for him, all my suppressed memories of how good we were together flooded back as he kissed me like I already belonged to him again. And I really couldn't front...I wasn't about to be the one to correct it.

Not when I was fully ready and fully willing to let him do a lot more than *kiss* me.

"I need to get my keys out," I told him, my hands shaking as I fumbled with my bag.



His eyes were low and shadowed, filled with lust as he stepped back, giving me some space. “Is that an invitation inside?”

“Do you really need to ask.”

Teddy blew out a sigh, shaking his head as he scrubbed his fingers through his thick hair. “Honestly, yeah I do. As much as I’m on my *fuck Dalton this, fuck Dalton that*, I really need you to be sure that you want to do what I think you’re saying we’re about to do. Niggas get real protective about the mother of their children, and I just want to make sure that I’m not creating a problem for you.”

I shook my head as my fingers closed around my keys. “Trust me. This isn’t going to be a problem at all.”

Those words seem to be enough for him.

Any hesitation he had quickly melted away as he approached me again, grabbing me by the waist to plant another one of those deep, slow, panty-wetting kisses on me. He pulled back just enough that his lips brushed mine as he spoke.

“Open the goddamn door then, Joia.”

I really didn’t have to be told twice.

He was on me as soon as the door closed behind us, barely giving me time to lock it before he had me pushed against the wall again.

I gasped as he hefted me up, hiking my legs around his waist as he kissed me. I barely had time to breathe, time to think, before his hands were underneath my shirt, underneath my bra, cupping my throbbing breasts. The pads of his fingers skimmed across my sensitive nipples making my back arch away from the wall from just that simple simulation.

It had been *so* long since I’d been touched by anybody else, it damn near seemed like just that was enough to make me come.

But of course, that wasn’t all he had for me.

“*Holy shit,*” I breathed, as he dropped his mouth to my neck, sucking and biting that sensitive area. Somehow, he remembered exactly the right spot, exactly the right pressure, exactly how much to give me - benefits of having been the one to discover that spot in the first place. I whimpered as he bit down harder, and chuckled against my skin.

He knew *exactly* what he was doing to me.

Just like that plate of his mother’s food, I didn’t know how much I needed this until it was happening. My hands dug into the soft coils of his short, faded fro, gripping to guide his head lower as he easily undid the buttons of my shirt. He pulled me forward off the wall, using one strong arm under my ass to hold me up. He used the other to pull my shirt off and toss it away. Seconds later, he’d unclipped my bra and tossed it away with the shirt, leaving my ultra-sensitive nipples exposed to him.

“These are definitely not what I remember,” he teased.

I wanted to scold him for his playful mocking about my swollen breasts, but before I could, he closed his mouth over one of my nipples, sucking and biting until a high, keening moan left my throat. I gripped his hair even harder as he went on like that. Torturing me with pleasure until my nipples were even harder than before - stiff, sensitive peaks that he teased with his thumb, teased with his tongue, teased with his whole mouth, covering me and sucking hard.

I couldn’t stay still.

Couldn’t stop *squirming*.

And the fact that he hadn’t pressed me against the wall again, instead using pure strength to keep me up... for some reason, that turned me on even more.

Teddy’s size had always been part of his appeal, but we were grown now. Back then, as kids, we both had limited sexual experience. Now, I knew exactly what the benefits of his size could be, and I fully intended on taking advantage of every single one.

Visions of vertical fucking danced in my head.

“Bedroom,” I said. One simple command that Teddy immediately responded to, his mouth full of my breast as he nodded and turned to head in that direction. With Dalton, I never would have been in his arms like this, first of all. He would have acted like it was the biggest burden in the world, carrying me to my bed to engage in sex. “*I can’t risk injuring anything*,” he would have whined. True enough, I was a tall girl, with plenty of muscle on me. But I wasn’t heavy like that for him to be concerned. His ass was just a fucking baby.

With Teddy... it was no problem.

He didn’t hesitate at all to take me to my room, eager to get to the treasure that waited for him there. At first, he accidentally turned into my guest bedroom, but it only took a quick moment of redirection to get him to the right place. Once we were there... it was on.

He laid me across the bed, pulling my shoes off first and then heading for the button and zipper on my jeans. He deftly undid them, then slid the jeans down my legs and tossed them away, just like he’d done with my shirt and bra.

But then he stopped.

Staring.

Staring, at my stomach.

“Wow,” he murmured. “You’re like... for real having a baby,” he mused, reaching to touch my stomach. I expected to recoil at his touch, expected it to feel foreign and unnatural and uncomfortable.

Instead, it felt a little *too* comfortable.

So, I redirected his attention.

I grabbed the back of his hand, pushing it up past my belly, up towards my breasts, prompting him into action – to lower himself on top of me.

“Wait,” I laughed. “Am I going to be the only one naked here?”

Teddy chuckled too, shaking his head. “Nah. There’s just something else I gotta tend to real quick first.”

I quickly found out what that *something* was.

He kissed his way back down my body, not lingering at my belly, which I'd hoped that he wouldn't. No, he went straight for my panties, pulling them down my thighs and tossing them in the same general direction as my jeans before he spread my legs apart and dove straight between them, headfirst.

"*Holy shit,*" rushed from my lips, again, as his mouth made contact with my sensitive flesh. Not that Teddy had ever been afraid of, or stingy about having his head between my legs, but the years had certainly imparted some fresh wisdom, because I didn't remember it being like *this*. In next to no time, he had me gripping my light comforter tight, back arching away from the bed as I hollered.

His strong fingers gripped my thighs, keeping my legs pulled apart, keeping me open for him as he devoured me, his tongue licking and lapping, playing and teasing and *taunting* me with every swipe. He put his whole face into it, not grudging or prude at all - he was *all* the way into it, sucking and licking me clean like I was a plate with the last piece of pecan pie.

My head fell back, mouth open, panting and whimpering as his tongue moved, offering a steady onslaught until the pressure in my core built, and built, and built, past the point of keeping it contained.

I couldn't do anything except cum all over his face.

I was still panting when he moved back, lip between his teeth, as he looked at me -he was obviously *very* pleased with his performance.

Hell, so was I.

I sat up on my elbows to finish catching my breath as he stepped back from the bed to get undressed.

"Wait, hold up," he said, holding a finger up to me as he pulled his cell phone from his pocket, while he used his free hand to wipe some of my juices from his beard. I frowned as I watched him, wondering what was going on. I hoped like hell he wasn't about to return a text, or respond to any type of

social media notification while I was laying there, spread eagle across my bed, completely naked, waiting for him.

I rolled my eyes when Ginuwine's "Pony" started up, blaring from the speakers of his phone.

"Teddy," I said. "I know for a *fact* that you are not about to..."

Oh.

Yes, he was.

And... I couldn't lie to myself – Teddy looked pretty damn good hiking up the front of his sweatshirt to show me his solid midsection as he ground his hips to the music.

"*Whooo!*" I yelled at him, clapping as he pulled the sweatshirt the rest of the way off, winding it over his head like a helicopter. His expression was completely serious as the chorus started, and he let the sweatshirt go, sending it flying in my direction to smack me across the face.

"You are *such* a goddamn fool," I laughed, as he turned around and started rocking his ass at me.

And *what an ass* it was.

Teddy had *cake* in the best possible way, and he knew how to move it. Despite my general disdain for male strippers as a profession and community, I was enjoying the hell out of Teddy's performance - especially once he toed his way out of his shoes and then got rid of those sweatpants and boxers to get fully naked.

A *glorious* sight.

There was just something about a big, wide, motherfucker who looked like he could build me a house that just... turned me on. And Teddy had *exactly* that type of vibe. He'd lost the softness his body held back when I remembered it from before. His consistency in the gym had replaced it with solid grown man weight that looked good as hell on him.

That I couldn't wait to have against me again.

And his dick - my *God had I shrunk it in my memory since I was mad at him?* Cause I definitely didn't remember it being like *that*, but I was ready for it now. I lifted a hand, making a hooking motion at him with my finger. He obliged, climbing back on top of me on the bed.

"Yeah, you liked that shit, huh," he nodded, cocky as hell as he pushed me back.

"I really can't stand you for the fact that you did it, but... I actually *did*," I admitted.

He grinned and lowered his mouth to mine, kissing me again as he reached a hand between us to spread my legs apart.

"Hold up," he said, meeting my gaze. "Protection?"

I let out a laugh. "Kinda already knocked up," I reminded him. "And if I was concerned about anything else, I wouldn't be having sex with you at all."

He nodded "Okay, so we're on the same page. Last chance to back out... you sure you want to do this?" he asked, his voice suddenly all husky and sexy and filled with lust, just like his eyes.

"Teddy," I whispered, planting my hands on either side of his ass. "Stop playing with me." I squeezed.

Then he buried himself in me.

We both let out a low, guttural, "*Fuuuuck*," at the same time.

Logically, I understood that Teddy was hung like a horse - I'd literally *just* seen it.

But still, somehow, I hadn't expected the way he stretched me to feel quite so good, hadn't expected his length to fill me so deeply. Hadn't expected it to feel like *exactly* what I had been missing - exactly what I had *needed* for so damn long.

I dug my nails into his firm ass cheeks as he started moving, building up a rhythm that had me whimpering in no time. It was beyond good - it was perfection. The kind of perfection that came from a man who knew your body, knew exactly what angles to come at you from, knew exactly what

spot to hit, knew exactly how deep he had to go to get you right where he wanted you to be.

And where he wanted you to be, was deep in the throes of pleasure.

“You feel so fucking good,” he growled at me, his gaze locked with mine until he decided he had a better use for his mouth. He brought his lips back to my neck, back to that sweet spot that only he seemed to know about, sucking and biting me there as he stroked me deep and hard.

Yes.

*Hell yes.*

*Just like that,* I thought, but didn't verbalize.

I didn't have to.

Teddy knew exactly what he was doing - giving me the best dick I'd had in a long, long time. My body was screaming with pleasure, and so was my mouth - unable to hold back anything I was feeling about what he was giving to me.

And he was giving it all.

He hooked my legs around his midsection as he buried himself deeper, drove harder, stroked me faster, and faster, and faster, until my thighs were shaking around his waist.

Yes.

*Hell yes.*

I could feel the flexion, feel the tightening of the muscles in his ass that let me know he was getting near his own orgasm, but I knew Teddy well enough to know - he wouldn't take his before he'd given mine.

