

MONICA WALTERS

I'M M
All In

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A BEROTTE FAMILY BOOK

MONICA WALTERS

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INTRODUCTION

Hello, readers!

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

This is book nine of a new family of books... The Berotte Family (pronounced Bee-Rot). It starts with the father, and the following books trickle down to the kids and their friends. So if some things seem incomplete where the sub characters are involved, that was done intentionally. Those issues will be resolved in later books.

This book is about Axton's brother, Arrow Vaughn, who is an honorary Berotte. Axton is Alexz's husband. You met him and his family in book two, *Deeper Than Love*. It's highly recommended that you read the previous books of this family series before indulging in this one, because it typically picks up right where the last one left off and updates ongoing issues that I don't go into great detail about.

Love On Replay

Deeper Than Love

Something You Won't Forget

I'm The Remedy

Love Me Senseless

I Want You Here

Don't Fight The Feeling

When You Dance

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

Arrow and Lynn's story is an extremely sweet love story. They had minimal drama, but the sub characters made up for that. LOL! Again, issues from previous stories are resolved and/or updated, and new issues have surfaced. So I hope you enjoy the ride this story is going to take you on.

Monica

PROLOGUE

ARROW

Seneca and I sat there quietly. There were no ugly words exchanged between the two of us. We were just quiet. I supposed we were both thinking of a way to talk about this that would preserve our friendship. He was involved with my sister, Kaysyn. I was more than sure that her friend Joyy knew. Joyy was who she vented to, and she was also Seneca's sister, which was how the two of them even knew one another. Although Axton and I were younger than her, we wanted to be her protectors. If she was having problems in her marriage, I wished she would have come to us.

Seeing Seneca and her leaving the movies together had rubbed me raw. It was probably a good thing I didn't approach them. While she and Ax looked at me as the most immature because of my dealings with women, I was mature enough to know that I needed to cool off. I wasn't weak by any means, but I also knew that I wasn't from the streets like this nigga. We were friends, but not to the point where he wouldn't kill my ass to protect himself.

I fucked around with women by choice, not because I was immature. Ax was the same way until a good year or two before he met Alexz Berotte. I just wasn't ready to settle down, nor had I found anyone I wanted to settle down with. Most women I came across were chasing their bag and not worried about a nigga. They just wanted to fuck just like I did. There was always a mutual understanding.

Finally breaking my silence, I asked, "How did it start?"

He slid his hand down his face. I wasn't rushing him. We had all night, because I was staying here until tomorrow... or at least I planned to. That all depended on how this conversation went. I felt like things would be cool, because I had a feeling that this shit was a lot deeper than I knew.

“She always used to pick with me. I mean, saying shit like, if you were a little older, I would give you a run for your money. I felt like she was playing, so I would ignore her. I would say some slick shit back, but that was as far as things went, until Joyy reunited with Isaiah, and I was around a lot more. It wasn't until Alexz and Ax's wedding reception that things took a turn. She kept walking close to me, rubbing her ass on me.”

I closed my eyes. Kaysyn started this shit. I would've never thought that shit. I slowly shook my head. He was only going to ignore her for so long. However, she was still my sister. I had to protect her at all costs and get to the bottom of this. Ax was way more hotheaded than me, so I knew it was something I had to handle. Plus, I was closer to Seneca than he was.

“I followed her out of the reception area and tongued her down in front of Joyy and Isaiah. Told her that I wasn't playing with her. Basically, if she wanted me, then she knew how to find me. Sure enough, a week later, she called me. I know Joyy didn't give her my number, so I don't know how she got it. She asked me to meet up with her at a hotel in Houston. The rest is self-explanatory.”

“Naw, it's not. She's married, bruh.”

“There are some underlying issues with that. Until I can tell her, I can't tell you.”

I frowned hard. “Issues with her marriage?”

“Well, they don't get along. They were always arguing, long before we hooked up. But it's some other shit going on. I have to tell her about it. I just don't want to see her hurt.” He stared right into my eyes, and without hesitation, he said, “I love her. She doesn't feel the same way. I feel like a weak ass nigga too. I ain't never been in love. Always been in the

streets chasing my paper, fucking hoes, and moving around. She's different. Seeing her so unhappy does something to me. She wants to keep me a secret though. So don't tell her you know."

"So you cool with being a side nigga?"

"I'm not a side nigga. I'm her main nigga. Her and Luckey are separated. I thought you knew that."

"I do, but they're still married."

"Legally. However, she ain't fucking with that nigga at all. He ain't seen his kids in two months. But again... I can't give you insight about that situation until I tell her."

"Why haven't you told her yet?"

"Because I'm trying to figure out a way to say that shit. She's going to be hurt regardless, but I'm trying to figure out how to soften the blow of what I have to tell her."

"If he was cheating on her, then just tell her that shit. It ain't like it matter now since she cheated on him with you."

"That ain't it. Quit fishing, bruh. I can't tell you. It would be up to her to tell you. Although we cool and you my bruh, my loyalty to her trumps my loyalty to you. I care for her more than anyone, especially for me to agree to keep us under wraps. If she knew you saw us, she would have a fit. I hope you can keep this between us. One thing I won't do is lie to you. I'd never hurt Kaysyn. I don't know how she did it, but she got me eating out the palm of her fucking hand."

I couldn't believe everything I was hearing. This hardcore thug was in love with my sister, and basically, she was playing with him like a toy. She needed to divorce that nigga Luckey if she was as done with him as Seneca said. She should have thought about how it would look to be with Seneca before it got this far. She was gon' fucking hurt him. I would have never expected him to be on this end of heartbreak and at the hands of my sister, but here we were.

"Well, I ain't gon' be able to hang around you as much until everything is out in the open. I might have to choke you to death to get you to tell me what's going on."

“Nigga, yo’ soft ass ain’t gon’ do shit, but I guess I understand. I have a sister, so I know how you feel. I was ready to go toe to toe with Big Zay on what I *thought* was going on. Put a gun right in his face. He still didn’t back down though. I love that nigga like the brother that he is. That’s a real ass man right there. So you for real?”

“Yeah. We can still kick it from time to time, but not like we do now. You think you know me, but you know my Dr. Vaughn personality, not Arrow from 3rd Ward. I ain’t from the streets, but I ain’t soft either. Don’t get fucked up by accident.”

He chuckled and I did too. We shook hands, and I went to the room I would be sleeping in. We’d better party hard while I was here. It would be the last time for a while.

CHAPTER 1

ARROW

ONE MONTH LATER...

“If I wanted to be here all fucking night, I would have brought an overnight bag.”

“Dr. Vaughn, please. We have no one else, and we’ll have to postpone this surgery for the tenth time. This lady has been extremely patient, but it’s critical to her health that we do this as soon as possible.”

I huffed. I’d been at this damn hospital all fucking day, and my nerves were on edge. Being an anesthesiologist that was in high demand was tiring. “Give me an hour.”

He released a sigh of relief. “Thank you so much. Ms. Jolivet will be so appreciative.”

I nodded, then threw my bag back in my locker. After flopping on the couch in the lounge, I kicked off my shoes and put my feet up. I set an alarm just in case I fell asleep, then closed my eyes. My plans for this evening were to simply go home and rest. I had taken off this weekend so I could rest tomorrow and go to Beaumont Sunday to kick it with my people. Everybody was getting hooked up with somebody, and that shit was unnerving.

Lately, I’d been kicking it with Ali, Jungle, and sometimes Seneca and Jericho. My brother was in Beaumont and my sister was in Atascocita. Kaysyn had *been* living there, but being in Houston without Ax took some getting used to. However, once he married into the Berotte family, I met Jamel. We were so much alike it was ridiculous. We were both fucking the city up on the regular. Now, even he’d settled down.

I thought he was a damn fool for falling for a stripper, but everything worked out. Sandrene was a beautiful woman, and if Jamel could get past all of us seeing her beautiful body naked, then I was happy for him. I didn’t know how I would feel about being with a woman who all my boys and brothers

had seen naked. And not just naked, but we'd practically seen the pinkness of her pussy. I would be on edge whenever she and I would be around my people, thinking they wanted to fuck her.

Again, if he could get past that, then I was happy for him. He seemed extremely happy, and they seemed good for each other. I'd gone over to his place while she was there, and we got to know one another a little better. I could see just how much they loved each other. However, my promise to myself about being a third wheel came to mind and I got the hell out of there.

"I thought you were going home, Arrow."

I opened my eyes to see this nurse I'd dug out on several occasions standing over me. I bit my bottom lip as I stared at her thick ass. "My skills were requested for another surgery. They can't get enough of Dr. Vaughn. You know what that shit be like."

"Hell yeah, I do. That's why I wanna come over one day this weekend. You feeling that?"

"Mm. I'm going to Beaumont Sunday. Tomorrow depends on what time I leave here tonight. Most likely I'll make time to fuck you up."

She licked her lips and smiled at me. Those thick ass lips drove my dick crazy. He twitched in my scrubs thinking about all the possibilities, and she noticed. She smirked as my phone vibrated in my pocket. "See you later, Dr. Vaughn."

"Mm hmm. Can't wait, Nurse Mitchell," I said as I pulled my phone from my pocket.

When I saw my mama's picture on my screen, I answered. "Hey, Ma."

"Hey! You forgot to come get your dinner?"

"No, ma'am. I'm still at the hospital. I have another patient in about forty-five minutes."

"Damn. They working my poor baby to death. There has to be someone else that's competent enough to put somebody to

sleep.”

“You would think. Like, I ain’t the only one at this hospital that know how to do that, but they know that most times I won’t say no. I’ll let them work my ass until I ain’t got shit left. I care too damn much. Dr. Schrapps said this woman’s surgery has been postponed ten times. It’s ridiculous around here.”

“What type of surgery is it?”

“It’s a bariatric surgery. She’s getting a sleeve.”

“No wonder they’ve postponed her.”

“Yeah, but the doctor said it’s medically necessary, and she needs this surgery as soon as possible. I can’t let that lady wait again.”

“You’re such a perfect doctor, Arrow. I love how you care for your patients. That’s why you’re in such high demand. They know how much you care too.”

“Yeah, and they exploit my ass because of it. That’s okay though. Long as they run me my money.”

She laughed. “I know that’s right, baby. Well, I’ll be awake for a while, so if you aren’t too tired when you leave, come get your food.”

“Okay. Thanks, Ma. Love you.”

“Love you too, handsome.”

I ended the call with a smile on my face. My mama was my girl. We were best friends. She was close to all her kids, but since Kaysyn and Ax were married now with families to tend to, she clung to me a little bit. Although I was thirty-two years old, I was still her baby. Until the right woman came along and changed that, I would continue to be her baby. Shirlene Vaughn had spoiled me rotten, but she didn’t have a problem beating my ass when I needed it.

She wanted the best for all her kids, and we gave that to her. All of us were career driven and had great jobs. My dad was just as proud of all our accomplishments. Personally, we all had flaws. I didn’t realize Kaysyn’s until recently. She was

always the one who had her shit together. Maybe she knew what she was doing with Seneca. I wasn't here to judge her, but I was definitely worried about her choosing him to fuck around with.

Instead of lying here doing nothing, I decided to just go ahead and get ready to get this lady ready for surgery. I canceled my alarm so it didn't scare the shit out of me later and headed to the back. We called it the holding tank. It was where patients were brought before surgery. When I walked inside, a couple of the nurses frowned. I had a good working relationship with mostly everybody, so they knew I was supposed to be done for the day.

"Yeah, yeah. I ain't left yet. Dr. Schrapps asked for a favor. Where's the patient chart?"

Katrina slowly shook her head and said, "You gotta stop letting them take advantage of your kindness, Arrow. They don't give a fuck about you. You need to look out for you. All these hours gon' catch up with your ass and lay you flat on your back. You hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear you."

"But are you gonna do something about it?"

"I'ma try. I'm off this weekend."

"Uh huh. Don't answer any calls from Methodist Hospital."

I took a deep breath because she knew me better than anybody. She was one of the first nurses I met when I started here. She was married and had three kids. We'd become genuine friends, and I'd even met her family. "Plus, you need to quit fucking with Melanie's ass. She telling all your fucking business."

I frowned slightly. Melanie Mitchell, the nurse I had a pending appointment with this weekend, didn't know shit about me. "What business? I don't talk to her about personal shit."

She glanced down at my dick. "She knows enough, Bow and Arrow."

I almost laughed too loud. I was slightly bow-legged, and she had said my dick looked like an arrow. She said my mama named me appropriately. I slowly shook my head and licked my lips. “I’m not worried about that shit.”

“You need to be. You know how these people are around here.”

“A’ight, a’ight. What’s the patient’s name again?”

“Lynn Jolivet. She’s a young woman, but she’s having quite a bit of health complications because of her weight. That’s why Dr. Schrapps begged you. She seems to be a sweet woman, but she’s extremely nervous. I know you have a gift of calming people down before surgery, especially the ladies,” she said as she rolled her eyes.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were a hater, Katrina.”

“Boy, please. If I’m gon’ hate on something, it’s gon’ be significant.”

“Oh, damn. You hitting below the belt now. You can’t be fucking up my arrow, girl.”

“Ugh! Follow me, nasty.”

I chuckled as I followed behind her. Katrina had better be glad she was married, or I would have dipped into her by now. Melanie would have never happened. All the ass Katrina was dragging around here would have been bouncing on my dick a long time ago.

When we got to where Ms. Jolivet was, Katrina moved the curtain. She was a large woman, looking to be around four hundred plus pounds. That wasn’t the first thing I noticed though. My attention went straight to the tears falling down her beautiful face. “Ms. Jolivet, are you okay?”

She only nodded as Katrina said, “This is Dr. Vaughn. He’s going to be your anesthesiologist.”

She frowned slightly as she wiped her tears. “Hi. You look too young to be a doctor.”

I smiled and walked to her bedside. “I *am* young, but I’m smart,” I said as I pointed to my head.

She smiled slightly as I grabbed her hand. “Now, what’chu crying for?”

She looked away for a moment. “I’m just nervous. I’ve never had surgery... never been put to sleep. I’m scared I won’t wake up. I have sleep apnea.”

“Everything is going to be fine. I’m gonna be there every step of the way. *You’re* going to be fine.”

Being at her bedside had my heart soft as cotton. I glanced around and noticed there weren’t any bags to indicate anyone was here for her. “I like your hair,” she said.

“It looks a mess right now, but thanks.”

I smiled at her, feeling her tension ease a bit through her loosened grip on my hand. My hair was in twists and pulled up at the top. I used to have locs like Ax, but I cut them off a while ago. My hair grew back fast as hell though. I usually kept it braided or twisted, then I’d wear it wild when I wasn’t at work. A couple of times, I’d blown it out, and it was the biggest afro I had ever seen.

“So I’m going to go over everything you should already know about your surgery and cover some things you may not know. Then I’ll leave to get my stuff together in the operating room and come back and get you.”

She nodded. I began explaining the details of her surgery and asking her questions to see if she’d been educated properly. I told her of all the risks and let her know that I had to make her aware. She seemed to stay calm during the talk, staring into my eyes and holding my hand nearly the entire time. Whenever she smiled, I couldn’t help but smile back. She had a dimple that seemed to wink at me every time she did.

Once I was done explaining, I tried to slide my hand from hers, but she gripped it. I stared at her as she closed her eyes. She took deep breaths, and her lips started moving, but no sound was coming from them. I assumed she was praying, so I

closed my eyes as well. *Lord, please let this surgery go as planned.* The heavier the patient was, the more difficult and risky weight loss surgery could be.

When she squeezed my hand, I opened my eyes to see her beautiful smile. She brought it to her cheek, expressing a sense of gratitude, and said, “Thank you, Dr. Vaughn.”

I nodded as she released my hand. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

When I left her area, I took a deep breath to calm my nerves. I wanted her to make it through this surgery so she could begin her journey. Diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and fluid retention was using her obesity as their ride to glory, but that ride would be disintegrating soon. I just prayed that it wasn’t too late.

CHAPTER 2

LYNN

My nerves were all over the place, and this gorgeous angel walked in here and calmed every single one of them. Dr. Vaughn was the most gorgeous man I had ever laid eyes on. *Jesus Christ*. The man was fine as hell, from the top of his head that adorned two-strand twists to his large feet that stereotypically meant one thing and one thing only.

However, the moment he left, the nerves came back with a vengeance. I'd been large my entire life. Four hundred fifteen pounds was where I was now. Despite that, my self-esteem was never lacking. I always dressed to impress, even if I had to wear a couple of waist trainers to be comfortable about the way I looked in a particular outfit. Being that I was only five-eight, that four hundred pounds wasn't as comfortable as I liked.

My knees constantly bothered me, and I was more than sure the heels I wore didn't help. Diabetes was running rampant through my body, and high blood pressure kept me with headaches. I felt tired all the time. I was too young to be faced with all these issues. I hadn't even graced my thirties yet. My mother never really took me to a doctor. I only remembered going to a clinic to get my immunizations. If they told her anything else about my health, I was unaware.

As far back as I could remember, I was bigger than most of my peers... even in kindergarten. My mother had told me that I was a fat baby and had shown me pictures. She was a big woman too and had long ago succumbed to the effects of congestive heart failure. She wasn't even fifty years old yet. I

refused to follow in her footsteps. I knew this journey would be difficult, because that liquid diet nearly took my ass right on out of here.

I had to lose weight before the surgery, and I'd lost the twenty pounds required of me. I didn't know how I did it, but I did. Hunger pains were killing me, and all I wanted to do was go to Whataburger and get a double meat cheeseburger and a large order of fries. Even now, all I could think about was how good a cinnamon roll would taste. I craved food like a pregnant woman.

I had to go through therapy for six weeks about food not being medication. That I shouldn't be living to eat but eating to live. I ate when I was angry, I ate when I was happy, and for everything in between. There wasn't a time I could think of where I didn't have an appetite. The therapist seemed to think that I had a food addiction, and it was why I was steadily gaining weight. I'd stretched out my stomach severely. Whereas some people could handle that kind of weight, my body couldn't.

It was rejecting the weight by all the health issues I had. The doctor had told me that if I didn't do something about it, my organs would start shutting down one by one. That scared me. I didn't want to die. I had too much to live for. I wanted to get married one day and have babies. My career was already set. I'd gone to school for six years, getting bachelor and master's degrees in communications. I worked for the radio station as a deejay. Everyone loved my voice. Very few people actually knew what I looked like. My middle name was Monique, so I went by DJ Mo 2 Luv.

I rarely revealed to people who I was, because I was never in conversation with anyone for longer than a couple of minutes. I saved my voice for the radio. I wasn't a talker outside of that. I loved that, because it felt like I had dual personalities. My sexy voice brought the male listeners, not to mention my segment, *Stroke the Male Ego*. I did it to uplift our brothers and to help women understand what they were going through.

As I lay in bed, slightly trembling, Dr. Vaughn appeared from around the curtain. "I'm back."

"So are we ready for surgery?"

"We have to wait a few minutes, but I figured I could chill out in here with you. I ain't tryna set myself up to be here all night."

I smiled slightly. *Good Lord*. This man was so fine. I knew he wasn't really paying attention to me since he was on the job. I remained quiet. My nerves were for a totally different reason now. "So... Ms. Jolivet, what do you do? Tell me something about yourself."

He turned to me with a slight smile on his face. "First, you can call me Lynn. I know it's professional to say Ms. Jolivet, but I feel old when people call me that. I'm twenty-eight... too young to have all the health issues I have. I'm from Missouri City."

"Okay, Mo-City Don. That's what's up. Your voice sounds like I've heard it before."

"I'm a deejay at The Box. Mo 2 Luv."

I spit that out so comfortably I shocked my-damn-self. "I know you lying. Man, you almost made me curse in here. I listen to you in the evenings sometimes. I like your segment, *Stroke the Male Ego*."

"Oh yeah? So what would you add to it if you called in?"

He lowered his head for a minute, then lifted his eyes to mine. "Can I speak freely? I don't need you reporting me afterward."

I giggled. "Yeah. What's up?"

"Maybe some of us ho around because we can't find what we looking for. Maybe good women are just as scarce as good men these days."

I swallowed hard. He was admitting to being a ho. *Okay*. "Damn, Dr. Vaughn. That's a good point."

"Arrow. If I'm calling you Lynn, you can call me Arrow."

“That’s different. I like it. So, I take it that you’re single.”

“Yep. I’m going to assume that you are, too, since no one is here with you.”

“Unfortunately, yes. My mother is deceased, and my father lives in California. I’m not close to him though. I haven’t talked to or seen him since my mother passed away five years ago. He has other kids in California, but I don’t know them.”

“Wow. So I mean, you don’t have friends?”

I shook my head. “I have coworkers. I go out and have a good time, but most times, I’m alone when I do. I don’t let people in easily.”

“Sounds like we have that in common. My parents are still alive. I have an older sister and brother.”

“So you’re the youngest? I bet you’re spoiled.”

He chuckled, and it seemed his cheeks reddened a bit. “I am a lil bit. Not spoiled enough to not get my share of whuppings growing up.”

“And you turned out to be a doctor. I guess they paid off.”

“Yeah. My brother Ax and I stayed in trouble. We both ended up becoming doctors.”

Damn. I wondered if his brother was as fine as he was. “Is he a doctor here?”

“Naw. He moved to Beaumont and started a practice there. He’s a gastroenterologist. After he met the woman that is now his wife, that was it. He started a practice there and hadn’t looked back at Houston since. They have a beautiful princess. She’s about ten months old.”

“Y’all must be close in age.”

“We are. Just a year apart. He’s thirty-four, and I’ll be thirty-three in a hot minute.”

“Dr. Vaughn, we’re ready,” a nurse said as she peeked around the curtain.

My nerves were back. I tensed up immediately. My brows furrowed, and I felt like I wanted to cry. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. “Hey... Ms. Jolivet... Lynn. Look at me.”

I opened my eyes to see Arrow standing over me. He grabbed my hand and caressed it with his thumb. The way he stared into my eyes almost lured me into a trance. Those perfect thick lips looked moist and hydrated. I wanted to kiss him suddenly. “Take a few deep breaths for me,” he said softly, not breaking his gaze into my soul.

I wondered if this felt as intense for him as it did for me. My entire body had heated up. I took the deep breaths, and he did so too, coaching me through it. After three or four, he said, “You finna knock this out the park. Everything is gonna go well, and you’ll be back at work before you know it, giving the city Mo 2 Luv. I promise I’m gonna be there every step of the way.”

I smiled at him and nodded. The nurse smiled too, and they began pushing my bed in the direction of the operating room. He slid his mask on then looked at me. I could see the smile in his eyes. “Keep taking those deep breaths, Lynn.”

I did as he said, and it helped. When we got to the operating room, they had R&B music playing. It was soothing, and I was grateful for that. I was more than sure Arrow had picked the music. Dr. Schrapps was an old white man. I doubted he listened to this. It had a soul, jazzy type feel to it. I looked over at Arrow and asked, “Who’s singing?”

“King. You like it?”

“I do. I love R&B, soul, and jazz. I like hip hop and gospel too, but those are my favorites.”

“I judged you right then.”

After they got my bed situated, the nurse left the room. There were a couple of other people in the room, moving around. Dr. Schrapps entered the room and spoke to everyone then came to my bed. “Hey, Ms. Jolivet. We’re finally getting the show on the road. You ready?”

I glanced at Arrow as he grabbed my hand and nodded slowly. I took a deep breath. "I'm ready. Let's do this."

He smiled at me and patted my shoulder. When he walked away, Arrow said, "What I'm giving you will have you sleeping like a baby. It's gon' be the best sleep you've ever gotten. When you come through this and heal up, you gon' have to hit me up to celebrate your new beginning."

I smiled at him as he got the syringe to push through my IV. "Okay. Thank you, Dr. Vaughn."

"What I tell you about that Dr. Vaughn stuff?"

"Thank you, Arrow. You're gonna stay the whole time?"

He smiled at me as Dr. Schrapps stared at him. He nodded. "The whole time. You ready?"

I nodded and closed my eyes. "Okay. Within a couple of seconds, you gon' be out like a light."

That was the last thing I remembered him saying before the lights went out.

CHAPTER 3

ARROW

We were wheeling Lynn to recovery. Her surgery had gone well. The journey to a healthier life for her had begun. When we got the bed positioned in recovery, I gently tapped her shoulder and watched her eyes flutter. Once her eyes opened, she began coughing a bit since we'd used a breathing tube. Because of her obesity and sleep apnea, it was necessary. She could have very well stopped breathing without one.