He pulled out of me, and I wanted to complain about the sudden emptiness from the absence of his dick between my legs, but I didn't have time before his mouth was on me again. Sucking and licking with a vengeance. He covered me with his whole mouth, slurping and licking as he buried his face deeper, and deeper, until I was right at that peak.

And then he buried his dick in me again.

Deeper this time, somehow.

Faster, longer, more intense strokes that had me gripping his ass, gripping the sheets, gripping my breasts, gripping my hair, looking for anything to hold onto, anything to keep me tethered to reality, since he was clearly trying to drive me out of it.

Trying to drive me out of my mind.

And then it hit me.

Like a sonic-fucking-boom, setting off static in my ears, making my vision blurry, making it hard to breathe, hard to think, hard to do anything except *feel* the pleasure of him buried deep inside me.

My pussy was still throbbing, body still contracting, trying to pull him deeper, trying to get more of him, when he came with the growl of his own. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, holding onto him tight as my body milked his release from him, taking it all in.

*“Holy shit,”* I whispered again.

“Yeah,” Teddy grunted in my ear, as he fell to the bed beside me.

He hooked this arm across my chest to pull me in closer to him, and I didn’t have any complaints about that at all. Instead of wondering how I could convince him to leave, I settled into his body, enjoying the feeling of his heat and the scent of his cologne.

And the lingering scent of that damn charcoal.

*This whole thing was the ribs’ fault to be honest.*

As much as I hated to admit it, being in this bed with Teddy... just felt right.

Which kind of made me mad all over again.

Because this whole thing could have been *so* different.

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## NINE

JOIA.

“**S**omebody got some dick last night, somebody like some dick last night.”

I was pulled from good, deep sleep to find Jemma in my face, wearing a bigger grin than she had last night for her party. I groaned, then rolled over, not quite yet interested in what she was saying to me, but she grabbed my shoulder, pulling me back in her direction.

“No ma’am,” she said. “We’re going to talk about this. I’ve let your ass sleep in all late. It’s already ten in the morning now, and it’s time to talk about it.”

“Talk about *what*, Jemma? Wait. Did you say it was ten in the morning?”

“Yeah. I guess good dick will do that for you - have you all discombobulated, not even knowing what time it is.”

“Could you stop?” I asked. “Where are you even getting this information from?”

She smirked. “Oh my information is from the very reliable source of my own eyes. When I brought your car back – thanks for letting me use it yesterday by the way - to your building at about 2:00 this morning... I saw somebody sneaking out of here. I mean, as if he could sneak, like nobody was gonna see his big ass wearing all that purple.”

Internally, I groaned.

“Ohhh, what is his *name*,” Jemma continued. “Oh yeah - Theodore Graham is his name. Yeah. Him. I saw him sneaking out to the parking lot. And then I get up here and *what’s* all up and through the atmosphere? Certainly *not* the Holy Spirit.”

“Jemma, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, Joia. I know you’re on your extra sensitive, secret squirrel shit because of the pregnancy. But let’s *not* pretend like I don’t know you very *very* well. I saw you sneak out of the party with Teddy. What else would you have been doing other than riding that man like the big ass thoroughbred he is?”

“For your information, he took me to his mother’s house to eat. Since all you had was that nasty food at your party,” I jabbed, desperate to re-route the conversation.

“Oh girl *please*,” Jemma laughed, not taking the bait. “Sure maybe he did take you to his mother’s house to eat. But when he brought you back *here*? I guarantee there was something else on the menu. Pregnant coochie.”

“*Jemma*, please!”

“Ain’t nobody lying on you! But as I said, I know you extra sensitive these days.”

“I just would like to not have assumptions made about me.”

“It’s not an assumption,” she corrected, flipping her hair over her shoulder. “It’s an educated guess. Based on finding the bra you were wearing last night in the living room. Or are you suddenly not a neat freak anymore either?”

*Shit.*

*No more denying it now.*

“Okay fine, so I got some. What’s wrong with that?”

She shook her head. “Absolutely nothing. I’m hoping it lightens your ass up some.”

“Are you saying I’ve been uptight?”

“Do you think you haven’t?” Jaclyn asked as she breezed through the door of my bedroom too, stopping beside Jemma.

Great.

“So the whole family is available for my sleep in of shame?”

“The only person shaming you is *you*.” Jaclyn said.

“Right,” Jemma agreed. “Teddy is fine as hell, and I thoroughly support you getting that old thang back.”

“That shit is definitely going on their wedding program,” Jac laughed. “Please join us for a beautiful ceremony as we celebrate Joia Love and Theodore Graham getting that old thang back.”

“I hate y’all so much.”

“No you don’t,” Jemma laughed. “You know you love us. Now get up so you can get ready. Mommy is cooking today, and she wants us all over there.”

“No can do,” I said, sitting up in bed. “I’ve got to get to the gym first. And then I’ll get ready and come by. But I can’t miss a day.”

Jac. “Girl, you’re only *barely* showing. You still hold your *Miss Fit Bitch* title. Give that baby some breathing room.”

“It’s not about that,” I snapped. “I don’t care about a damn title. I just need some normalcy. *Something* in my life that can stay like it’s been, and my gym schedule seems to be one of the few things I can control. So it is what it is.”

Jac and Jem exchanged a look, and then Jac sat down at the end of the bed.

“Jo, you know we’re just messing with you, right?” she asked. “You *have* been off since finding out that you were pregnant, understandably. I can’t even say that I get it, because I don’t. I can’t imagine what you’re going through... how scared you must be, how confused you must be. But seriously... you know we got you, right?”

I pushed out a deep sigh. “Yes, I do. Devyn says the baby is perfectly fine. I know I have you guys as support. I know that when it really comes down to it, everything is going to be fine. But it’s like...*still*. I just feel numb or something. Like I barely believe it’s happening.”

“Probably because you haven’t talked to anybody about it,” Jemma said, joining me and Jac on the bed. “You can’t just wear this burden by yourself. I know how your mind works. You *need* to talk to somebody about it.”

I nodded. “I know, I just... I haven’t talked to the father yet. And I don’t feel like it’s right to talk about it with anybody else, when I haven’t talked to him yet.”

“Okay, so when are you going to talk to him?” Jacqueline asked.

“I don’t know. I feel like I need to have my thoughts together before I have this conversation with him, because I have no idea how it’s going to go. I have no idea how he’s going to react. I have no idea if we’re going to be able to get along for any type of co-parenting setup. It’s all just confusing.”

“You do see how circular that is,” Jemma asked. “You want to talk to him about it, before you can talk to anyone else to put your thoughts together. But you don’t want to talk to anyone else to help put your thoughts together, until you talk to him. You’re going to drive yourself nuts Jo.”

“I know,” I whined. “But I really do not know what to do.”

“I can tell you what to do,” Jac said. “First, you go to the gym and sweat it out. Then you shower that off of you, and come to the house and let Mommy and Daddy get on your nerves. Then, when you’ve got yourself a full stomach, and you’ve worked off your stress at the gym, and you come back home and get yourself some wine... well, wait, no wine. Hell, kombucha or whatever it is you drink to relax. And you call him. You talk to him. You *tell* him. And you get this off of your chest, so you can move on without the stress. So you can focus on being a mommy.”

I blew out a heavy sigh, and let myself fall back onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling. “Yeah. You’re right. I can’t just keep pretending this isn’t happening.”

“Nope,” Jemma said, patting me on the thigh. “You sure can’t. So come on, get up. Let’s get you off to the gym.”

“*Joia! Joia! Wait up!*”

Reluctantly, I slowed my steps.

There was no part of me that wanted to actually wait up, after the way I’d just worn myself out in the gym. I was already regretting my decision not to use a rideshare to get there in the first place. I’d driven, which meant I had to drive back.

This was the shit nobody told you about making financially responsible decisions.

I didn’t recognize the voice that had called out to me, which meant it was more than likely a social media follower. As soon as I turned around, that suspicion was confirmed, as a trio of young women walked up to me beaming, cell phones already out.

“Hi guys,” I said, pulling up as much cheerfulness as I could, even though I was exhausted, and all I wanted to do was get home and take the shower I’d opted not to take there at the gym. I was hot, my clothes were sweaty, and my breakfast had worn off about halfway through the workout.

I really wasn’t in a mood to be “on brand”, but that didn’t matter.

People like these - who liked me, who watched my videos, who clicked my links, who hit the subscribe button on my channel, they were the ones who basically paid my bills, by giving me an engaged audience.

If they wanted Joia Love, they were gonna get her.

“I told you it was her,” one of them said, as they stopped in front of me.

One of the other girls shrugged it off. “Oh my God, you’re *so* pretty in person. You’re not even wearing any makeup right now, are you?”

I shook my head. “No, thank you!” I said. “That’s really sweet of you to say, and I appreciate it, because I *certainly* don’t feel that pretty right now.”

We all shared the laugh about that.

“We saw you working out, but didn’t want to interrupt,” the one who hasn’t said anything yet spoke up. “It seemed like you were going really hard to be pregnant.”

*Seriously?*

“Well, since I was already super active before, my doctor suggests that it’s not something I should change. The best thing I can do for the baby and for my body, is to keep my same activity level, without overdoing it.”

“Yeah, I just don’t understand why you would want to take a risk like that. It just seems so much safer to take a break.”

*Girl, if you don’t get the fuck out of my face...*”

I forced that smile to remain on my face. “I totally appreciate your concern, but I think I’m just going to follow the advice of my doctor, and trust that she wouldn’t steer me wrong.”

“Ashley, could you not?” The girl who’d initially call out my name scolded her friend. “You don’t remember she did a video with her doctor right before Christmas? I’m sure she knows what she’s doing.”

I was getting ready to thank *this* girl for her wise counsel to her friend, but then she reached out a hand, aiming it directly for my stomach - which was currently obscured under my flowy workout tank. Instantly, I jumped back, avoiding her touch.

“Whoa,” I said. “I would really prefer that we *didn’t* do that,” I told her, making sure to keep my tone light, even though I couldn’t believe her nerve.

She wrinkled her nose. “*Oh*. Sorry. I was just trying to see if you had a baby bump yet. You haven’t mentioned it at all on your channel, or on Instagram or anything. I mean... we want to know what’s going on. How far along are you? How are you feeling? Who’s the father?”