I held her hand as she tried to come to. Her eyes opened, and she looked right at me. She smiled, but I could tell that she was still totally out of it and probably wouldn't remember any of this. Her eyes were extremely low like she was high. I chuckled and said, "You made it. I just wanted to assure you that I was there the entire time. If it's okay, I may drop in to check on you tomorrow."

She nodded. "Yes. Thank you, Arrow."

I didn't want to scare her and tell her that I had to be there. As long as she was under anesthesia, I had to be there in case there were any complications... even with general anesthesia. Before I could say goodbye, she was out again. I smiled as I stared at her. She was so beautiful. Her high cheekbones that made her slanted eyes almost close when she smiled was sexy as hell. Had it not been for her health complications, if she wanted to lose weight, I would have helped her work it off every damn night.

She was thick in all the right places. I could clearly see that through her hospital gown. Lord, when that thing fell open and I saw all the shit she would be getting rid of, I had to think of

damn gremlins and other rodents to keep my dick from getting hard. I couldn't have people questioning my abilities because I couldn't keep him in check.

Normally, I didn't talk to patients as much as I talked to her, but I was trying to stay out of sight so I wouldn't end up here all night. If someone would have seen me, I would've ended up working another surgery. I wanted to bend over and kiss her forehead, but I would get fired for sure. The doctor had said that he would be keeping her for two days, so if I couldn't make my way here tomorrow, I would at least send flowers and put my phone number on it. I had to shoot my shot.

It seemed as if she was feeling the same way I did. The way she stared at me... it felt like she was analyzing my soul. Maybe she was just attentive, and I was fooling myself. I grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze, then turned to head to my locker to get my shit. Before I could leave, I heard her say, "Thank you, Arrow."

When I turned to her, I noticed her eyes were still closed, and she was talking in her sleep. I chuckled then made my way out. Katrina was walking into the recovery area as I was leaving, and when she saw me, she frowned. "What are you doing in here?"

"I was leaving Ms. Jolivet's bedside. I wheeled her in here."

"Oh."

That wasn't unusual. I often did that for my patients when I had time between surgeries, and especially for the last one of the day if they were cool with me before surgery. "I'm about to head out. You working Monday?"

"Yep. I'll be here three p.m. to three a.m.," she said as she rolled her eyes. "I hate that fucking shift. I don't get to spend any time with my family. Either I'm here or sleeping. When I wake up, my kids are at school, and my husband is at work."

"I can imagine. Well, I'll see you tomorrow. I'm tired as hell."

“How long have you been here?” she asked.

“I got here at three this morning.”

She looked at the clock on the wall to see that it was eight o'clock. Turning back to me, her eyes wide, she said, “That’s a long ass day. Get some rest, Arrow. Don’t do shit I wouldn’t do this weekend.”

I chuckled and slowly shook my head as I walked off. She was married. Nothing was off limits for her sexually. She told me that they’d even had a threesome a couple of times. So I didn’t know what the fuck she *wouldn’t* do. When I got to my locker, I sent my mama a text to let her know that I was leaving the hospital.

After grabbing my bag, I turned around to almost run right into Dr. Schrapps. “I apologize, Dr. Vaughn. Do you know my patient?”

“Naw, not personally. She’s a deejay at a radio station I listen to occasionally. I’d never met her in person or even seen a picture.”

“Ahh, so you’re a fan?”

I chuckled and shrugged. “I guess you can say that. Never thought of it that way.”

“She seemed really comfortable with you. She’d been so nervous about this surgery. I think that’s why she wasn’t upset that it kept getting postponed. Are you like that with all your patients? If so, I may want to request you for future procedures.”

I reached in my coat and handed him my business card, silently answering his question. “I’m credentialed here and at Hermann.”

“Thanks, Dr. Vaughn. Great work today.”

I nodded and left to get to my parents’ house. As I checked my messages, I saw that she’d texted me back. *Do you want to eat here, or will you take it home?*

If you don’t mind, can you warm it for me to eat it there?

Absolutely, baby.

I smiled slightly as I entered the parking garage and got into my Maserati. Life was great. My career was amazing. There wasn't a thing I desired that I didn't have, except love. Material things were mine for the taking. I made nearly half a mil a year. Since I was single, I worked more than any other anesthesiologist in the area. My home was a two-story, five-bedroom palace, just waiting to be filled with family. I bought it a year ago, hoping to one day find my queen.

Truth be told, I was lonely. *Lonely as fuck*. I was almost at the point of putting out ads in the paper. I wasn't about to settle for just anything though. The strip club no longer interested me and neither did the other clubs. I was tired of the fucking scene. I wanted to lay up in my house and cuddle with the woman I loved, and actually Netflix and Chill. I wanted to enjoy every day with my woman like it was my last.

My mind wandered back to Lynn. Mo 2 Luv. She seemed like she could be a good prospect for the position. She was friendly, beautiful, and seemed just as driven as me. According to her segment, she loved black men and wanted to see us prosper financially as well as in love. She was a rider. I knew if a man she felt compatible with came along, she would bite. I just hoped she felt compatible with me.

When I got to my parents' house and walked through the door, I said, "Yo, yo, yo! The prince is here."

My mama appeared in the kitchen and gave me a big hug. It didn't matter if I'd just seen her yesterday, she always hugged me like it had been months. "Hey, baby. Let me get your food from the microwave. How was work?"

"Hey, Mama. It was tiring but cool. Money was made, doctors and patients were happy, and I'm off this weekend."

"Sounds good to me, although money ain't everything, son."

"It's not, but I'd rather be *making* money than spending it. When I need the rest, I'll take days off."

She gave me the side-eye. I'd been saying that since last year. It was early December, and I could count how many days I'd taken off this year. Sundays were my normal off days unless an emergency popped up. I sat at the kitchen table, and she brought my food to me with a huge glass of lemonade. She knew I loved her lemonade. "Thanks, Mama. Where's Dad?"

"He went to the store to get some trash bags. We ran out before he noticed we were low. It's running over, but it's the last bag. He'll take it out after you scratch your bones in it."

I looked down at my plate of smothered chicken, yams, cabbage, and field peas with rice. My mama always threw down in the kitchen. Lately, besides my dad, I'd been the only one still benefitting. After blessing my food, I dug in. My eyes closed involuntarily with the first forkful of cabbage. I was in soul food heaven, running through fields of flowers like the grandma in the *Klumps*. "Damn, Ma," I said as soon as I swallowed what was in my mouth. "This is good."

"Uh huh. Thank your daddy for the motivation."

I dropped the fork and stared at her with my lip turned up. "Why you had to ruin my meal like that?"

"Boy, you got a stomach of iron. I know I ain't ruined your appetite."

She laughed, and I couldn't help but smile slightly. "You right, but that don't mean I wanna hear about it, especially not while I'm eating."

She lifted her hands in surrender. "Fine. I'll wait until you finish."

"Ma!"

She laughed so hard she almost fell. I slowly shook my head as my daddy walked through the door with the trash bags. He kissed my mama like he hadn't just seen her before he left for the store. I stood from my seat and shook his hand. "Hey, son. She always throws something you love in the meal."

I smiled. I'd loved field peas ever since I was a kid. "What's up, Dad? That she does, and I'm so appreciative."

“Good. So if she wants to talk about how I satisfied her, you should listen.”

The smile dropped from my face, and I rolled my eyes as they laughed. They were always with the shits. “I need to hurry up and find me a woman to spend time with before y’all ruin sex for me.”

“Ruin sex for you? Nigga, finish yo’ food and go home so I can have my wife to myself.”

I stood from my seat and got the foil. “I don’t have to stay here and take this abuse. I’m going home and enjoy my food in peace and quiet.”

They only laughed harder. I was happy that they were that way though. They hadn’t grown to hate each other. My aunt and uncle slept in separate rooms, and I didn’t understand that. It was like they damn near hated each other but refused to leave. My aunt said it would kill my uncle if she left. *Fuck that*. I wasn’t ’bout to be miserable for no damn body.

After I wrapped my plate, I glanced at the two of them. They were standing there waiting for me to leave. *Nasty asses*. I was salty as hell. I was too tired to fuck anybody. It was times like this where I wished I had a woman the most. I’d give my right testicle to be laid up under the woman I loved right about now, but whatever.

I kissed my mama’s cheek and shook my dad’s hand and made my way out of the door with my plate of food. Thankfully, I didn’t live too far from them, only about fifteen minutes. I wasn’t trying to rewarm food when I got home. I just wanted to finish eating, shower, and if I couldn’t go to sleep, go power drive Melanie’s pussy.

As I was turning in my driveway, my phone rang. When I saw Jamel’s number on the caller ID, I answered. “What’s up, bruh?”

“What’s up? You going to Beaumont this weekend?”

“I plan to go Sunday.”

“What’chu doing tomorrow?”

“I don’t know. Rest.”

“Sandrene is going to Laredo with Amiko, so I wanted to see if you wanted to hang out.”

“I’ll let you know tomorrow. I’m tired as hell.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll let you go.”

“We can talk for a minute. I just got home. I worked damn near seventeen hours today. I still have to eat. How are things with you and yo’ private dancer?”

He chuckled. “Things are good. I really wish she would move in with me. I be missing her ass during the week. At least if we lived together, we could lay up under each other.”

“I feel you, bruh.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. This single life ain’t that fun no more. You all up under Sandrene on the weekends, me and Seneca’s schedules clash, and Ali has been out of pocket lately too. You and I are the closest. This shit lonely. I met a woman today that had me all soft and shit though.”

“Nigga, you always soft, especially if you met her at work.”

“Shut up. I met her at work. She was a patient.”

“Oh shit. What was she having surgery for?”

I remained quiet for a moment as I thought about Lynn. “You know I ain’t supposed to be telling you this shit, so keep it to yourself.”

“Aww, nigga, I know.”

“Bariatric surgery. She has health issues that made the weight loss surgery necessary. And get this... She’s Mo 2 Luv on the radio.”

“Damn. For real? Is she really heavy?”

“Not to me. I can see her curves. She’s not short... maybe about five-seven or eight, so it’s evenly distributed. But I mean... that didn’t even matter to me. The first thing I noticed

was how beautiful she was and her tears. I'm not a superficial type of guy when it comes to matters of the heart. Just for a fuck... then yeah. I want to get to know her."

"How you gon' do that though? You were her doctor."

"*Were* is the keyword. I'm gonna call the florist in the morning for a last-minute delivery."

"That's what's up. I hope it works out for you, bruh."

"Yeah, me too."

"Well, I'll call you tomorrow to see if you wanna get into something. If not, I'll see you Sunday."

"A'ight, man. Holla."

I ended the call as I dug into my food. It was time to hang up my playboy shoes. It had *been* time. Hopefully, this wouldn't be a long process. If it was, I didn't know how I would keep myself from reverting to what I'd always known. *Sticking and moving.*

CHAPTER 4

LYNN

“I ’m okay, Jazzy. I had to do a swallow test this morning, and I passed... no leakage. I should be going home tomorrow morning.”

“That’s good, Mo. I’m glad you’re getting your health under control.”

“Me too.”

“Okay. Well, get some rest. I can’t wait to see you back at work. Your listeners will be glad to have you back as well.”

“Thanks, Jazzy. Talk to you later.”

I ended the call with a smile. Jazzy was the one person from my job that always checked on me. He was the only one that seemed to give a damn, besides my supervisor. She had her hands full though. I didn’t take her silence personally. Thankfully, I wasn’t in too much pain. It was more like a mild discomfort. I’d already walked around and had been doing well. I was just hoping I didn’t experience too much pain at all, especially once I went home. It had barely been twelve hours since the procedure.

As I shifted in the bed and turned on the TV, there was a knock at the door. Assuming it was a nurse, I didn’t respond. Sure enough, the door opened, and it was my nurse. She came in to check my vitals and to see how I was feeling. She was only in my room for a total of five minutes then she was gone.

However, when there was another knock at the door, I was confused as to who it could be. I didn’t respond, and they didn’t come in. After they knocked again, I said, “Come in.”

When I saw a big, beautiful bouquet of pink tulips, I fell in love. The only person that could have sent those were Jazzy. Once I signed for them, the delivery guy handed me the card from the stem and placed them on the windowsill. He gave me a smile and left my room after wishing me a speedy recovery.

I stared at the flowers for a moment and reflected on just how good it felt to receive them. I never received flowers. I hadn't had a significant other in nearly five years, and I hadn't even gone out on a date in at least two years. Thankfully, my job kept me busy. I was constantly thinking of content and brainstorming for my show.

Taking my attention away from them, I opened the card with a smile, expecting to see a message from Jazzy. My eyes zeroed in on the name, and when I saw Arrow Vaughn aka Dr. Vaughn at the bottom, my entire body heated up. I quickly went back up to read what the card said.

I hope you're recovering well and in minimal pain. I'm off work today, but if you feel like having company, I wouldn't mind coming to chill with you. Call me.

His phone number was listed. My eyes misted. I wasn't sure if he actually wanted to spend time with me or if he felt sorry for me. I was definitely open to finding out. I grabbed the hospital phone from the side table and dialed his number after glancing at the clock to see it was ten in the morning. Hopefully, he was awake. I knew he'd had a long day yesterday.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Dr. Vaughn. Thank you so much for the flowers. They're beautiful."

"Hey. You're welcome. Girl, I almost didn't answer the phone. I thought they were tryna call me in. I was prepared to tell them hell naw."

I giggled. I liked his nonprofessional tone. It matched the sex appeal he was giving off yesterday when we talked. "My bad. This phone was closer. I would love... I mean, I won't mind having company. Just make sure you eat before you get

here. I would hate to strike you off my nonexistent friend list before you even get there.”

He was quiet for a moment. “I’d never torture you like that. Food won’t even be a topic of discussion. Give me another hour, and I’ll be there. What’s your room number?”

Once I gave him my info, he ended the call. My heart was beating fast as hell. The tenderness in his voice when he promised not to bring up food, caught me off guard. Was he trying to be more than just my friend? *Why?* This was so new to me, and I didn’t know how to feel about it. I was constantly protecting myself from fuckboys. Arrow had somewhat indicated that he was a ho in conversation yesterday evening.

However, I knew he couldn’t have been thinking about fucking when he saw me yesterday. I was at my very worst, physically, mentally, and emotionally. I was worried about dying and everything else. My lips were dry and cracked from biting them, and I’d practically broken all my nails off from worry. Just the acrylic was sitting on top of them. He kept grabbing my hand like he didn’t notice. He was probably laughing at me on the inside.

As I shifted again, I realized I was being one of two things: either toxic to myself or overthinking shit he wasn’t concerned about. Maybe he just wanted to be friends. He was so damn fine though, and I couldn’t help but analyze myself under his physical perfections. Within an hour, he would be here like we were totally comfortable with one another and were old friends.

I was comfortable with him as Dr. Vaughn. That wasn’t who he’d be when he got here. He would be Arrow. I would have to calm my nerves somehow. I almost wanted to ask for pain meds just because. However, my tolerance was low when it came to narcotics. If I got something, I would be asleep when he got here and possibly the entire time he was here.

It would help to sleep off some of this anxiety though before I made myself sick. I glanced at the tulips and when I tried to look away, I found myself looking right back at them. They were so beautiful. Just the fact that he took the time to

order flowers for me was amazing in itself. That had to be a one-hundred-dollar bouquet. That was probably nothing to him since he was an anesthesiologist. On top of that, he was in high demand. My little radio salary probably wasn't shit compared to his. I stared at the flowers and drifted off to sleep with a smile on my face.

I AWAKENED TO A KNOCK ON THE DOOR. AS I GLANCED DOWN at my body, I quickly pulled the covers to my neck. "Come in."

When the door opened, I closed my eyes and yawned. That action hurt a bit, so I was wincing when he walked around the corner. Concern filled his gaze as he approached my bedside. "Hey. You okay?"

"Yeah. I yawned."

He smiled then went to the couch to have a seat. "So, how was your morning?"

"It was okay. I did the swallow test, and everything was fine. I also walked."

"Good. You probably ready to get out of here then."

I smiled slightly, but I didn't respond to him verbally. He turned his attention to the TV. "What'chu in here watching?"

"More like what's watching me. I'd dozed off staring at the beautiful scenery on my windowsill."

He glanced at the bouquet, and I swore I saw him redden a bit. It disappeared just as quickly as it appeared though. "If you want to sleep, go ahead."

I frowned slightly. "That would be rude. I told you I wanted company."

"You're in the hospital. You had surgery yesterday. It's normal to still feel sluggish. I really wanted to make sure you were good."

My curiosity got the best of me. I had to know. “Why? I mean... the flowers, your personal number, and your presence. I know you don’t do this for all your patients.”

He scooted forward on the couch, and when I saw his dick print through his sweats, it felt like I started sweating instantly. I saw an arrow alright. My eyes quickly lifted to his as he said, “Well, I thought that you could use a friend.” He looked away and took a deep breath. “I mean... I could use a friend. We seem to get along well. Conversation doesn’t usually flow *that* smoothly between me and patients. We gel.”

Friends. I knew it. I was reading too much into this. I nodded. I didn’t know if I could be his friend with as fine as he was. I was attracted to him, and I thought he was attracted to me too. *Ugh!* After clearing my throat, I said, “Okay.”

He smiled at me and sat back on the couch. Now that I’d seen his package, I couldn’t stop myself from glancing at it. Now it was resting on his thigh, calling out to me like a fucking candy cane. I closed my eyes. I wanted to turn my damn head, too, but that would be taking it too far. Before I could continue our conversation, there was a knock at the door.

It opened, and when the nurse walked in with a pitcher of ice and water, her eyes widened. “Dr. Vaughn, I wasn’t expecting to see you in here.”

He didn’t say anything to her. He only nodded. However, I noticed his eyes quickly scanned her. She set the pitcher on my bed table as she asked, “How do y’all know each other?”

“We’re friends,” I answered.

She looked uncomfortable for a second, then she returned to her bubbly self. “Oh, okay. Well, do you need anything, Ms. Jolivet?”

“No, ma’am. I’m okay.”

“Okay. Just hit your call button if anything changes.”

I nodded as she gave Arrow a glance. “See you later, Dr. Vaughn.”

He nodded too. They either wanted to fuck or they had already. I could see the attraction between the two of them plain as day. Breaking my silence, I said, “She wants you.”

He turned to me with a frown on his face. “What makes you think so?”

I gave him the side-eye. “Don’t insult my intelligence, Dr. Vaughn. I can tell by the way she looked at you. Either that, or she’s already had you.”

When he remained quiet, I turned to him to see him staring at the TV. *They were fucking*. I could appreciate one thing though. He didn’t lie to me. While he didn’t totally divulge what was going on between them, he didn’t deny it either. He had no reason to lie to me, but I was glad he didn’t go that route.

I chose to change the subject by asking, “So what are you into outside of this place?”

His face brightened a bit. “Well, as you can see, I like getting tattoos.” He chuckled as he lifted his hands, showing me the art I’d already peeped. He had palm trees on one hand and what looked to be a butterfly on the other. “I like kicking it with my people. I go to Beaumont almost every Sunday to kick it. My parents live here in Houston, so I spend a lot of time with them too when I’m not at work. I used to go out a lot, but I’ve slowed down on that, especially since my partner in crime done settled down.”

“I like the tats. How many do you have?”

“I don’t even know. Quite a few. I lost count.”

“Are there any that you regret?”

He tried to contain the smirk on his thick, soft-looking lips, but he failed miserably. “Yeah. I got the words ‘just vibe’ on my legs right above my knees. ‘Just’ on one leg and ‘vibe’ on the other.”

A slow smile appeared on my lips. “What made you want to get that?”

“I don’t even know. I was stressing over finals and just went and got it.”

I nodded as he stared at me. It was like he was waiting for me to laugh. When I finally released a giggle, he said, “Go ahead and laugh. I knew you wanted to. That’s okay. I see how this friendship is already going. You gon’ laugh at my pain.”

That only caused me to laugh a little louder. He shook his head and laughed too. His twists swayed as he did. I so loved his hair. “So you mean to tell me you ain’t never done something crazy that you regretted later?”

“Absolutely. There just isn’t any proof of it,” I said, barely able to contain my laughter.

I brought my hands to my stomach, trying to stop the slight pain I felt from laughing so much. Arrow stood and walked to my bedside. “That’s what you get for laughing at me.”

He moved my hands and laid his there, gently massaging. I heated up so much. My light complexion had to be red for sure. He stared into my eyes as if gauging my pain through them. “That feels better?” he asked in a softer voice.

Dr. Vaughn had arrived just that quickly. I nodded as I stared into his eyes. I was mesmerized, and I didn’t want him to look away. “How does your hair look when it’s loose?”

He smiled slightly, then pulled his phone from his pocket. After finding what he was searching for and showing me a picture, I nearly came on myself. Arrow Vaughn belonged in magazines. He was too fine to only be seen in the hospital. “Wow. I love it. You’re fit for hair commercials.”

“I have a sponsor. I do a lot of TikTok videos, so I get noticed. Hair product reps contact me all the time.”

“That’s so cool.”

He went back to his seat as he asked, “So what else are you into besides radio and music?”

“Music is my life. I listen to it all day. Today is the first day that I haven’t listened to music in years. I like going to concerts, clubs, and just hanging out.”

He stood and went to my phone. He handed it to me to unlock it, then I gave it back to him. “So tell me your favorite song that’s outside of your preferred genres of music. Everyone has at least one favorite song that’s unlike any music they normally listen to.”

I smiled slightly. “I actually have two. They are kind of old, but I love them. ‘All By Myself’ by Celine Dion and ‘I Don’t Want to Miss a Thing’ by Aerosmith.”

He nodded, then began playing “All By Myself.” I closed my eyes when Celine started singing. I wasn’t sure if he was familiar with the song. I was always a loner. I had a few acquaintances in high school, but after we graduated, that was it. The song’s lyrics resonated with me. Love had been distant and obscure... just like the song said. Celine sang the fuck out of that song. I lost myself in it whenever I heard it.

The room was quiet, other than the song playing, and I could imagine he was probably staring at me and my many facial expressions. Whenever she hit a note I liked, I would make a stank face. Music was something that had always been a constant in my life. It never left me. When Celine sang her pinnacle note in this song, I shook my head rapidly like I was in church feeling the spirit. That note was the pinnacle of that song. It was the defining moment for me that said, *this white girl can sang*.

When the song ended, I opened my eyes to find Arrow staring at me. His face was serious. I was expecting to see a smile or something indicating that he thought my reactions to the song were funny. Instead, he said, “Well, you aren’t all by yourself anymore.”

He put my fucking heart on pause.

CHAPTER 5

ARROW

“So, let’s listen to this Aerosmith song. You gon’ have me venturing out of Hip Hop and R&B,” I said to Lynn.

That song by Celine Dion was sad as hell. I had to assume that Lynn related to it for her to feel so strongly about it. I mean, Celine sounded good in the song, but because of what she was saying, it wouldn’t be my choice as a favorite unless I could relate to the lyrics. When I found the song and hit play, she closed her eyes once again.

I honestly liked that she closed her eyes. It gave me the opportunity to study her without making her uncomfortable. I knew this song from the movie, *Armageddon*, but I never knew the name of it. I watched her arched eyebrows scrunch together as she pursed her lips. I gently grabbed her blonde braid that was hidden under her cap yesterday and played with it. This woman had a beautiful personality. I just hoped she could see that in me.

I wished I wouldn’t have told her that I just wanted to be her friend, because I wanted so much more, but I didn’t want to scare her off. Lots of people didn’t believe in instant chemistry or instant anything for that matter. I felt it the moment I saw her. It was like her soul had lassoed mine and pulled it into itself. When the lead singer began screaming in the song, she shook her head again like she did when listening to the Celine Dion song.

When it went off, I said, “I get the impression that you listen to these often.”

She took a deep breath and winced slightly when she did so. “I wouldn’t say often, but at least once every other month. Who are some of your favorites?”

“Well, as far as R&B goes, I like Kenyon Dixon and Eli Derby.”

“Oh yes. I love them, especially Kenyon Dixon. The brother has pipes.”

I smiled and put her phone down. Watching her in her element was so peaceful. I went back to the couch and said, “I gotta add that Aerosmith song.”

“What about Celine?”

“It’s kind of depressing for me, but I feel like that’s how you really feel.”

“Kind of. The single life gets lonely, but being that I don’t have any family close to me makes it worse. My mama was my everything. The way she was taken away from me was just so cruel. I wanted to ask God questions, like why did He even allow this. Eventually, I found peace with it.”

She reminded me so much of Jamel’s girlfriend Sandrene as far as the family situation. Sandrene’s parents were deceased, and she was the only child born to their union. Since Lynn hadn’t spoken to her father in years, he might as well had been dead. I knew it would be cruel to say that to her, but I was more than sure she probably felt that way. I’d only been around this woman for one day, and I was already making assumptions about how she felt. What in the fuck was wrong with me?