I shook my head, still keeping that smile on my face even though it was about as far opposite of how I felt as you could get. “I totally understand the curiosity guys, but I really would prefer to keep those things private for now. As soon as I’m comfortable, I’ll do an update or something,” I promised.

The pregnancy expert, Ashley, frowned. “That’s funny. You took a pregnancy test on a live stream and found out you were having a kid in front of everybody. *Now* you want to be private? Girl, bye.”

I, quite literally, had to bite my tongue to keep the *fuck you* from rolling off.

“Okay, that’s my time,” I said instead, turning to walk to my car. “You ladies have a wonderful rest of your day, okay?”

I *had* to get out of there before I said something ugly.

Not out of character.

Just ugly.

“These influencer bitches are always so rude,” one of them said as I walked off.

My fists clenched, and instant heat rose to my face, but I forced myself to keep walking instead of turning around to address that comment. Ten times out of nine, it would end up all across social media, and of course I would be presented as the one in the wrong, as the aggressor.

It wasn’t even worth the frustration.

As much as I loved my career, loved working for myself, loved being able to create, loved being able to relate and talk to people, and suggest things that I knew worked, etc, this was the worst thing about it. Every time I was out in public, I had to be on guard instead of being able to just live my life like a regular person.

Most people were respectful enough to engage you like you were human, just like them. Those were the people that kept me going, and kept me doing this. There had been times where something that I suggested completely changed someone's life for the better. There were times when a passing mention of, "*hey make sure you study today*", or "*make sure you drink plenty of water*" etc, was just the push someone needed to make better choices for the day. Or times when seeing me plan my meals got someone to plan theirs. Or seeing me doing my workout at the gym inspired someone to put their own plan into action.

Or even something as simple as the live stream, which I rarely did with any sort of rhyme or reason or script or plan, just spending that time with the people who followed me, talking to them and engaging... it mattered a lot to them, and it mattered a lot to me.

But then people like *this*, who treated you like you were their own personal entertainment, or some puppet for them to pull strings as they wished. I couldn't wait to see how this interaction with going to be spun into something *I* had done wrong.

I didn't have to wait long.

I was barely out of the shower before my phone was going crazy with notifications, and as expected, the commentary was ridiculous. Of course there was no video evidence of the interaction, because the video wouldn't have supported those women's claim that I was rude and aggressive with them, that I'd smack that girl's hand away from my belly, or that I'd snapped at *anyone*, after giving me "useful" advice for my pregnancy.

*I always knew something was off about her.*

*You can tell she doesn't even want to be pregnant. She's probably trying to kill that baby at the gym. Can't tell me any different.*

*These influencer chicks always think they're more important than they are.*



*Nobody cares about her ass being pregnant. She's not talking about it because she wants people to ask. Wack ass bitch.*

It went on and on like that, and those were just the ones people actually *tagged* me in, bold as hell from the other side of a computer screen. Against my better judgment, I composed a message of my own, and hit send.

***“Had no idea that stepping away from a complete stranger trying to touch my stomach, or assuring someone that I was under guidance from a medical professional, could be construed as rude or aggressive. But here we are. #NoteTaken.”***

I knew better than to hit send.

I *knew* better than to hit send.

But I couldn't help it.

This mess was ridiculous.

And no sooner than I sent it, was there a new flurry of information of commentary going around, based on my singular message in my own defense.

*These influencers get on here and get so bold with the ranting.*

*She ought to be ashamed of herself for even commenting on it, encouraging people to bully those girls - don't you have something better to do? RAISE YOUR BABY, BITCH.*

*You know she sits around searching her name, don't you? She should know better with a follower count like that, not to even comment on it, because you know her fans are going to go after those girls now. This is another form of bullying if you ask me.*

Wait.

So... people could lie on me and say whatever they wanted to say, and that part was totally fine. But when I spoke up or defended myself, suddenly *I* was the bully in the situation? *I* was the one in the wrong?

Yeah.

*Time for me to get off social media now.*

I muted my notifications from all social media apps, across the board. I put the phone down and got up, focusing instead on getting dressed to go spend time with my family.

It was a *much* better use of my time.

“Well, would you at least tell me *when* I’m going to be a grandma,” Mama demanded more than asked of me from across the table.

*So much for a better use of my time.*

The whole time I’d been at their house, I’d been fielding questions, even after I made it clear I didn’t want to answer. But they were my parents, and if they want to ask me questions while I was in their house, they could ask me questions while I was in their house.

But there were certain things that I just honestly wasn’t ready to answer, and wouldn’t.

Especially considering that I was almost thirty, did not live with them, and paid my own bills.

At this point though... I was just tired.

“In about 4 months if all goes well,” I said, then put another forkful of food in my mouth.

That little admission set off a bomb blast of quiet around the table, and then an aftershock of what I can only describe as chaos.

“*Four months, meaning you’re five months pregnant right now?!*”

“*Wait a minute if you’re five months now, that means...*”

“*Yep, that baby was conceived around New Years.*”

“*And for New Years, Joia was in Vegas!*”

“Welp,” my father spoke up, chuckling his ass off. “You did Vegas all wrong, didn’t you? What happened in Vegas followed you home!”

“Go ahead and get all your laughing in,” I said shaking my head as I forked another mouthful of my mother’s bomb ass chicken and dumplings. “You were going to find out soon enough anyway.”

“Yeah, when you had this baby two or three months earlier than any of us were expecting!” Mama exclaimed. “You don’t even have a baby bump or anything yet!”

“That’s because she has abs,” Jaclyn said, laughing. “They’re holding back the floodgates right now.”

“She’s actually right,” I admitted. “Basically, my steadily swelling uterus is going to *rip* my abdominal muscles apart in about a month or so, tops, to accommodate the baby. So that is going to be an absolute *blast* to rehab. Just so much fun.”

“Awww, JoJo!” Jemma said, reaching over to rub my back. “You’ll still be fine. We’ll still call you Miss Fit Bitch right up to delivery when you’re all swollen and gross, okay?”

I rolled my eyes and laughed about that. “Thank you, so much. I appreciate it.”

“Well, it has been real as always, my beautiful family,” Jemma said, “but your girl has a flight to catch.”

“Where you off to this time baby?” my father asked.

“Just New York,” Jemma answered. “Moving on with book tour dates.”

“What happened to the trip you were supposed to be taking with your sisters?” Mama asked.

Once again, the table went quiet, as everybody turned to look at me.

“Well, we didn’t think that Joia would really be up for the travel this summer, so we figured we’d postpone it for now,” Jemma said, with a glance at Jaclyn.

“Yeah,” Jac agreed, nodding. “We’d rather wait than do it without her. You guys are going to babysit for her while we go live it up after she drops this baby, right?”

“Hell yes,” my mother said. “Joia, you don’t ever hesitate to bring my grandbaby to me, you hear me?”

I laughed.” Of course, Mama. I already know.”

“Jac is dropping me off for my flight this time,” Jemma said. “You coming with?” she asked me.

I shook my head. “No, not this time. I’m pretty tired. Probably going to head home and get some rest. I really, *really* need to get some work done tomorrow.”

“But we’re ignoring that bullshit on social media, right?” Jac asked. “Cause I’m really ready to get tagged in. Hell... ready to find those bitches to be honest, but I’m being cool.”

“Yes, please be cool, and stay out of trouble so you can enjoy your degree and your new man,” I urged, laughing. “I’m going to ignore it all, I swear.”

Since Jemma and Jaclyn were leaving, the next few minutes were absorbed with goodbyes. We were used to seeing Jem off for her travels at this point and so it wasn’t necessarily a big deal, but just in case, we always made sure to love on her before she caught a new flight. Once they were gone, my father made his way to his den for his usual *fall asleep in front of WAWG sports* session.

Which left my mother and me alone to clear the table, put away the extra food, and do all the dishes. But I didn’t mind.

For a while, we were quietly working, which I knew meant something was brewing. Quiet was not particularly high on my mother’s long list of virtues.

It took a while, but as we were drying the last of the dishes, after a little bit of small talk here and there, she finally turned to me, dish towel in hand and tears in her eyes.

“You don’t seem excited about this baby, Joia,” she said, meeting my gaze.

I opened my mouth to respond to that, but she held up in hand, shushing me.

“I understand it’s a lot to take in unexpectedly,” she said. “I understand it even more now that you finally told us how far along you are. I am *not* scolding you about this, Jo. I know you’re probably scared, and confused, and frustrated right now, and those feelings are overwhelming your room for anything else. I *know* you’re going to *love* this baby. I know your excitement will come. But in the meantime, I just want you to know...” She reached out to grab my hands, squeezing them between hers as a broad smile spread over her face. “*I’m* excited. My *first* grandbaby! You have no idea how happy I am about this.”

I smiled back. “I’m not going to lie to you Mama... I really want to say, that makes one of us. But I *can’t* say that, because I’m really not sure *how* I feel. I don’t necessarily hate the idea of being pregnant, and you know I’ve always wanted kids. I’ve always wanted a family. I just really did not imagine it happening like this.”

My mother nodded. “Of course you didn’t. But this is how it happened. You’ve got to come to terms with that, sweetheart.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I know. And I will.”

“Oh I know you will,” my mother said in her usual wise owl tone, turning back to the last of the wet dishes. “So, Vegas, huh?”

“No, I am not pregnant by some stranger that I met in Vegas.”

“I didn’t think you were,” she said. “That would be way too simple for you.”

“You know... you might be right. If it was someone I barely knew, it honestly might make this easier. It would eliminate a good 50% of the concerns on my mind.”

“Uh-huh. Cuz now you got to make it work with...?” My mother let that trail off, obviously waiting for me to fill in the blank, but I shook my head.

“I haven’t talked to him yet. So I really don’t want to put it out there.”

“Can you at least tell me if he’s willing to step up and do the right thing?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I am pretty sure he is going to make his presence *very* apparent, whether I want him to or not.”

My mother shrugged. “Well in that case, the only thing left is for you to have that conversation.”

“Yes, I know. I talked about it this morning with Jem and Jac,” I told her.

“Okay, so when are you going to do it?” she asked, putting her towel down and giving me her full attention as she looked me right in the eyes.

I let out a sigh. “Tonight. I’m going to make that call.”