“I’m gonna assume you cool with getting to know me.”

“Yeah. You seem cool, Arrow.”

I nodded as my cell phone rang. I had a feeling it was Jamel. When I pulled my phone out, I saw that my assumption was correct. “What’s up, bruh?”

“Nigga, where you at? I’m at your place.”

“I’m at the hospital, Mel. Why you at my house without calling first?”

“Nigga, since when?”

“Yeah. Yo’ ass got a woman, and now you need the arrow to point you in the direction to a good time.”

“Fool, shut up. Where you at? Don’t tell me. The hospital.”

“Yep. I just said that.”

“Nigga, you might as well sell this shit you call a home and forward all your mail to the medical center. You gon’ be there all day?”

“I don’t know. I’ll call you when I leave.”

“Bye, nigga.”

I chuckled as I ended the call. I lifted my head to find Lynn staring at me. “Why you turning down stuff to sit up here at the hospital with me?”

“Mel gon’ be in Beaumont tomorrow. My brother is married to his sister. We’re a part of the same family. I can see him whenever. You might ghost me once you get out of here.”

She chuckled. “What makes you think that?”

“I don’t know. You just don’t seem as interested in forming a friendship with me as I am with you.”

She shrugged. “I’m interested. I’m just so used to being alone it feels weird when other people come into my space, especially if I don’t initiate it. I do want you here though. I’m enjoying your company.”

I smiled softly at her, and we continued to make small talk about the weather and our jobs for at least the next couple of hours. When I decided to leave so she could get some rest, she actually looked slightly disappointed. I was kind of disappointed too, but I was hungry, and I refused to eat in front of her or even bring up that I was hungry. The biggest part she would have to overcome with this surgery was her mind. She wasn’t hungry, but her mind would be telling her that she needed to eat something. That was enough turmoil in itself. She didn’t need me adding to it.

I WAS BEYOND PISSED AT MYSELF. I LEFT THAT HOSPITAL AND didn't have Lynn's phone number. She'd called me from the hospital phone. I'd been calling that number all day, but she wasn't answering. I was more than sure she had been released to go home. I supposed she had someone to pick her up... either that or she called an Uber. I could have been the one to take her home. *Fuck*. I supposed if she wanted to talk to me, she would call. She had my number on that card from her flowers if she saved it.

I was sitting here for Sunday dinner at the Berotte's looking like I'd lost my best friend, when one of them was sitting right next to me acting a fool with Chad and DJ. Jamel was happy and way more talkative than he'd been. He wasn't ever really quiet, but he wasn't as loud as he was being now. I could only attribute that to the woman in his life. She'd started teaching the women how to pole dance, and they were always talking about it. That happened to be what they were talking about now.

“Man, Lexi had a pole installed in our bedroom two weeks ago. Listen, the shit she did on that thing had me drooling. Mel, I see why you was fiending. Lexi had me on a fucking leash like a real ass dog after that. She could have had me in a fucking apron cleaning the whole house and cooking like a maid. I would have done whatever she wanted me to do. I would have even been a weak ass Sigma,” he said as he glanced at Isaiah.

I rolled my eyes. Every Sunday it was the same shit. They always talked shit about each other's frat, mainly Chad. He liked picking with people, and everyone was accustomed to it. So much so, when he was quiet, everyone knew something was wrong.

“Nigga, you better be trying to be like this Sigma man so you can turn your woman on. Dawg's can only satisfy bitches. Ask your woman to confirm, because she's probably left wanting more. You need to level up.”

My eyebrows shot up, and my mouth formed in an O. “Ooooooh! This nigga took out the big guns!” Shy said loudly and slapped Zay’s hand.

I swore that statement had Chad, Ax, DJ, and me on pause. He stunned the fuck out of the majority. Finally, DJ said, “Nigga! How you gon’ throw all of us under the bus with Chad’s ass?”

“I didn’t though. I said *he* needed to level up. I thought y’all had already leveled up, but only hit dawgs holla.” He shrugged. “Just saying.”

Shy, Dylan, and Mel were laughing so damn hard Mr. Sheldon had to come find out what was so funny. The look on his face was one of amusement, like he didn’t know whether to laugh or be offended. Isaiah looked unbothered, and we looked like we’d swallowed a whole lemon. Chad finally eased up a bit and said, “You know that’s yo’ ass, right? It’s open season, nigga. I gotta give it to you. That was a good one. Below the fucking belt, but a good one. I ain’t got a comeback because I’m tryna focus on this trial next Monday.”

“What?” Mr. Sheldon asked, clearly hating that he missed the action.

As Chad explained to him what had happened, Ax sat next to me. “You good, bruh?”

“Yeah. Tryna recover from the shit Zay just said.”

Axton laughed. “Yeah, he was wild for that one. I guess I’m glad I done leveled up.” He laughed again as he shook his head. “For real, bruh, you good?”

“Well, I’m kinda feeling one of my patients. I went to see her at the hospital yesterday and spent hours with her. Sent flowers and everything, man. She called me from the hospital number, and I forgot to get her number. So now I’m forced to wait on her to call me since I put my number on the card of the flowers I sent.”

“Damn. When was her surgery?”

“Day before yesterday. I want to talk to her so bad. It’s killing me to wait for her to call.”

“Wait a minute. Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

I frowned as I stared at the man that was nearly my twin.
“What?”

“You ready to settle down? I never thought that day would come for you and Jamel, for real.”

“We just hadn’t met a woman that pulled that out of us.”

“You can’t get her number out of her records?”

I gave him the side-eye. He of all people knew better. He was a doctor and knew I couldn’t invade her privacy, especially since I wasn’t her doctor. I wanted to say to hell with it though. This feeling was all too new to me. I’d never been caught up enough to miss anybody, especially not someone I’d never been intimate with.

Axton chuckled, then said, “Sounds like you in a jam. Do you know where she works?”

“Mm hmm. She’s Mo 2 Luv at The Box.”

“I know you lying. I used to think she had a sexy ass voice.”

“Yep. I thought the same thing about her. It’s even sexier in person. She’s a beautiful woman.”

“Well, if it’s meant for y’all to connect, she’ll either call or you’ll run into her again.”

Before I could respond to him, Seneca and Ali walked in. They gave everybody a pound. I hadn’t talked to Seneca in a month, and just from seeing him I wanted to dig in his shit and ask all kinds of questions. Kaysyn hadn’t been forthcoming about any new developments in her relationship status with Luckey, so I could only assume that he hadn’t broken the news to her yet. I wanted to tell Ax so bad, but I knew things would get out of hand if I did. He would confront Kay in front of Mama, Daddy, and her kids. That nigga didn’t care when he thought one of us was going through some shit.

I remembered there was a girl spreading around campus that I’d given her herpes. That nigga had stood on one of the

tables in the most populated area of campus and said that she got herpes from another nigga she was ho-ing around with while holding up my clear test results. Then the nigga made copies of the shit and was passing it around campus. People laughed at and talked about her ass so much until she dropped out or went to another school.

Being that Seneca could be hot headed at times, I knew I had to keep shit to myself. Jamel was the only one who knew that I knew and kept glancing at me, I supposed to make sure I stayed in pocket. When Seneca got to me, I stood from the couch and slapped his hand. He pulled me in for a hug and said, "Meet me outside."

Aww fuck! "A'ight. Jamel gon' come, too, because he knows."

"A'ight."

I gave Jamel a head nod and tilted my head in the direction of the patio so he knew to follow us. The minute we closed the door behind us, Seneca said, "I told her what the issue was with not so Luckey."

I almost wanted to laugh at him calling that nigga not so Luckey. "What did she say?"

"She was hurt, of course, but she doesn't want to tell y'all just yet. She said she knows we're cool, so not to tell you. She needs to process everything I told her first."

"Well, this ain't no fucking better. I should have just told her I saw y'all. Now if I say that shit, she gon' think you said something."

"Not if you tell her when you saw us. She'll know that I hadn't said anything about it yet. You can't tell her that you know something is even up with Luckey though."

"Naw. Kaysyn too smart for that. She'll think you said something to me before you said something to her. I mean unless you don't care."

"You know I care. I just didn't think about it that way," he said as he rubbed his hand over his mouth.

My beef wasn't with him, but he was the one getting the pushback because Kaysyn was playing. "I think I'm just gonna tell her. She should know you by now, right? She knows you wouldn't do that."

He shrugged then looked at his feet for a second. "Whatever. Either way, I know we gon' get into it about it. She so fucking stubborn. Shit gotta be her way or no way at all."

"Hol' up na. That's still my sister."

"I got'chu, nigga. Still."

"She *is* stubborn. I'ma holla at her though, because I can't be sitting on this type of information without asking her what's up. I thought she would have been forthcoming about what was going on, but apparently, she has no intent of saying anything. How long ago you told her?"

"Last weekend."

"Bruh, just make sure you don't fly off the handle," Jamel said.

"I won't. That's why I didn't tell Ax, because he will."

"Y'all come eat!" Alexz said through the door.

I took a deep breath and stared at Seneca for a moment. The nigga looked defeated, and that was something I'd never seen. Kaysyn had some explaining to do.

CHAPTER 6

LYNN

“How you feeling, Mo?”

“Just a little sluggish, but I’m okay. I’m moving around and pushing through it.”

“Make sure you don’t do too much.”

“I won’t. Talk to you later, Jazzy.”

I ended the call and looked at the time. I’d been sleeping a lot since I’d been home. They told me it was common to want to rest afterward, but I knew I needed to get moving. It was Monday, and I was taking sips of water still. Much more than that made me throw up. I tried to drink a little more yesterday and ended up regurgitating my insides. I was in no shape to talk to or see anyone after that.

I had planned to call Arrow when I got home, but that shit killed all my intentions. Today I knew he was probably at work. It was so sweet of him to sit with me for as long as he did Saturday. The killing thing was that he seemed to enjoy my company as much as I was enjoying his. I was kind of in my feelings when he didn’t call Sunday, but then I remembered he only had the hospital number since that was what I called him from.

I wondered if he was feeling as tortured as I was or if he was just chilling or fucking on somebody... like Nurse Melanie. Just the thought of that put a sour taste in my mouth. I knew that it was only because I wanted him to be fucking on me. Who was I kidding? The man had friend zoned me. He probably didn’t like big girls like me, because Melanie was a

much smaller woman. She wasn't skinny, but she wasn't big like me either. It was usually the men that I found attractive that turned the other way.

The men I came across that liked BBWs were always older... like old enough to be my grandfather. They didn't look like the Silver Fox Squad either. They looked like the typical grandfather. Wasn't shit attractive about that. One man had the nerve to approach me smelling like piss. When I noticed his pants were wet, I threw up in my damn mouth. He needed a fucking provider to help him change his Depends, not a girlfriend.

A man like Arrow Vaughn never had a woman like me on their radar. Still... he thought enough of me to sit at the hospital for hours Saturday. The way he stared at me while those songs played had me shivering on the inside. My eyes weren't completely closed the entire time. I could still see him and how he analyzed every part of my body because he thought I wasn't looking at him. When he grabbed my braid and played with it, I wanted to pass out.

The memories from that day had me grabbing my cell phone and the card from the flowers sitting on my windowsill. As I punched in his number to send a text, my insides heated. The way he looked at me couldn't have been the way he would look at someone he only wanted to be friends with, but I had to go by what he said he wanted. *Hey, Arrow. Sorry I didn't message you yesterday. I felt like crap. I'm at home though, and this is my phone number. Lynn*

After I sent it, I saw the bubbles come up, indicating he had an iPhone like me. When the message appeared, I laughed so hard. He sent the meme of Denzel Washington holding his heart and falling back into a chair. Right after, the next message came through. *Damn, girl. I thought you'd already ghosted a nigga. I called the hospital phone a few times yesterday. I felt crazy for missing you already. I'm pathetic and need more friends. How are you feeling today?*

I chuckled as I read his message. It was nice to know that he'd missed me. I quickly responded. *LOL I'm okay. What about you? Are you working?*

Yeah. Can I call you in an hour? I'm on my way to another surgery, then I'm taking a lunch break.

Of course.

He sent the heart emoji, and I stared at that thing for what seemed like hours, analyzing it. This was fast for a friendship. It felt like we were kids in elementary school. *Will you be my friend? Circle yes or no.* This shit was weird, or maybe it was just weird to me. I didn't typically make friends intentionally. It was done organically. That was probably why I didn't really have any. Jazzy was the closest thing to that. I felt like the minute we stopped working together, we would fall off.

I turned on my TV, prepared to watch one of my shows, but my phone distracted me. I frowned slightly because I knew that it couldn't be Arrow already. It was a number I wasn't familiar with. I answered anyway. "Hello?"

"Hey, Lynn. How are you?"

I frowned even harder. *I know like hell this ain't who I think it is.* "Who is this?"

"I know it's been a long time, but I thought you would always know my voice, baby girl. It's your father."

I didn't know why Allen Jolivet was calling me, but I planned to make whatever his reason was a quick one. "I'm good. How are you?"

"I'm good too. I just wanted to see how you've been. I know it's been a long time. After too much time went by, I didn't know how to reach out."

"You seem to have done fine just now."

He was quiet for a moment. "I know. There's no excuse for me letting so much time go by without talking to my only daughter. I love you, Lynn, and I figured it was time I told you and started showing you. I want to reestablish our relationship. I want to get to know you as the beautiful woman I know you've become. I feel like I left you out there all alone after your mother passed away and—"

“You did. You left me all alone to get through my grief and sorrow. You knew I had no one to lean on, but that didn’t matter. So keep it real with me. If you’re going to continue playing games, then this conversation is for nothing.”

I was getting angry because I felt like he called for a specific reason. I could have been wrong, but it felt like he was withholding something from me. There was a reason why he left me high and dry five years ago. It wasn’t like we were all that close anyway.

He took a deep breath. “I thought if I put space between us, it wouldn’t hurt as badly when you followed in your mother’s footsteps.”

I was stunned into silence. This nigga had pretty much planned my funeral. Before I could respond, he continued. “I’m sorry, Lynn, but that was my reasoning, which was wrong as hell. I didn’t want to tell you that because I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“Well, why don’t you keep that same energy, Allen. Enjoy your life.”

I ended the call and hated that I’d let him get me all riled up, because now I wanted to eat something. I was so hurt and angry, and I didn’t know how I would come out of it without stuffing my face with an oatmeal cake or even a damn apple. This surgery was forcing me to face things head on that I often drowned out with a snack or my next meal. I hated this!

I lay on the couch and cried my eyes out. My own father was sending me to an early grave instead of trying to do something... anything to help me. He was the only family that I knew I had left in this world. I knew there were more people out there, but I didn’t know them. My mama had a sister, but she died before my mama in a car accident, and she didn’t have kids. My dad had siblings, but I didn’t know them. I barely knew his ass.

My mama had told me that they met at a club, and after only a couple of months, she was pregnant. Nigga ran the other direction. He showed up, trying to be a father when I was two, but moved to California a couple of years later. He

was in and out of my life, mostly out, and somehow thought that I would receive what he had to say well. That wasn't love.

I wanted to throw my fucking phone. Fuck him for having me about to have a meltdown. I hadn't cried like this since my mama died, and him calling only reminded me that she was no longer here. As I wiped my face, my phone started ringing again. I grabbed it, fully prepared to curse him the fuck out. When I saw Arrow's name and number, I slowly shook my head. He couldn't have called at a better time. It hadn't been an hour though.

"Hello?"

"Hey. You okay?"

"I'm okay. It hasn't been an hour."

"Yeah. The surgery got postponed, and the next surgery I'm supposed to be on got canceled due to an emergency the doctor had. You sure you good?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

"No, you aren't. Your voice is quivering."

I rolled my eyes. "What would you do if I wasn't?" I asked with a slight attitude.

He was quiet for a moment, then he said, "If you were comfortable with it, I would come see about you, offer comfort. Whatever you needed me to do."

I rolled my eyes again. That response was so damn cliché. This wasn't working for me. Why was he so willing to be there for a woman he didn't know? "Arrow... I don't know you like that."

"I know. That's why I said if you were comfortable. There's not much I can do over the phone but pray. Or I can allow you to vent to me. You probably wouldn't be comfortable with that either."

I took a deep breath as he remained quiet. *Every man isn't like your father.* "Just talk to me, Arrow. You can help by taking my mind off what has me upset."

“Gladly. So, I was thinking. I’m off Monday next week because my frat brother has a court date. He’s also my brother’s brother-in-law. The nigga is suing the FBI. Who in the hell does that and get away with it? Anyway, if you aren’t working, I was thinking that maybe we could spend some time together when I got back. I’m actually off Monday and Tuesday.”

I smiled slightly. “I don’t see why not. I’m sorry I kind of snapped on you.”

“It’s okay. I somewhat expect it. You’re not feeling your best already, so even little things can set you off. I’ve been doing this long enough to know.”

“Thank you. So what will we do?”

“Whatever you wanna do. I know you’re limited right now. Do you know how to skate?”

“Yes.”

“A’ight. That’ll be something we can do when you start feeling better. If you don’t mind me asking, what side of the city do you live on?”

He was trying so hard, and I just wasn’t feeling it today. Before my father’s phone call, I was looking forward to talking to him. He didn’t deserve my attitude. I just didn’t feel like talking. “I live on the west side. What about you?”

“Me too.”

“Arrow?”

“Yeah?”

“I really don’t feel like talking.”

“I gathered that. I apologize for being pushy.”

“Would you like to come over?”

“For real?”

“Yeah. At least it won’t be so awkward if I’m silent. We can watch TV or something.”

“Sounds like a plan. Shoot me your address, and I’ll head your way.”

I smiled slightly as I sent him my address. “The apartment is on the first floor. I just sent you the address.”

“Got it. On my way.”

“Okay.”

I ended the call and immediately regretted inviting him over. What in the hell was wrong with me? This was how women got killed. They put themselves in situations, trusting people way too soon. I slid my hand down my face, noticing my jacked-up nails. I needed to soak this shit off. I got up and got a bowl to soak them in so I could get this acrylic off.

While I was worried about him being in here alone with me, the invitation had worked. It took my mind off my mother’s sperm donor and put it on the fine ass man coming to my place. I could only hope that I wouldn’t regret it.

CHAPTER 7

ARROW

I rang her doorbell, happy as hell that she made the decision to trust me. I was nervous as hell though, hoping I didn't say or do anything to offend her. If my dick got hard, I would never forgive myself. I'd convinced her that I wanted to be her friend. How would I explain that shit? Maybe I needed to let her know that I was feeling her. *Yeah, then she would put me out of her place quicker than I could count to five.*

When the door opened, I smiled. She did the same and invited me inside. After she closed the door, I grabbed her hand and helped her to the couch. I frowned slightly when I felt they were wet. "What'chu in here doing?" I asked, noticing the bowl on the coffee table.

"I'm soaking this acrylic off my nails."

I smirked slightly, because I saw how all her nails were broken off the day of her surgery. She stopped in front of the couch and put her hand on her hip. "What, Arrow? What'chu smiling at?"

"Nothing," I said, desperately trying to contain my smile.

"Nigga..."

I couldn't help it. I chuckled. When she rolled her eyes, I laughed. "I mean, you broke them nails off like they were press-ons, girl. Your nerves did that shit to you?"

"Yes." She shoulder-bumped me. "Stop laughing at me. I was nervous as hell. I thought I was gonna die on the operating table. I was chewing the hell out of those nails."

When she chuckled, that only made me laugh a little harder. She slowly shook her head then sat on the couch. I sat next to her. “I don’t know why you thought we weren’t going to take care of you. Methodist is one of the best hospitals in the world for a reason. We don’t play about our patients. Not one person has died on the operating table for a surgery I was a part of. As of now, I have a perfect record.”

“Do I hear some cockiness in your tone, Dr. Vaughn?”

“Hell yeah. I thought I’d made that clear. Let me make it a little clearer. I don’t fuck around. I’m the best anesthesiologist in the area. I mean, I melted all the ice around your exterior. You had a damn icebox where your heart used to be.”

She laughed as she shook her head. “Lawd have mercy. Is your brother as cocky as you are?”

“Shiiiiid, he’s worse. And he can be downright rude at times. That was how he and his wife met. She was a nurse in the office he was in, filling in for the doctor. They traded words a few times until she showed up at our grandmother’s funeral.”

“What does your sister do? I hope she’s not as cocky as the two of you.”

“Where do you think we learned it from?” She turned to me with her brows lifted. I chuckled. “Naw, she isn’t as bad as us. She’s a superintendent in Atascocita ISD.”

I couldn’t help but think about the shit storm that was brewing though. Things could get extremely dangerous. Just like *I* saw her out with Seneca, what if Luckey would have seen her? I never took him to be a soft man. He was a Q just like Axton and me, and he’d always seemed pretty cool. Kaysyn never eluded that anything was going on. I knew she didn’t like us in her business, but damn.

She’d only mentioned them separating because my nephew, Ellington, had said something about his dad moving out to my parents. We had to ask all the questions. I couldn’t figure out why she was being so private until I saw her and Seneca together. They’d probably started fucking around while

Lucky was still living in the house. Next time I saw her though, I would be sure to bring it up. That wasn't something I wanted to discuss by phone. I needed to be able to see her reactions... all the things she refused to say.

I watched Lynn fight to try to get that acrylic off her fingernails and slowly shook my head. She was going to tear her real nails up. I took the file she was using and grabbed her hand. Her eyes widened as she stared up at me. As I began gently removing it from her nails, she said, "I would have never in a million years thought you would be good at this."

"I'm a doctor. My hands are gifted."

I meant that in more ways than one, and I could feel the tremble in her hand, indicating she caught the double meaning. "Just because I don't operate on people doesn't mean I don't know how. Keep your other hand soaking."

She put her other hand back in the liquid and watched me expertly remove all the gunk from her fingers. I could feel her eyes on me like she was analyzing my features. Putting her on blast, I said, "Say what you want to say, Lynn."

She cleared her throat and shook her head rapidly. "I'm just watching you. I don't have anything to say other than, wow. I know who to call in the future to get this shit off my nails."

I gave her a one cheeked smile and focused my attention on her pinky finger. It was the hardest since the nail was so small. Apparently, I applied too much pressure, because when the acrylic popped off, she yelped. Her light complexion turned red as she snatched her finger from my grasp. "Gifted hands my ass."

I gave her a tight smile and pulled her hand back to me and looked at her nail. It was a little red but that was all. I gently rubbed it then looked up and stared into her eyes. She held my gaze, and I swore I saw heaven's gates open. This woman was the angel I'd been searching for. I hated that I told her I wanted to be her friend. Now was the time to rectify that poor decision. I brought her hand to my lips, and I kissed her pinky.

It looked like she stopped breathing. She looked away from me for a moment, then turned back to me as she dried her other hand on the towel and lifted it, lightly gliding her fingers over my bottom lip. I kissed them as well. Her nipples had hardened beneath her shirt and her breathing was extremely heavy. It was as if the passion between us was a cloud that had settled like fog around us.

She leaned in a bit as her lips parted. I stared at them as I bit my bottom lip. When I leaned in slightly, closing the space between us, she backed away and cleared her throat. I eased back to my position, and said, "I owe you an explanation."

She looked uncomfortable as hell. She rubbed the back of her neck as she tilted her head, making me want to slide my tongue up that shit. My dick was getting hard, and I knew he was only reacting to what he saw whenever I looked at her, but she was even sexier in this moment, even in her terry cloth robe. I would have loved to see what she was wearing beneath it.

When she looked back at me, I rubbed her hand between mine. "I want to get to know you, Lynn... as more than friends. I thought that if I openly flirted you would have rejected me, especially after what I told you I would say on your radio show."

She squirmed slightly then shook her head slowly as she stared at her lap. "I'm flattered. I had a feeling already, but I thought it was just wishful thinking."

When her eyes met mine, I placed my hand on her cheek and caressed it with my thumb. This time when I leaned in, she didn't pull away. I let my lips slightly graze hers, then rested my forehead against hers. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. It was strange how much I wanted her. I'd never seen a woman that attracted me not just physically but intellectually as well. She got my attention in one conversation.

It wasn't that we were talking about matters that were deep in theory or anything like that, but I could tell she had book sense and plenty of common sense. I didn't wanna rush things

with her, but it seemed as if it would be hard not to. Lynn would be mine before the new year rolled in. Period.

No question.

No doubt.

No hesitancy.