I *did* make a call, but it definitely wasn’t about the baby.

The call I made was to get Teddy back to my apartment - back into my bed.

So, the time I was supposed to be spending having a heart-to-heart with the father of my child, was actually spent attempting to ride my college boyfriend off into the sunset.

“Damn,” he breathed grabbing my hips to slow me down. “Did you drink a red bull before I stopped by or something?”

“No,” I laughed, anchoring my feet on either side of his powerful thighs, and digging my toes into the mattress. I used my hands against his chest for balance as I rode him harder. “Are you complaining?” I asked, halfway breathless.

He shook his head. “*Hell no.*”

“Good. Shut up then.”

He did.

Well, mostly.

From there, he had nothing but grunts, groans, and moans of pleasure and encouragement as I bounced on him, working my hips in circles, giving it all I had, until we were both wrung out and empty.

I spread myself out on the bed beside him, panting and staring up at the ceiling until my body had finally calmed.

“So is this our new dynamic now?” Teddy asked, turning on his side to look at me. “Exes with benefits?”

Shaking my head, I kept my gaze pointed upward instead of looking at him. This really hadn't been in my plans for the day, but as the day wore on, the need for release had only grown stronger. The idea of doing it myself, while convenient and drama-free, just didn't seem quite as appetizing as it had before Jemma's party.

My eyelids slammed open wide as the weirdest sensation crept across my belly. I looked down, thinking that maybe Teddy was caressing my stomach, but his hand wasn't even close to me. Not to mention, this didn't feel like something happening on the outside of my skin.

This was happening inside me.

Like something in there was moving around.

Like the *baby* was moving around.

“Hey, you okay?” Teddy asked, sitting up on the bed.

I shook my head, still staring at my stomach as that foreign sensation continued. “I... I think I just felt the baby move.”

“Man! For the first time? Really?” Teddy asked, then he covered his face with his hands. “Ah, damn... you think it's cause of what we were doing? You think I was like... knocking it upside the head?” he asked.

I laughed at his silliness, and shrugged. “I don't know, maybe?” I thought about it for a second, pulling my lip between my teeth. “Do you want to feel it?”

“Seriously?”

I nodded, grabbing his hand and pressing it firmly to my stomach on the side that seemed to be getting the most activity. “Do you feel that?” I asked him.

He was quiet for a moment, concentrating before he shook his head. “Nah. I don’t feel anything.”

“It’s probably too soon. Maybe once the baby is bigger, it’ll be more pronounced,” I guessed. “And that’s when other people will be able to feel it as strong as I do.”

Logically I actually *knew* that was the case, but it was still a little disappointing.

All this time - with the exception of the ultrasound of course - there hadn’t been anything to really make this real. And even the ultrasound was just an image on the screen – still fairly abstract. But *feeling* it, knowing for sure that this baby was definitely there, definitely growing inside me...it was different.

I kinda wanted to share it with somebody.

“Yeah,” Teddy nodded. “Maybe. Probably not right for me to experience something like that before the father does anyway, right?”

Again, I bit my lip. “Yeah... it probably *would* be a great experience for the father to be the first person other than me to feel the baby move,” I agreed. “So I guess we’ll just have to keep trying.”

Immediately, Teddy’s face pulled into a frown, but he didn’t say anything. He just looked at me. “What does that even mean?” he finally asked, when I just looked at him too.

“I think... you know what it means, Teddy.”

“Nah, I think you need to clarify. You can’t be saying what I think you’re saying, because before the other night, me and you hadn’t even kicked it like that since...”

“Since Vegas.”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “Which was...”

“About 5 months ago, yeah.”



“So you’re saying...”

“Yes,” I confirmed, blowing out a deep breath as I finally spoke aloud the truth I’d been wrestling with for days. “I’m saying that the baby growing inside me right now... is *your* child.”

Teddy shook his head, climbing out of the bed as he scowled at me, and started grabbing his clothes. “Joia, seriously? This shit ain’t funny. *At all*,” he said.”

I sat up, watching him. “No. It’s *not* funny at all, and I’m not trying to *be* funny. I’m trying to be real with you here.”

He sucked his teeth. “This is real to you?! If I hadn’t been making an effort to get back in good with you, were you going to tell me? Or were you just going to let me believe the baby was Dalton’s?!”

“I’ve *never* insinuated to anybody that this was Dalton’s child, first of all. You made an assumption and ran with it – I didn’t correct you because I’m still fucking freaking out about it myself. Besides that, as soon as I found out how far along I was, I knew *exactly* whose it was. And *of course* I was going to tell you, Teddy. I found out less than a week ago, and I was trying to process it all. I didn’t even mean to blurt it out just now. I... thought I would prepare a speech or something.”

“Were you *processing* when you let me take you to my mama’s house and eat up all that food?! Or when you brought me over here, twice now, to use me for my body?!”

“Actually,” I nodded, “Yeah, I was.”

“*That doesn’t make this not fucked up*,” he bellowed, straightening to a stand once he’d finished dressing. “Man... give me my baby, I’m about to go.”

He stared at me, completely serious, for several seconds.

I stared right back, before finally speaking again. “You... do realize that can’t happen, right?” I asked. “Since I haven’t actually *had* the baby yet.”

His eyes narrowed. “I’m not dumb,” he said. “I’m just practicing for when I inevitably have to argue with your ass,

since I see you like keeping secrets and shit. I already *know* we ain't gone fucking get along!"

"You're acting as if I've known this whole time!"

"Maybe you have! Why the fuck should I believe that you really are just now finding out?"

I glared at him. "You don't have to believe *shit*. But it is what it is. And if *this* is how you're going to act? You can go."

"Whatever Joia," Teddy snapped, snatching up shoes and heading for the door. "You ain't gotta tell me twice."

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## TEN

TEDDY.

**W** *hat the fuck.*

I pushed myself back from my desk and leaned back in my office chair, crossing my arms. I was pissed off, nothing was helping, and I didn't even know what to do with it.

I'd already tried distracting myself.

I'd channeled my energy into a tool my therapist had given me years ago to help decompress and relieve some of the jumble that happened in our brains.

Journaling.

I wrote out everything that I felt about this bullshit with Joia.

The break-up, having to constantly see her over the years, finding out she was pregnant, trying to get back with her, and then finally, the cherry on top of the shitty ass cake, finding out that the baby was mine.

She really could have come with that shit a whole lot earlier.

Of course I'd seen it along with everyone else, when she found out about the pregnancy "by surprise". Right along with everybody else, I'd believed she had no idea - the reaction she and her sisters had to that positive test was something that just didn't seem faked.

But at the same time... the shit was so ridiculous.

How the *hell* could she not know she was halfway through a whole ass pregnancy?

I may not have been in touch with her much over the years, but I followed Joia, watched her videos sometimes, and kept up with her brand because some of it overlapped mine.

She was incredibly conscious of her body.

*Self*-conscious to be honest.

So I couldn't understand how she would have missed the changes in her body that would have come along with being pregnant.

But then again... pregnancy wasn't something I had experienced or even *could* experience. I didn't live in a woman's body, and more specifically, I didn't live in *her* body. So it really wasn't for me to say what she should have known or not.

Joia was a smart woman, and I couldn't imagine her going through this whole elaborate prank just for some views on a live stream video. She was serious about her brand, but she didn't put her real life out there like that, not like some others. I mean, she was her *real self*, don't get me wrong. But she didn't have the whole world in her business.

I knew that because, again, I kept up with her.

I saw when her videos posted, saw when she put up new statuses, etc. Ever since that live stream, no matter what she talked about, all the commenters wanted to know was extra-intrusive, detailed information about her pregnancy. How far along was she, how did she feel, who was the father, was it an accident, has she been assaulted, was she drunk – all asked and speculated about with various degrees of ugliness. People were taking this whole thing way left and Joia was astute enough to know the storm a stunt like this would bring.

But... it wasn't a "stunt".

I knew that.

And yet, I still felt room to be pissed about it.

Which was stupid, especially when this really worked out in my favor.

I wanted Joia back. There was no question about that. To the point I was willing to insert myself in her life enough to make myself *more* valuable than the man I initially thought was the child's father.

But *I* was the child's father.

So that should make the whole thing easy for me, right?

Here it was, right here, the family I called myself wanting. And instead of embracing it, instead of considering her feelings, instead of acting like my mama had raised me right... I got mad at her.

Stormed out.

Like *I* was the fucking baby.

I had to get my shit together.

So I did the journaling. Recorded a few videos, but very specifically nothing where I was trying to be funny, cause I just wasn't in the damn mood for it. Took my ass to the gym too, purposely lifting heavier than before, smashing through personal records.

All in pursuit of distraction.

Now, I was sore as hell physically, but mentally and emotionally, my shit wasn't any better. I'd even try to do some other work, taking out the time to write my pitch for the WAWG Fresh thing, and submitted it. Now more than ever, with a kid on the way, I *really* hoped it got accepted.

I may not know much about babies, and even less about pregnancy, but I *did* know that shit was expensive. Which meant it was time out for the bullshit. I had to get real, *real* serious out here.

At some point, I was going to have to talk to Joia and make it right.

This pregnancy really was out of nowhere for her, and when it came down to it, *she* was really the one who needed

the support in this situation. And now, instead of just having to overcome some shit I did eight years ago, I was going to have to overcome the stupid shit I did a few *days* ago.

Making my goal of getting her back – not just co-parenting, but being *with* her - that much harder.

One thing I never been scared of was a challenge though.

So whatever I had to do to make the shit right, I would.

Cause when it came down to it, just like I told her that night in the hallway of her building... Joia and I were a foregone conclusion.

It was time to bring it back to life.

“So... you sure you want to do this?” Len asked, from the passenger seat of my truck.

“Hell nah, I’m not sure. But sometimes, you just gotta do what you gotta do,” I answered, sharing his somber mood.

He huffed. “Man... I just... I really didn’t think I’d ever see you do something *this* drastic.”

“Me either.”

“You don’t think there’s any other alternative?”

I shook my head. “Nah, man. This is how it has to be. I gotta let it go.”

“You think we ought to have some type of memorial service or something? Something to commemorate the loss?”

I blew out a sigh. “I don’t know man. Honestly, it’s too soon for me to even think about it. Too many memories. Let’s just do it.”

I opened my door stepped out of the truck – which had been my baby all this time.