My body and mind craved her. I didn't want to just feel her insides. I wanted to get acquainted, adjust, and set up residency there. She had a beautiful soul, not to mention she was fine as hell to me. I'd always liked BBWs. It was why I rarely got lap dances at the strip club when I was going with Jamel. If the woman wasn't a BBW, then she at least had to have major curves... a fat ass and big titties to catch my attention. Lynn 'Mo 2 Luv' Jolivet had my attention.

She reached up and slid her fingers through my twists, then to my beard. Backing away slightly, she stared into my eyes for a moment then pulled away. I took a deep breath and grabbed her other hand to get back to work. It remained quiet between us, but it wasn't uncomfortable. No words needed to be spoken when our spirits were communing with one another.

By the time I finished with her other hand, I had been here an hour. She stood from her seat and took the tub she was soaking her fingers in to the kitchen sink. I stood and joined her in there, and she turned and looked at me, then said suddenly, "Maybe that's why I feel so comfortable with you being here. There's no way I would have invited a man to my place after only knowing him a day or two. For some reason, I trust you. That shit is usually hard to obtain."

I gently pulled her to me and hugged her. I'd been dying to feel her soft body against mine. She was giving me a Christian hug, but when she wrapped her arms around my waist, her body molded into mine. At that point, I just wanted her to stay in my arms forever. That shit felt better than I ever thought it would. I couldn't stop my lips from kissing her head. I'd kissed her braids three times already. I wasn't even sure if she was aware.

In this short amount of time, I'd already imagined her being my wife and having my babies... me rubbing her swollen feet and lifting her pregnant belly to give her some relief. I just hoped she was ready to experience everything I'd been withholding for years, waiting for the right woman to come along and snatch the shit from me. It hadn't been but three days, and I knew she would be the woman to have me losing my good sense.

"My father called me. I haven't spoken to him in five years," she said softly.

I pulled away from her without saying a word and washed her hands. As I massaged them under the warm water, she continued. "He said when my mother died, he wanted to create distance between us, as if we were ever close."

I dried her hands and continued listening to her. One thing I could pride myself on was I was always a good listener. I was never quick to speak. It was a good quality to have when dealing with patients as well.

"The distance was because he didn't want to feel as torn up about me dying because I was following in my mother's footsteps."

I frowned and looked at her. *I couldn't have heard her right.* "What?"

"He said in so many words that he knew I would die from obesity like my mother. He wanted to create distance so he didn't feel as attached to me. I was never attached to him. My life is just fine without him in it. I haven't talked to him in five fucking years, and I told him he could keep that same energy. I still don't know exactly why he called, because I feel there's more to it. Saying he wanted to get reacquainted. He can kiss my fat ass."

I grabbed the lotion from her basket by her sink and squirted a bit in my hand, then led her back to the couch. Once we sat, I grabbed her hands and rubbed lotion on them. As I massaged one hand, I stared into her eyes. "I know those words were hurtful, but try not to take them to heart. It's not like you feel loved by him anyway. If he truly loved you, he

wouldn't have let five years pass by without at least picking up the phone to say hey. Love is a verb. It requires action. Don't even waste your valuable energy and time on someone who means you no good. He hasn't been in your life for a reason. He's had twenty-eight years to be a part of the best thing heaven has to offer, but he chose hell. Let him live with himself and that choice."

She was staring at me as I massaged her fingers one by one. Her gaze took me places I shouldn't even be going. I didn't want to initiate sex so soon. I didn't want to make her think this was all physical. It was so much more. I wanted to know her mind, spirit, and soul, because I felt like those were the parts of her I met first when I saw her laying in that hospital bed crying.

"Thank you, Arrow," she said softly.

"Is that what was bothering you earlier?"

"Yes. When you called, I had just gotten off the phone with him. I suppose his words caught me off guard. I didn't expect them to affect me the way they did, because I never would have thought that he would have said that he was waiting for me to die. That was cruel as hell. Part of it was true though."

She lowered her head and sat back on the couch, pulling her hands from mine. I followed suit, and she laid her head against my shoulder. "How so?"

"My mother died from the effects of obesity. Her organs started shutting down one by one. She died from congestive heart failure. She wouldn't take heed to the doctor's warnings. Food was her safe space, and she unknowingly taught me that it could be my safe space too. She didn't take her declining health seriously. I was indeed following in her footsteps. When she died, I already had diabetes. Her death propelled me into high blood pressure. Even then, I wasn't thinking about changing anything."

I lifted my arm, putting it around her. She scooted closer to me and got comfortable in my embrace. I was extremely comfortable too. It was like we'd been knowing one another for months. "What changed?"

“My doctor had to give me the harsh reality. He told me that if I didn’t change, I would be dead within the next two to three years. I would die of a massive heart attack by the time I was thirty. I thought he was exaggerating to scare me into eating healthy until he made the comparison of my numbers to other patients of his. Of course, their names were blurred out. My numbers were worse than that of an eighty-year-old woman.”

“It’s important to take care of yourself, especially if you want to live a long, fulfilling life. I’m sorry your mother had to die, but it seems she had to die for you to live.”

I kissed her forehead, causing her to look up at me. She gave me a tight smile and lay against me. We let the quietness encompass us until I grabbed my phone and played “Vital Transformation” by Georgia Anne Muldrow. “I love that song,” Lynn said softly.

I kissed her forehead again. I believed I had a gauge on her musical palate, but I chose this song more for the words than anything else. She lifted her gaze to mine once again, and I lowered my head and kissed her lips. When her eyes closed, I knew she was giving me permission to enter her aura... her realm. I kissed her again, feeling my soul enter a peace that it had never known.

When I separated our kiss, she moaned quietly and laid her head on my chest as I pulled her body closer to me. Quietness once again consumed us, and it wasn’t long before I heard a light snore come from her. I smiled slightly and decided to join her.

CHAPTER 8

LYNN

I didn't know how Arrow Vaughn had come into my life and taken control of my every thought, but he had come in like a gentle breeze that turned into a whirlwind. My assumptions about him were correct. He was attracted to me... even more than I was to him it seemed. The way he held my body close like he loved me was a feeling I'd never felt from a man. Although we'd fallen asleep, the quietness wasn't awkward. It was peaceful. My soul felt at ease with him.

The man had me on edge when he was massaging my hands and fingers though. I thought he missed his gift as a masseuse for a minute. Apparently, I had tension in my hands that I hadn't noticed, because when he finished, they felt brand new. Before long, I would have him rubbing every part of my body. The sexual tension was high, but I appreciated him for not trying to take it there just yet.

Although I wanted nothing more than to feel his hands in places someone else's hands hadn't been in a long time and his body on top of mine, the timing wasn't right. The moment would have felt rushed, and it would have only led to doubt about what he really wanted from me. Arrow was perfect... from him working on my nails and hands to his advice about my father. I didn't regret a single moment.

His lips though, my God, they were everything I knew they would be. They were so soft. I wanted to suck on them so badly, but I knew had I done that, it would have definitely catapulted us into places we had no business. It was too soon

after my surgery to be engaging in those types of activities anyway.

Today was going to be my first day back at work, and for the first time, I wasn't the least bit excited about that. I loved my job, and I was usually happy to be there. However, just for that week, I'd gotten used to being home. Arrow had come over every day after he got off, to check on me, and we talked throughout the day as well. He'd sent a bouquet of roses, and I stared at those flowers until he got to my house.

He'd come to see me yesterday before he left for Beaumont, and I nearly had a fit over his hair. I'd played in it the entire time he was here. The intense part about it was him staring at me as I did so. We kissed quite a bit, but his hands never roamed to places they shouldn't have been. When he left, it felt like my soul had somehow escaped my body and left with him.

Arrow had called this morning to say that they didn't go to court. He said they asked for a continuance. There had to be some extremely incriminating evidence for the FBI to need more time. What kind of shit was that? He said that the attorney was the guy's brother and was a maniac in the courtroom. He had me laughing with some of the things he said Shy Berotte would say. His family sounded fun to be around, and I could only hope that we made it that far in a relationship to where I would get to meet them.

Today, I was going to begin my workout routine. I knew I would have loose skin once it was all said and done, but I also knew if I worked out regularly, I could minimize it. I was already down eight pounds. It had been ten days and the weight was coming off nicely. I took the doctor's advice and would only weigh myself once a week. That was Friday. So I was probably down even more.

As I was leaving the house, I grabbed a protein shake, my bag, and keys. This would be an uphill battle, but I was ready for the climb. Exercising was a nonexistent task in my daily routine. The most exercise I would get was walking from my car to wherever or walking at the radio station. I just couldn't let my laziness get in the way. I was going to have to push

myself to do what was required of me to get the results I wanted.

There was no turning back now, or all of this would have been for nothing. My health had become important to me, and I wished it would have always been important so I wouldn't be in this predicament. However, I knew I couldn't dwell on that. I could only focus on the present and the future and be thankful that I chose to do something when I did... before it was too late.

When I got to the gym, I immediately felt intimidated. I was the biggest person in here. As I looked around, a gentleman walked over to me. "Hello! Welcome to Planet Fitness! Are you new to our establishment?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Let me show you around! You're going to love it here."

I doubt that. I was trying to remain positive, but my thoughts wouldn't let up. Being that I worked from ten in the morning to seven in the evening, it took my entire day away from me. I wanted that morning segment, especially now that Arrow was in my life. Instead, there was the designated morning show from Michel Warren. All they did was crack jokes. Nothing about it made you think and rethink. *Whatever though.*

After the employee finished showing me around, I went to the treadmill and walked for an hour. Because of his tour of the facilities, that was all the time I had left. Hopefully, I could find something to do at work that would help me get more exercise. It wasn't like I was on air the entire time. I went on at two, and my segment was at four, right before a lot of people got off work for the day.

Once I showered and had gotten dressed and gone to my car, I put the A/C on full blast. It was fifty degrees outside, and I was still sweating. My body was so tired after that. I pushed myself beyond belief, because I wanted to quit after ten minutes. I stopped watching the time and put on an audiobook. For the first time, music didn't distract me enough.

I pulled my phone from my bag along with my towel and called Arrow. As I wiped the sweat from my forehead, he answered. “What’s up, Lynn? How’s your day going, beautiful?”

My cheeks heated up, as if I needed to be any hotter. “Hey. I’m tired as hell. I just left the gym.”

“Which one?”

“Planet Fitness. I’m still sweating.”

“It’ll be like that in the beginning. Since I’m off tomorrow, you want me to go with you?”

We’d discussed that he had a membership there in one of our many discussions. That was why I chose this one to come to. It wasn’t too far from my apartment either. “Sure,” I said breathlessly.

I was slightly embarrassed about how winded I was. That alone proved that I hadn’t been exercising as I should. Grabbing my thermos, I drank a bit of water, doing my best not to overdo it. I wanted to fucking cry though. I wanted to drink so much more.

“How long did you work out?”

“An hour.”

“Okay. Pace yourself. Maybe only do thirty minutes next time. That way you won’t want to guzzle a gallon of water.”

“Yeah. I found that out the hard way. I feel like I wanna throw up.”

“Do you have time to go home and relax for a minute?”

“No. I have to be at work by ten.”

“Damn. I wish I was there to help you.”

“I’ll be okay. I have to be. Had I not met you, I would have been in the same predicament.”

“But you *did* meet me. So I need to be there. I’ll be there by the time you get off though.”

“So what exactly happened in court today?”

“Shy stunned them with some new evidence and research that the judge allowed. Chad and Shy lucked up with a judge that hates crooked cops.”

“He must be black.”

“*She* is black. I’m willing to bet Shy had something to do with that. The nigga is smart as hell and knows all kinds of loopholes to get his way. She did grant the continuance though. They go back in two weeks. That nigga Shy was smiling the entire time, like he was a Cheshire cat, and he swallowed the muthafucking canary.”

He chuckled, and it made me smile. I could tell just how much he loved his extended family by the way he spoke about them. “Well, congratulations. That sounds exciting.”

“It is. Umm... I’m not sure how you will feel about it, but my boy Jamel would like to meet you. He and his lady invited us to their place Saturday evening.”

That was interesting. I didn’t even know what to define us as. Clearly, Arrow had been talking about me. I was somewhat flattered that he wanted others to know of his interest in me. That let me know that he was serious about what he was feeling if he wanted to invite me around his friends. I knew he considered Jamel more of a brother than a friend. I was still hesitant though. “Umm... okay. Uh... sure.”

“What’s up? I can hear your hesitancy.”

“I’m not used to meeting new people. We’re still new. But I feel like it will be fine. Are they having dinner?”