As a damned teenager, I’d dreamed about this truck, with these exact details. Big wheels, with chromed out rims. Chrome trim on the body, popping against the immaculate, cobalt paint. Buttery-soft leather interior, tinted windows,

state-of-the-art sound system... every last detail had come from a long-standing vision of my *dream* vehicle.

And it was *paid for*. All mine, didn't owe a single dime to anybody for it. The money I made from the "*Teddy Grahams, No Milk*" brand on social media had all gone toward procuring it, after I helped my parents with their forever house, and after I'd set aside a good amount for savings.

This truck had been my splurge.

The thing that was all for me, all about me.

*Blue magic.*

Now, it was time to let her go.

Reluctantly I made my way through the door of *J&P Auto Sales*, glad for the opportunity to give the same dealership who sold me the truck my business again. It was quiet inside, since it was the middle of the day, so the owner, Big Joe, found me immediately.

"Theodore Graham," he said, his hand extended as he approached me. "What can I do for you today son?" asked. "Don't tell me something wrong with that truck?"

I accepted his hand, honestly pleased by the fact that he remembered his customers so well. "Nah man," I shook my head. "It's just time for something a little more... family-friendly, I guess."

He grinned. "Oh you got yourself a lady friend, about to get married?" Joe asked.

"No, not quite on the ring," I admitted. "But I do have a baby on the way, and I don't think the truck is really car seat conducive."

Joe whistled. "No, you sure don't want a car seat denting your leather, and you'll want a lot more enclosed room. So you looking for something new, or you thinking about trading it in?"

"I don't think it's wise to pick up a new car note at this point, so probably trading it in – *if* you can give me a good price on it, and I can get something at about equal value."

It was an expensive ass truck, which made it hurt to let go. But I had already looked up what the value of it was, and knew I could get something decent in that family SUV range.

Even if the thought kinda made me sick to my stomach.

“Okay,” Joe said, clapping me on the shoulder. “Let me go look at the truck, we can run some numbers, and then I’ll show you what I got.”

I nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”

Thirty minutes later, I was sick as fuck, looking at these wack-ass family-friendly ass vehicles. Joe was giving me a great number on the trade-in, so I had no complaints about *that*, but these damn family SUVs...

I was *definitely* going to have to come out of pocket for some rims, some dope interiors, some tint on the windows, *something*.

Acadias had exactly zero swag.

Subarus were even worse.

There *was* a Benz SUV on the other side of the lot that was calling my goddamn name, but I knew better. Knew that wasn’t the wisest financial decision for me right now.

Could I afford the payments on it?

Yeah, probably.

But it was time out for making vanity decisions. I’d always said that whenever I had a kid, whenever I had a family, *that* was when I would have to start being smarter.

I hadn’t secured a big enough bag yet to be riding around with a car seat in a Benz.

Not when the Tahoe a few rows over looked good enough, and the price on the sticker was right up my alley.

Instead of letting it drag on, I said that was the one, and gave the go-ahead for Joe to get started with the paperwork. While we were waiting, Len showed me the video footage he’d been gathering from this whole ordeal. It certainly wasn’t anything that we were going to put together for public



consumption anytime soon, but I had to admit - the look on my face through most of it, like I'd lost my childhood pet or something, was pure fucking comedy.

With the right editing, it could definitely be something, and that was the type of shit I had to think about. Not just what was comfortable for now, but what could eventually become content that could provide for my kid later on.

He was still showing me footage when my phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out, halfway hoping it was Joia. Three days had gone by since she dropped that bomb on me, and honestly... I didn't even know how to approach her. So I was hoping she would be the one – be the bigger person.

This wasn't that though.

My eyes damn near bugged out of my head when I saw it was an email marked urgent, from the people at WAWG Fresh.

Immediately, I tapped my screen to open the email, frantically scanning the words on the page.

*Teddy, this is Carmen Waters, head content editor with WAWG Fresh.*

*I'm reaching out personally to let you know that we absolutely loved the pitch you sent.*

*It was so unique, so unlike any of the others.*

*So absolutely... fresh.*

*Your method of sending it in as if it were pulled straight from your personal journal, ranting about this very transitional point in your life... it really touched me. Really, really captured my attention.*

*I want to move forward with this with you as soon as possible.*

*With Joia's pregnancy so far along, it puts us on a pretty strict deadline, and we want to try to get in some footage during the pregnancy. It's why I'm reaching out now, instead of waiting until the pitch contest is over.*

*We're very **very** excited to partner with you two to make this series. No scripting, no added drama, just you and her trying to come to the point of peaceful co-parenting, possibly getting back together, and us documenting everything along the way.*

*We cannot wait to get started.*

*Please respond to this message as soon as possible so that we can work out the details. We'll need you and Joia to sign off, but we're ready to do this.*

*Let's talk numbers.*

*-Carmen Waters.*

What?

*What?*

*What!?*

What the *hell* was she talking about, about a "unique pitch, journal entry style"?

My pitch to *Fresh* was about me and Len checking out all the wing spots in our state, and talking about sports while we did it.

It had *nothing* to do with Joia, nothing to do with the baby, nothing to do with...

*Oh, shit!*

I sat back in my chair, my brain working in overdrive as I ran the day I submitted that pitch through my mind. I remembered having a document for my journaling open in one tab. I was writing my pitch in another.

But my head was so messed up, overwhelmed with that little piece of breaking news from Joia...

*Had I copy/pasted and hit submit on the wrong damn thing?*

Actually... reading through that message again, there was no doubt about it - it was absolutely what I'd done.

But... they liked it.

And they wanted to talk *numbers*.

*Numbers* that could mean everything, from a huge corporation like that, when we had a baby on the way. I couldn't speak for Joia, but I could definitely use a boost in income.

“Yo, what's up with you” Len asked, finally noticing that I wasn't paying attention to his video clips anymore.

I shook my head, unable to verbalize it to him quite yet.

Not when I had a million things scurrying through my mind.

Most important being... how the hell I was going to get Joia to say *yes*.

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## ELEVEN

JOIA.

“**Y**ou want me to say yes to *what?*”

I stepped back, glaring at Teddy and not letting him pass the threshold of my front door. His *first* mistake was showing up at my door unannounced after *three* goddamn days of virtual silence. His second mistake? Thinking I was going to agree to have a camera in my face for the rest of this pregnancy.

“Absolutely *not*,” I said, as soon as he opened his mouth to actually answer the question I’d asked him. “People are already in my business enough, and you think I’m ready to *invite* them into it?”

“I get where you’re coming from Joia, I swear I do,” he insisted, his large body filling the door frame. “But listen... if we do this, you get to control the narrative. Remember a couple of years back, your homegirl Nubia Perry was talking about this, when she did that behind the scenes thing about her pregnancy.”

“I know you think it’s flattering for you to compare me to Nubia Perry, and in most other circumstances it would be. In *this* circumstance though... nigga are you out of your goddamn mind? No, never mind, I take that back. It’s not a question. You *are* out of your goddamn mind. You have *lost* your goddamn mind. And when you *find* your goddamn mind, *then* you come back and talk to me.”

Shout out to NeNe Leakes.

“You’re tripping! This could be a good opportunity for *both* of us.”

“Maybe so, but when it involves me putting myself out there even more than I am right now, I really can’t say I’m interested in that.”

I walked away from the door and he followed me inside, closing it behind him. “I *get* that. I know it feels intrusive. But WAWG is all about their *we all we got* shit. You know they’re not really with the exploitation and stuff, know they’re going to make sure you’re taken care of, right?”

“I’m really not trying to depend on anybody except myself for *that*,” I told him with a pointed look that he picked up on immediately.

Good.

I could understand him being upset over suddenly finding out about the baby like this. I hadn’t even meant to tell him in such an abrupt, unplanned way, so I wasn’t even that bothered about him being pissed off at me.

Initially.

But it had been *three* days, and as far as I was concerned, his silence has spoken volumes.

Teddy had never been a stupid guy, so of course he immediately picked up on the ugly inflection of my words. He pushed out a sigh, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

*Damn him for looking good when I’m mad at him.*

He’d gotten a fresh lineup since the last time I saw him, and had the nerve to come over here smelling all good, bringing up memories of our recent intimacy.

*Asshole.*

I wasn’t going out like that today though.

My hormones may have been on ten, but my pussy was dialed down to zero.

“Listen,” he said. “I understand that it wasn’t cool for me to go radio silent about this. Even if I was upset – and I was - I should have reached out enough to make sure you know - I have *every* intention of doing my part with this child. *More* than my part. *All the parts*. But you have to know, you came out of left field with this.”

“Oh trust me - I understand how it feels for this to hit you out of left field. But at least you don’t have the swollen abdomen, gas, back pain, swollen breasts, constant hunger, insane hormone fluctuations, etc.”

I really wasn’t trying to be *that* pregnant girl but damn.

“We all got pain,” I told him, crossing my arms.

*Some of us more than others.*

I really didn’t give a shit about his complaints, since he wasn’t the one who had to *carry* the baby. But still... there was a slump in his shoulders that spoke to his guilt about the way he’d reacted.

It kinda made me feel bad.

“Hey,” I said, choosing maturity over the pettiness I wanted to give in to so, so bad. “I’m not saying that this isn’t rough for you too. I know it is. And I’m sorry for the way it all came out.” I shrugged. “I’m sorry it’s happening at all. I’m not trying to disrupt your life, and honestly, if you don’t want to do this, you do *not* have to. But I know the kind of guy you are, Teddy. Which is why I *did* tell. Or rather, why I *planned* to tell you. I don’t know why I told you when I did, like I did, it just came out. And I’m sorry about that.”

Teddy shook his head. “You don’t have to apologize. I mean, don’t get me wrong, it was pretty abrupt, especially considering what we’d been doing about ten minutes before that.”

I nodded. “I can accept that.”

“But I can only imagine how hard this has been for you. Physically, mentally, emotionally, all that. It has to be rough.”

“Yeah,” I huffed. “All sorts of things I had no idea were pregnancy symptoms are making a whole lot more sense now. Things that I had written off as nothing, I realize now were all signs that I missed. All because pregnancy was just... never a consideration in my mind. So in addition to everything else, you feel kinda... stupid, you know?”

“*You?*” Teddy asked, his face pulled into a skeptical scowl. “Stupid?” He shook his head. “Nah. Not you.”

“Well, the evidence says something different, but you know what? I’m just going to take the compliment. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He stared at me for a second, and then his gaze traveled down to my clothing. It was early afternoon, and whereas I would usually be in athleisure gear, I was actually dressed today, in a comfy floral short set that concealed my little belly.

“You going somewhere?” He asked.

“Yeah,” I answered. “I have the twenty-week prenatal appointment. The big one.”

Devyn’s initial thought had been that I was eighteen weeks pregnant, based on the quick measurement she’d taken at that first ultrasound. But going from the actual date of conception was a different story.

The baby was a measuring little on the small side, probably because I hadn’t been eating in a way that supported growing a new life. I was pretty consistent with my daily multivitamin, and ate lots of leafy greens as my standard diet, which helped with making sure I’d gotten enough folic acid. Still, one of my first changes had been to start a prenatal vitamin, and to eat more, now that I knew my stubborn midsection wasn’t about me not eating a clean enough diet.

Teddy took his hands from his pockets, throwing them up in the air. “Come on Joia, really? Why wouldn’t you tell me about something like that?”

My eyebrows shot up. “Maybe if you hadn’t spent the last few days not talking to me, I would have told you about it.”

Teddy's nostrils flared as he clamped his lips together and nodded. "Okay. That was my bad, I'll eat that."

"I know you will," I said. "Cause you're right, that's *your* bad." The defeated look on his face made me sigh. "Do you want to come with me?"

"Hell yes," he said, perking right up. "I'll drive."

I wanted to roll my eyes at his sudden enthusiasm, after not having anything to say to me for three days. But in the interest of not being petty, especially since I was about to be in the truck with him, and then stuffed into a room together for this appointment, I didn't.

Instead, I simply nodded, grabbed my keys and purse from the counter, and motioned for him to come on.

In the parking lot, I had to slow my steps because I didn't see his truck. That thing stuck out like a sore thumb, so there was no way I was simply overlooking it.

I turned to him, confused.

He grinned at me as he held up his keys, making a big deal of pressing the unlock button. I heard a vehicle chirp in tandem with that unlocking mechanism, but still, I didn't see his truck.

I watched, baffled, as he walked up to a shiny black Tahoe - a nice looking vehicle, for sure. But again... not his truck.

"What is this?" I asked, as he opened the passenger side door for me.

He didn't answer until he'd secured himself in the driver seat and turned the SUV on, sending heavenly air-conditioned waves in my direction - a needed respite from the increasingly hot pre-summer weather.

"This," he said, "Is me being real serious about this thing. Showing it to you, and showing it to myself. Did I love the truck? Yes. Did I have some great memories in that truck? Yes. Did that truck get me a lot of ass? Yes."

I rolled my eyes.



“But the important thing here,” he continued, “Is that the truck wasn’t really a practical vehicle for carrying a family around in.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Seriously Teddy? You’re already thinking about driving a *family* around?”

He shrugged. “Why not?”

“I don’t know. It just seems... Abrupt.”

“Well,” he said, grabbing the gearshift to move. “Almost a decade ago now, I had this girlfriend who taught me a very important lesson about not half stepping. So now, when I decide I’m about something... I’m not halfway into it. There’s no ambiguity. I’m all in.”

I shifted my gaze away from his, already knowing what that was about.

I... was surprised to hear it.

It was one thing for him to be willing to step up and take care of the responsibility he’d assisted in creating, and quite another for him to still be pursuing me on a romantic level.

*If that’s what that meant.*

“**O**h damn. It’s a for real baby, huh?”

I forced myself not to let loose a smile at Teddy’s enthusiasm over the picture of our baby up on the screen.

Devyn seemed pleased too - not just that I’d brought the father along with me, but by his apparent delight, which was... infectious.

This time, the ultrasound felt a lot different.

Instead of being scared and confused, barely believing what was happening, I felt a pinch of excitement myself. This wasn’t my first time seeing the baby or hearing the heartbeat, but those two things along with having felt it moving - with feeling it move right now, and watching those movements happen on the screen as well... It was just different.

I didn't feel anxious at all.

"Would you guys like to know if it's a girl or a boy?" Devyn asked, carefully charting certain measurements as she looked back and forth between us and what was happening on the screen.

"No," Teddy and I said at the same time.

This time, I did give in to the smile, because I was glad we were on the same page. "Everything else about this baby has been a surprise. May as well let that be another one."

"Yeah," Teddy said, giving me a sly grin. "I bet our fans would like that angle too... hint, hint."

I rolled my eyes about that, but now that I was seeing the baby again, hearing the healthy, steady heartbeat, now that this moment wasn't filled with tension and uncertainty... I could honestly see the benefit of contacting *WAWG Fresh* about their idea.

And... I thought about it on the drive over.

Teddy was absolutely right - it could be a great opportunity for us. And while I still wasn't so sure about putting my child up for other people's entertainment purposes, it couldn't hurt to make a little money during the pregnancy.

We would *both* need a steady income in order to take care of a child. That really wasn't up for debate. WAWG was huge - I knew they could pay us well for the show, and we could probably negotiate some type of royalties too. Not to mention what the visibility could do for both of our brands.

It would be silly not to consider it.

I wasn't signing away any type of options for extended visibility of myself or my child. The risk was, on one hand, fairly limited. But on the other hand, the risk was huge. I was putting myself out there for more abuse than I'd already experienced, and I wasn't sure I was up for it.

But... there was always love from people too.

Much, *much* more than the hate. And the more I thought about it, the less inclined I felt to turn down something that

could be amazing in favor of hiding myself away because of haters.

To me, and probably to a whole lot of other people, there was value in seeing Black faces navigate something like this. Sure, the *didn't know I was pregnant for the first half of it* thing was probably uncommon, but figuring out how to get through a pregnancy and raise a child with someone you weren't necessarily with?

There was no question in my mind that there were people who could relate to *that*.

And even if it wasn't about relating, just exposing people to unconventional relationships had value as well. Not that there was anything particularly special about a heterosexual man and woman having a kid, but our dynamic was certainly not the *first comes love, then comes marriage, then come the Grahams with a baby carriage* type.

More like *first came the gin, then came the sin, now oh shit, I gotta deal with **you** again*.

"I'll be right back," Devyn said, excusing herself before either of us could question her sudden exit.

I looked up at Teddy, whose eyes were still trained on the screen. The baby wasn't live streaming anymore, but he was so enthralled by those images that it set off tightness in my chest.

In a good way.

"Hey," I said, getting his attention.

He turned to me with this wonder-filled look in his eyes that only intensified the tightness in my chest. "What's up?" he asked.

"I've been thinking about it," I said. "And... I do think the show is a wise choice for us, but only if we have a *whole lot* of creative control over it all. We both have great quality camera equipment, we both know how to edit, we have backdrops, all of that. I want them to let us do our own filming and production. We're capable of it. We can film what we want, cut it, and send it off. I'm even willing to work with a

consultant, if they want that. But if we do this... it has to be our way.”

Teddy bit his lip, nodding. “No complaints here. I like the way you think, baby.”

“Did they give you any idea what the numbers looked like?” I asked.

Teddy grinned. “Oh yeah.”

Seconds later, my eyes went wide as he rattled off a number that wasn't *huge* money, but it was definitely *good* money.

*Really good money.*

*Stupid to walk away from it, if they agreed to let us have creative control, good money.*

Before I could respond to it, Devyn came back in, with my cousin Joseph in tow.

Joseph Wright was chief resident of the women's center at University Hospital. Devyn wasn't technically a “doctor” - she was a nurse practitioner. With that title, she could do pretty much everything any other doctor in the women's center could do – and with her advanced certifications, more than some of them - so it concerned me that she'd gone to get Dr. Wright.

“What's going on, cousin?” Joseph greeted me, walking up to wrap me in as much of a hug as he could with me in an inclined position for the ultrasound. His cheeriness made me feel a little better, but still... Something was wrong here.

“Honestly Joey, I'll be a whole lot better if you just cut right to the chase. She didn't bring you in here for nothing,” I told him.

He and Devyn – his wife – exchanged a look, and then he nodded.

He didn't say anything at first, instead going to look at the ultrasound pictures with Devyn. They used her personal screen, so I couldn't see what was being pointed at, but my untrained eyes were all over the large monitor trying to spot anything that could possibly be wrong.

We'd been here for hours, taking all kinds of blood tests after I'd drunk some nasty orange concoction. Devyn had spent time pointing out all of our babies' limbs and organs, the brain, etc, gushing about how everything looked really good.

Obviously though... it didn't.

"Okay Jo," Joseph said, after he'd reviewed my ultrasound images for himself. "The good news is that the *baby* looks perfectly fine, as Nurse Wright has already explained to you. There's not anything of concern there. What might be of *slight* concern is the fact that your placenta is sitting quite low, to the point of nearly covering your cervical opening. This is something called placenta previa, which is not necessarily something to panic about. It's something for us to keep an eye on, and monitor as you get closer to delivery," he said.

But he wasn't finished.

"There is, however, something potentially a little more serious for us to keep an eye on. You see this dark area right here?" he asked, pointing at something on the screen - not the baby, but close to where he'd just pointed out the potential issue with my placenta. "We can't tell right now, but Nurse Wright is slightly concerned that this dark area is your placenta pulling away from the uterine lining. Now, that's something that usually - if it *does* happen, doesn't happen until after you've passed your 20-week mark. Usually the third trimester. It *could* be nothing. It *could* be scar tissue or just your normal landscape. Could be any number of things that are absolutely *not* harmful to you or your baby. But...we want to be cautious."

My mouth was so dry that I couldn't even verbalize any of the million questions that immediately came to my mind.

"Okay," Teddy spoke up. "Tell us what we need to do."

"Really, there's nothing to do unless we're *sure* it's a placental abruption. Which I'm not saying that I think it is, not saying that I think it isn't. I'm saying that it's a possibility. A *small* possibility. But it's too early to tell."

Teddy nodded. “I get what you’re saying. You’re not trying to scare us; you just want us to be aware. So what do we *do*,” Teddy asked again.

“For now,” Joseph said, glancing directly at me with a look that immediately let me know I wasn’t about to like the next thing out of his mouth. “Semi-bed rest. That does not mean you have to lay in your bed, flat on your back all day. What it *does* mean is... Joia... cousin... I know how you like to do. I *know* how you like to move around. But... you can’t be Superwoman at the gym until we know for sure that you’re okay.”

“So I caused this?” I asked, eyes wide. “My gym habits have done something that’s going to hurt the baby?”

Immediately Devyn and Joseph both shook their heads.

“Absolutely not,” Devyn answered. “You have absolutely *no* control over where the placenta attaches. And it would take a pretty intense trauma for *you* to have caused a placental abruption. A *major* hit to your stomach, like a car accident or something like that. You haven’t had anything like that have you?”

“No,” I shook my head.” But still. This whole thing has me second-guessing every single thing I’ve done for the last 5 months. I’m trying to figure out everything that’s happened that I forgot about. Everything I shouldn’t have done. All the soft cheese I shouldn’t have eaten. Just... *everything*.”

“And that doesn’t help you, and it doesn’t help the baby,” Joseph said shaking his head. He abandoned his place at the screen and came to me, grabbing me by the hand. “Joia... you are *family*. This baby? Is *family*. You trust me and Devyn to take good care of you and your baby, right?”

I blew a long stream of air out, then nodded. “Yes. I do.”

“Okay then. Don’t sweat this, alright? Just take two weeks off from embarrassing the muscle-heads in the weight room, and we’ll take another look. You can be up and about – I don’t recommend that you stop being active. Just for now, get comfortable with... power walking.”

“*Power-walking?*” I groaned. “Fine. *Fine*. I’ll do whatever you tell me to do, for this baby.”

“And you will *both* be just fine,” Devyn smiled. “All *three* of you will,” she amended, a correction that put a smile on Teddy’s face.

“What about sex?” Teddy asked, out of nowhere, making my eyes damn near bug out of my head.

Devyn rolled her eyes, and even Joseph gave him a bit of a side eye. “Sex is... fine. Just take it easy.”

“That ain’t no problem,” Teddy acknowledged, shaking his head. “I was just asking.”

After a little more time spent on my instructions for the next two weeks, Joseph and Devyn stepped out, leaving me to clean the ultrasound gel off my stomach and... panic.

“That girl from the gym was right,” I told Teddy, letting him take over the drying of my stomach. “My obsession messed something up, and now the baby isn’t going to get all the oxygen and nutrients it needs.”

Teddy stopped moving to raise an eyebrow at me. “That’s what you heard?”

“That’s what they *said*,” I insisted.

He laughed at me.

“I’m a let you have your space to freak out, but for the record – nobody said that shit to you. They said *if* it’s a placental abruption, that *could* happen. And that *if* it’s a placental abruption, *you* did not do anything to cause it.”

I sucked my teeth. “Of course they said that, they *love* me. They don’t want me to feel bad.”

“So you don’t love yourself then?” he asked, looking me right in the face.

“*What?*” I frowned. “What the hell are you talking about?”

He pulled my shirt back down, covering my exposed belly. “Well, your logic is that the people who love you, don’t want you to feel bad. So, following that, if you love *yourself*... why

are digging into this narrative that only serves to make you feel bad?”

I opened my mouth to counter that, but... there wasn't shit to say.

“Okay,” I conceded. “Point taken.”

“Shout out to my therapist, giving me tools to pass on and shit,” Teddy said, tossing an imaginary ball into a hoop somewhere near the ceiling, and then cheering for himself.

*Wow, Joia.*

*This is really the dude you're having a baby by.*

“Come on,” he said, helping me down from the table. “I know you couldn't eat before all this, so you gotta be hungry. We can grab some grub, then head to... one of our houses.”

I turned to look at him before we left the room. “One of our houses to do *what?*”

“Well... we have some things to talk about, right?” he asked. “The pitch for *Fresh*, baby gear, coordinating my schedule around your appointments so I can be there. Oh, and getting this power-walking shit down – it's some old ladies down at the mall in them big white sneakers that want smoke with me. I got a partner now, we can go get that shit popping.”

I laughed – something that felt really, *really* good behind the stress of finding out this potential complication with this pregnancy.

A laugh I sure as hell needed – something he'd never failed at providing.

“In all seriousness... you know the Wrights – and the Loves – aren't the only ones that have your back, right?” he asked, meeting my gaze. “You carrying a Graham baby, baby. The first *grand*baby. The Grahams got you too.”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“Aiiight. Let's get it then,” he said, holding the door open for me to step through, putting a hand at my back to steady me.



*Wow, Joia.*

*This is really the dude you're having a baby by.*

*... not bad.*

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## TWELVE

JOIA

“Hey people, so we’re back with another episode of *Live with the Loves*, our scripted series,” Jac said, looking directly into the camera.

No clue how *she* managed to do so with a straight face, but I laughed, and so did Jemma from her hotel room in... wherever she was currently on her book tour. We’d patched her into the chat, even though she wasn’t physically here with us – I felt like I could use all the sisterly moral support I could get during my first time going live since the pregnancy test disaster.

“I appreciate your commitment to the cause, but you know you can let that go now, right?” I asked, still chuckling over her silliness. “Not going to lie though — that was some quick thinking.”

“Well *somebody* had to do something, fooling around with you. *Miss There’s No Way I’m Pregnant*.”

I shook my head. “I definitely didn’t want to believe it.”

“Well that belly of yours certainly ain’t lying on you,” Jemma said. “No hiding it anymore.”

She was right – I’d finally really popped, and it was obvious now that the growth in my midsection had nothing to do with a sudden change in diet. I had a clear maternity situation going on.

“I’ll have you know, I think I’m *quite* cute with this belly,” I said, putting a hand over it.

“Oh you’re definitely that,” Jemma agreed. “And then we got Jaclyn over here with her freshly fucked glow going on. Y’all out here settling down and shit. Wonder which one of y’all are going to get married first...” she mused, sipping from whatever was in her glass.

“Well, I don’t even have a boyfriend,” I reminded her. Sure, Teddy and I had been getting along well enough over the last few weeks since I had finally revealed the truth about the pregnancy. And... we’d maybe even gotten it in a time or two. But as far as I was concerned, he and I were still working on being *friends* again.

We weren’t a *couple*.

“Oh girl *please*,” Jaclyn waved me off. “Maybe it’s not settled yet for real for real, but everybody knows it’s coming.”

“Don’t forget we’re on live,” Jemma warned Jaclyn. “We already told all Jo’s business to the internet once – she might disown us if we do it again,” she laughed. “Not that all this stuff is gonna be secret too much longer anyway, right?”

“Nope,” I agreed. “Not at all.”

Teddy and I had already submitted two episodes worth of content to *Fresh* for the upcoming show, and we’d been out and about together quite a bit. Mercifully, nobody had approached us, but I figured it was only a matter of time before everything came out - either assumptions based on seeing us out, or from the show, which had a “surprise” premiere next week.

Neither Teddy nor I had said anything publicly yet about it.

“Fine,” Jac said. “I’ll be cool until then. But on our next episode of *Live with the Loves*, I want you to be prepared for me to clown you about how I saw this coming. With details about exactly why and all that.”

I shook my head, laughing. “I am *sure* you have plenty to say about it, and I’m ready to hear it all.”

From there we moved on to other topics, going along with what people commented about in the live stream. But as soon as we were done with that, I couldn't help addressing Jac about what she said.

"Okay, so you know I'm not waiting until the next episode, right?" I asked. "I need you to tell me what you mean when you say you saw this coming."

Jac grinned. "Okay so I'll admit to not necessarily knowing it was Teddy right off the bat. When you didn't know you were pregnant, there was this immediate assumption that it must be *recent*. But I don't think you would have been as quiet about it, if it had been Dalton's."

"What makes you think that?" I asked.

"Well for one," Jemma chimed, "You never miss an opportunity to drag Dalton for one thing or another, and you *always* tell us when you backslide with him."

"Exactly," Jac nodded. "The fact that you *didn't* was a key indicator that something about this was different."

I laughed. "*A key indicator that something was different. What is this, Love & Order or something?*"

"See you playing, but I actually like that," Jac said. "*Fresh ain't closed their little contest up yet, I will pitch that shit. Love & Order – Fuckboy Victims Unit.*"

"God knows we've got the content between the three of us," I replied.

"A whole season's worth," Jemma added. "But back to the topic at hand – girl we're your damn sisters – we *know* you. When you came back from that Vegas trip all extra quiet on us, I knew something was up. And *then* the fact that you were suddenly *extra* anti-Teddy after not really being pressed about him for a while... Yeah something was up."

"Obviously we didn't think you were pregnant," Jac said. "And neither did you, because so much time passed before *Baby Love* made him or herself obvious, but there was an *inkling*. And then you left Jemma's party with him, and she saw him leaving here, so yeah... pretty much settled."

“But neither of you said anything.”

On screen, Jemma shrugged. “You said you wanted to keep it private, so we respected it.”

I sat back in my chair with a sigh – and a smile. We may get on each other’s goddamned nerves sometimes, but I loved that my sisters were my *friends*, along with everything else. No matter what, they *had* me.

“Oh bitch. *Bitch. Biiiiitch!*” Jaclyn squealed, scream-laughing as *Forever My Lady* started blaring from her phone. “*Holy shit,*” she – barely – breathed, clutching her stomach as she bent over, still laughing. “Joia, *girl*. Your social media notifications are about to be *tore* up,” she giggled, wiping tears from her eyes.

“What?!” I asked, at the same time as Jemma. “What’s going on?”

Jac waved me over as the view from Jemma’s front camera shifted – she’d picked up her phone too. Before I could make it to where Jac was, Jem gasped.

“*BITCH!* No the fuck he didn’t. Nooooo the fuck he *didn’t,*” Jemma choked out, before she started laughing too.

And now that I saw what they were looking at... I couldn’t look away.

“Teddy is gonna *kill* this motherfucker,” I muttered, leaning in to get a good look as Jaclyn started the video over.

A video of Dalton, with my face on his tee shirt, dancing in some dark studio to *Forever My Lady*.

“*So you’re having my baby...*”

My stomach lurched as the first line of the song started up, and I shook my head. “This isn’t actually happening, right?” I asked Jac, who was now crying full-blown tears of laughter.

“Read the caption, oh my *God,*” she managed to get out.

I shook my head. “Nah, I’m not going to do that.”

“Oh you *have* to,” Jemma laughed. “It’s so good. It’s so good.”

There was *no* way there was anything “good” about that caption, but I forced my eyes to the words underneath the video anyway.

“*Just a sneak peek of what’s to come, what I’ll have to offer forever... my lady @JoiaLove.*”

“FOREVER,” Jemma and Jac exclaimed, in unison, still cackling.

This, of course, was the *other* side of having these two as sisters.

“This is the wackest shit I have *ever* seen in my life,” Jemma said. “And I’ve seen some *wack* shit, okay?”

“My nigga Dalton said *just a sneak peek*,” Jac said, her shoulders bobbing as she kept laughing. “Whew, I would seriously feel bad for him if he weren’t such a literal human turd.”

I shook my head. “I feel *seriously* bad now – I haven’t even thought about him, and I have him blocked everywhere. I guess this is his way of getting through to me?”

“Girl, maybe so, but whoever filmed and hyped him into doing this, they don’t love this boy. There’s *no* way.” Jemma stopped, thought, and then laughed again. “Also fuck him though.”

“You’re right, but still... let me reach out to him so he can delete this. I can’t even imagine what Teddy must be thinking – I need to call him too. Or better yet, just go see him. I was supposed to drop by today anyway.”

“Awwww,” Jac said. “Listen to you, thinking about your man – and I don’t wanna hear that shit that he’s not. He totally is.”

I sucked my teeth. “You’re one to talk, like you weren’t fronting about Kadan, not even two months ago!”

“You’re both whipped, smitten, whatever you want to call it,” Jemma spoke up. “Whatever it is, just make sure you keep that shit over *there*.”

I smirked. “Uh-huh. Keep talking, your turn is coming up. You can’t let us be boo’ed up and having babies by ourselves.”

“I absolutely *can*.”

Jac grinned. “Come *onnn* Jem. Gone and settle down with one of those foreign hotties and give the family some expat babies.”

Jemma shook her head back and forth, with exaggerated firmness. “Not for nothing, I ain’t goin’, I’ll be *forever* hoein’.”

“*Bye*,” I laughed at her lyric remix.

“Y’all read the book, I ain’t playing,” she insisted. “But I will gladly pet sit, babysit, brother-in-law sit, whatever you need.”

“We know,” Jaclyn said. “And we love you for it.”

We spent a few more minutes with that back and forth, but then I had to get Jemma off the phone. I needed to call Dalton and get that over with, before I linked with Teddy to figure out how – or if at all – I needed to address him putting this video out, essentially claiming the baby I was carrying as his.

“So... question – *why* is Dalton so sure this baby is his?” Jac asked, as she packed up her things to head to Kadan’s. “When was the last time...”

I pushed out a sigh. “I had to already be pregnant the last time I messed around with Dalton. Groundhog Day. Don’t ask.”

“I *definitely* wasn’t going too,” Jac laughed. “Seriously though – send that nigga a text. “*This ain’t it, chief. And the baby ain’t yours either.*” Boom. Solved.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Like it wouldn’t be all over social media ten minutes later?”

“Good point,” she admitted. “But still – I don’t want you getting on the phone with him, stressing yourself out – cause you *know* that’s what he’s gonna do. And you don’t need that.”

I *didn't*. I'd already been cleared of the scare with the placenta, but now my blood pressure was elevated – stress was the last thing I needed.

“I can't just *not* tell this man the baby isn't his, when obviously he thinks so – you *see* this stunt he pulled, and tagged me!”

Jac pursed her lips, and nodded. “True, he does need to know. Hmm...” she thought about it for a moment, then nodded, pulling her phone out. She tapped at the screen for a bit, then held it up for me to see... the tweet she'd just sent.

“@youngjac\_love – my niece or nephew ain't Dalton's. Thanks, management, bka Jaclyn Love.”

It was accompanied by an “*Anybody wanna fight?*” gif, and @jemmaoutchea had already retweeted it.

I opened my mouth, but Jac immediately held up a hand.

“Nope,” she shook her head. “Problem solved. Bye.”

She didn't wait for a response before she sauntered away, leaving me alone with my – now constantly pinging – phone. I pushed out a sigh and picked it up, and... turned all my social media notifications off.

I needed to go see my child's father.

Teddy

*Piece L connects to R, and then R connects to Y and...*

“Hip bone connects to the ankle bone or something, goddamn.”

I put down the instructions to the crib Joia had gushed over, taking a break from putting it together. For a “small” fee, I could've simply had it delivered already assembled. But the damn thing had already cost enough, and I was a pretty handy motherfucker.

So, I figured I could do it myself and get the points for surprising her with it, *and* points for building it.



I was *real* close to pulling up the “*We Gotchu*” app instead - some Blakewood graduates had created a small jobs app, where you could commission anything from a babysitter to somebody to pick up your dry cleaning, to somebody to mow your grass.

*Or...* build an overly complicated crib to impress the woman who was damn near six months pregnant with your child.

I cleared a space among the mess on the floor and laid back and stretched out, not caring about the camera set up in the corner. When I thought I would be able to get this crib built with no trouble, I’d had the idea to record it for a quick time lapse we could use as B-roll footage for the *Fresh* show.

Now this shit was straight up blooper reel material.

I had no idea where my phone was, but I knew it had to still have power - it was supplying the sound pouring into my headphones. I’d set it to *Do Not Disturb* while I was working on the crib, with Joia and my mama set as the only exceptions who could get through that filter. With that in mind, I closed my eyes.

Swedish engineering was fucking exhausting.

I fell asleep wondering about the practicality of putting all this shit back in the box and finding a nice solid Nigerian company to purchase a crib from.

The next time I opened my eyes, Joia was standing over me with a grin on her face.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” I said back.

She glanced around us, motioning at the parts to the crib before she pointed at the box. “What’s all this?”

“You know *exactly* what it is, baby,” I told her, grinning as I sat up.

*Damn she looked good.*

Her hair was out and wild, floating around her shoulders like a lion's mane. She was finally embracing her baby bump instead of hiding it, and even though it was still small, it was prominent in the bright blue maxi dress she was wearing - and so were her titties.

I forced my gaze back to her face just in time for the scolding I knew was coming.

“Well... it *looks* like you are already nesting, so much harder than I am. And, it looks like you bought the crib that was twice as much as the one we decided on together at the store. I'm assuming that's because you knew how much I loved it, which is ridiculously sweet. But it's also... not the best financial decision?”

I nodded to acknowledge her concern. “True, this one was quite a bit more expensive than the other ones we looked at. *But*. You didn't see your face,” I told her. “None of those other cribs gave you that same look. So this is the crib we're getting.”

She raised her eyebrows a little, probably at the authority in my voice. But she didn't challenge that. Instead she kneeled down beside me.

“Teddy... you know we need *two* cribs, right? One for your place, one for mine.”

“Or,” I suggested, wrapping an arm around her waist to pull her closer. “You can stop playing with me, and we can just have *our* place.”

Joia shook her head. “If you think I am moving in with someone when I don't even know completely where I stand with him, you're out of your mind.”

“And you're out of *your* mind if you don't know where you stand with me Joia. Ain't no ambiguity about how I'm trying to move with you.”

She let out a quiet scoff. “Yeah... I got a little too comfortable with that before, and we see where that went. I know where I *seem* to stand with you. We're getting to know each other again; I feel like you're truly a friend. But you

know what happened between us. Why we were apart in the first place. I'm not asking you to do anything - I think we're in a good place. I don't *need* you as a boyfriend - I need you as a partner in this, romantic or not. I could absolutely see you as more, but I'm not comfortable assuming shit. Just, honestly," she admitted.

I nodded. "Okay. I see exactly what I need to do."

I released my hold on her waist to get up, looking around among the wood pieces and instructions and packing materials and everything else from the box that the crib had been delivered in. Finally, I found my phone and picked it up.

"Oh!" Joia exclaimed. "Hold up before you look at that! There's... a video that might upset you a little. But if it helps, it's already been addressed, and the original was already deleted."

I looked up from my phone with a frown. "What video?"

Joia cringed. "Well, it seems as if Dalton was still under the impression that the baby was possibly his. And since I wasn't talking to him, he decided to make... A grand gesture?"

Shaking my head, I unlocked my phone and headed straight to social media.

The first thing I saw, the first thing *everybody* seemed to be talking about, and tagging Joia in... was Dalton.

Dancing.

*This motherfucker...*

"Yo," I said, as the video started up, with the music playing in my ears. "Ol' boy stole my idea, I'm gone smack this dude next time I see him."

"Please don't," Joia giggled. "Like I said, it's already been addressed. Already been handled," she tried to assure me.

"Nah," I shook my head. "I'm about to handle it."

I went back over to where Joia was sitting and joined her down there on the floor. I switched my cell phone to my front

facing camera and held it up, making sure that me, Joia, and the crib box and shit were *all* in the picture. With no prompting, Joia smiled into the camera and so did I, snapping the picture. I showed it to her for her approval, which she hesitantly gave. Before she could change her mind, I tapped out a caption for the picture and posted it.

When I showed her my phone again, she smiled.

*“First Graham family portrait,”* she read aloud. “You don’t think the *“Graham”* thing is presumptive?”

I shook my head. “Nah, not at all. I messed up with you before by not making my intentions and feelings clear. Won’t catch me slippin’ again.”

I watch the emotions play over Joia’s face. Watched her try her best not to break into a big smile. After a few seconds she gave up, and shook her head as she grinned.

“Well, in that case... You should probably let me help you put this crib back in the box. It’ll be a lot easier to move into a new place that way.”

“Man, I’ve been recording this for the show,” I complained. “I’m very hype that you’re rocking with me on the “let’s shack up” thing, but... All my hard work, just going down the drain.”

Joia lifted an eyebrow, looking around at my “hard work”. When her gaze returned to me, she said, “That’s okay. Next time... we’ll do it together.”

“Hell yeah,” I agreed, biting my lip as I pulled her into my arms. When I looked down, she was wearing a smirk that made me ask, “What?”

Her eyes glittered with mischief. “You know I’m about to get on your damn nerves, right?”

**T**he end.

*christina c jones*   
*love, in warm hues*

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Christina C. Jones is a modern romance novelist who has penned many love stories. She has earned a reputation as a storyteller who seamlessly weaves the complexities of modern life into captivating tales of black romance.*



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