“No. I figured you wouldn’t be comfortable with that. I told them that we had meal plans already, but that maybe we could drop by afterward.”

I released a sigh of relief, grateful that he didn’t tell my business to them. It would be fine for them to know, but I would rather be the one to say so. While he was close to them, I wasn’t. “Okay. What time?”

“I figured eight should be good. What you think?”

“Sounds good. Tell me a little about them.”

I took the ramp to 610 South as he chuckled. “Well, Mel is a fool. He’s cool and so in love with Sandrene it’s crazy. He and I used to hang together all the time, but now we only see each other on Sundays, simply because I don’t wanna feel out of place around him and his woman. Sandrene is a dancer. She works at a dance studio. I forgot the name of it. She teaches ballet, pole dancing, and hip hop.”

“Pole dancing, huh? That’s cool.”

“Yeah. I think the two of you are the same age, and you actually have a lot in common as far as your parents go, but I’ll leave that for the two of you to talk about for when you get comfortable with one another.”

“Okay. Cool. Listen, I’ll be at work in the next ten minutes. Let me take this time to calm down and talk to myself.”

“Um... okay.”

He chuckled and I did as well. “I’ll explain it when I see you later.”

“Okay. Have a good day, gorgeous.”

“You too, Arrow.”

I ended the call feeling like I could conquer anything. Talking to Arrow did that for me. He was always considerate and caring. I could only hope that this thing between us went further.

“So I HOPE YOU ENJOYED YOUR VACAY, BUT YOU HAVE A TON of mail to go through. Not to mention voicemails. These fans have been ruthless. You publicized that you would be out for a week, and even prerecorded some portions of your show and the people were still calling, charging us up about your whereabouts. They thought you’d left. I can’t wait for you to get on air so these folks can calm their nerves.”

My supervisor, Charlene, was one of the sweetest people I'd ever worked with. She didn't get to hang with us too often, because she was raising three kids practically on her own. Her husband was a basketball player, playing overseas for Spain. So it was like she was a single parent. That had to be hard for her, but she did what she had to do and always had a beautiful smile on her face.

I giggled at her as she ran around trying to make sure I had everything I needed. When I'd walked in the door, she'd given me the biggest hug and told me how proud of me she was. She had me on the verge of crying within my first ten minutes. Once I got situated at my desk to handle paperwork and open some of the mail, she said, "If you need anything, holler."

"Okay. Thanks, Char."

When she left my office, my phone vibrated on my desk. When I saw the slightly familiar number from the other day, I knew it was my father. I refused to let him destroy my progress today. While I wanted to ignore him, the curiosity of why he was calling took over my fingers. "Hello?"

"Hi, Lynn. I hope you're having a great day."

I took a deep breath but chose to remain quiet, waiting for what he would say next. I could hear him shuffling around, like he was moving to another room or something. When a door closed, he said, "Are you there?"

"Yes."

"How are you?"

"Puzzled. Can you get to the point of your call? I'm at work."

"There's no point, Lynn. I just wanted to check on you and make sure you were okay."

"Bye, Allen."

I ended the call and took a couple of deep breaths, trying to rid my spirit of his toxicity. As I continued making my way through the mail, Charlene appeared in my doorway with a bouquet of sunflowers. I smiled as she said, "Okay! I see you

went on vacation and picked up an admirer in the process. This bouquet is beautiful!”

She set the flowers on the table near my door and pulled the card from the stem and brought it to me. I needed his words right now. Allen’s phone call was trying to disrupt my peace, and I was sick of his ass. The only reason I hadn’t blocked him was because I wanted to see when he would actually say what he wanted instead of playing like he wanted to get to know me.

As Charlene anxiously waited for me to open the card, I gave her a smile. “Sorry. You probably want privacy, but you know I’m nosy! And I love to see new relationships bloom. Why are you torturing me, Mo?”

I slowly shook my head and laughed at her as I pulled the card from the envelope.

We’ve probably already talked today, but I just wanted you to know that no matter what comes your way, you can handle it. You’re as bright and beautiful as these sunflowers. Take one day at a time, breathe, give yourself grace, feel what you’re going to feel, and let it go. I hope to see you tonight. Arrow

I closed my eyes and held the card to my heart. He always knew what to say and when to say it. When I opened my eyes, Charlene was standing there like she was holding her breath, practically hopping like she had to piss. I laughed and handed her the card. She practically snatched it out of my hand and sped read it, then gave me that ‘aww, how sweet’ look. Her eyebrows were lifted and slightly scrunched together, and her lips were turned down.

I slowly shook my head as she handed the card back. “He sounds perfect, Mo.”

I nodded repeatedly. “So far, he is.”

CHAPTER 9

ARROW

“**T**hese muthafuckas never saw that shit coming. We fucked the game up with that one,” Shy said as he and Skyler slapped hands repeatedly in some kind of secret shit they had made up.

Skyler worked for him, and she was Dylan Berotte’s wife. Dylan was the first of the playboy club to settle down. They’d gotten married a little over two years ago and had a beautiful daughter who was nearly two years old, I believed. Dylan, Jamel, and I used to fuck shit up in Houston and Beaumont. Ariana was sitting on my lap, gibbering and spitting. She was almost a year old now and the prettiest little thing I’d ever seen.

Axton and Alexz had her spoiled rotten, but that was okay, because I did my fair share of spoiling. I laughed at the guys as they somewhat celebrated with Chad about having the best attorneys in the state of Texas. Shyrón was so fucking cocky. Axton and I had nothing on his ass. He’d been talking shit since we got back to Mr. Sheldon and Mrs. Anissa’s house.

As I played with baby girl, my phone started ringing. I assumed it was Lynn calling me before she went on air. It was noon, and I knew she would probably be reaching out. She’d texted earlier, thanking me for the flowers and saying she needed those words of encouragement. Just being around her felt good to my soul. However, when I looked at the caller ID and saw Melanie’s number, my dick reacted, reminding me that it had been a while.

I let it go to voicemail, but apparently, that didn't mean a thing to her because she called right back. Ariana was reaching for it, ready to bring it straight to her mouth. I took a deep breath and answered. "What's up?"

"Goodness. I thought something had happened when I didn't see you at work. You never take off. I didn't wanna ask anyone and make them think I actually cared."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm good."

"Well, good. Umm... you wanna come through later?"

She seemed a little desperate with her proposals, especially since I never called her last weekend. After I spent the day with Lynn, she was all I could think about. "Naw. I'm seeing someone now."

"Quit fucking lying. Yo' ass don't even know what settle down means. You must be getting it from somewhere else. I'm a big girl, Bow and Arrow. You can tell me that you wanna move around."

I chuckled. "I really am seeing somebody."

"Well, shit. She must be the damn exorcist on that dick."

I laughed, and Ariana turned to stare at me. Getting up from the couch, I handed her to Mrs. Anissa and went outside. I didn't even feel right having this type of conversation while I was holding her. Alexz and Axton went to work after court, so she stayed with Alexz's parents as she normally did during the weekdays. Once the backdoor closed, I said, "You crazy as fuck. But that shit ain't none of your business. I'm feeling the hell out of her, and I'd appreciate it if we just end this now. I gotta prove to myself that I even deserve her."

"Okay. I'll back off. If shit don't work out, you know how to find me. Hol' on! Don't hang up."

"What?"

"Is it that woman that had the weight loss surgery?"

"Melanie..."

“It *is*! I didn’t know you liked big, big girls! I see you, Bow and Arrow, but if y’all just talking, you don’t have to be exclusive. I know she ain’t fucking you right, because she just had surgery. So if you need one last tune up, you know I got’chu.”

I stared up at the sky. This waiting was eating me alive. It had been three weeks since I’d fucked Melanie’s world up, and I hadn’t touched anyone else since then. I had three regulars that I kept on rotation. Surprisingly, I hadn’t gotten a call from the other two as of yet. “I know, but I’m good. I’m off tomorrow, too, so I’ll see you Wednesday.”

“Okay. You can’t say I didn’t offer.”

“Don’t make it seem like you taking that pussy off the table. I know it’s always purring when you think about me.”

She laughed. “Hell yeah. She always on the table for you, baby, unless I get a steady nigga who gon’ put up with all my shit. Enjoy your off day.”

“A’ight.”

I ended the call and just stared out into the backyard. Lynn needed me to take my time, but my dick was mad as hell. We’d had intimate moments already. Had I not had women in the wings, maybe I wouldn’t be so pressed. “Yo, you a’ight?”

I looked up to see Ali. He had his keys in his hand as if he were about to leave. I took a deep breath. “I’m cool.”

He stared at me for a moment. “If you don’t wanna holla at me about it, just say that, because clearly, you ain’t cool.”

I slid my hand down my face. Ali was one of the most impersonal niggas I’d ever met. I didn’t know too much shit about him or his past, other than he used to be in the streets. That information didn’t even come from him. It came from Shy. It was always about the turnup whenever we hooked up. Jamel was a lot more comfortable with him than I was.

“I’m going through a transition. I’ll tell you about it if you tell me what’s been having you bothered. I mean, ever since you had to handle Talisha, it’s like you’ve been more withdrawn. What’s up with that?”

He bit his bottom lip as he stared at me for a moment then gave me a head nod and walked off. I frowned slightly, trying to figure out what was up with him. I knew he couldn't have been secretly feeling that ugly ass girl. He turned around to stare at me and asked, "You coming or what?"

I looked around then stood and followed him down the driveway. I was confused as hell as to what he was feeling. Once we got in his car, he pulled out a blunt and fired it up. For a while, neither of us said a word. I knew I probably shouldn't be around him while he was smoking, because my job could pop me with a random drug test, but I couldn't leave either. At least he put the window down.

He blew the smoke out the window then placed it in his left hand. After lowering his head for a moment, he turned to me. "If I hear any of this shit repeated, I'm gon' fuck you up."

"You ain't got that to worry about," I said as I slumped in the seat some.

I wasn't surprised that he was about to tell me what was going on with him. Out of the five of us that kicked it together the most—Jungle, Jamel, Jericho, Seneca, him, and me—I was the most lowkey. I had a level head. I didn't talk a whole lot like Seneca. I was almost sure that Jericho probably knew as well.

"So... I have a problem. Women are my weak spots. It's hard for me to kill a woman. Until I can get that sensitivity toward women under control, I chose to be single. I ain't had sex in over a year. I just been concentrating on getting my bag. That's it. I fully left the drug game a year or so ago, but I still have connections, of course."

"Why? I mean... your super sensitivity to women."

"My father used to beat the fuck out of my mama. I wanted to protect her, but I couldn't because I was just a kid. Nigga damn near knocked me out once for stepping in front of my mama. I vowed that I would never hurt a woman that way. What I did to Talisha is fucking with me. She just wouldn't let up. You know she followed me home? I saw her ass behind me when I turned on my street. People that know me know not to

fuck with me, but she don't know me like that. I thought I'd shown her who I was after Shavozz beat her ass."

"What did you do to show her?"

"I told her ain't no-fucking-body would care if I blew her brain matter all over the wall while holding my gun to her head. It wasn't loaded. I had no intent of doing that, but I wanted her to think I would so she could chill. After the incident at Watchful Eyes, I was done. Even when she followed me home, I pulled my gun on her and she sped off. That girl is deranged. She ain't right, and I think I ignited her crazy."

"So, you killing her is haunting you."

"Hell yeah. Like I sold my soul to the devil."

He took another pull from his blunt and blew the smoke out the window. "Now what's up with you?"

I slid my hand down my face then glanced at him to see him looking at me, waiting for me to spill it. "I'm trying to establish something with a woman that I'm really feeling. We're getting to know each other and have been for a little over a week now. We haven't discussed exclusivity or anything like that, but I know it would hurt her if she found out I fucked someone else during this process. I don't wanna mess up."

"But whoever that was that called you got you thinking with the muthafucka that wink."

I bit my bottom lip and turned to him. "Yeah."

"If what you're trying to establish with her is sacred to you, block those hoes. Why allow temptation to have access to you if she's the only one you want? You have to like her a lot if we're having this conversation."

"I do. I can block them, but I work with one. I see her five days a week."

"Shit. Now you acting like Dylan with that Chanell bitch. You never fuck a woman you have no intent of being with at

your place of employment. I expected better from you. You know better.”

“Yeah, I do. The ass was calling me. You know how I feel about thick women. She was Delilah, and I was Samson.”

“Well, just hope she don’t have you crushed in the rubble like that nigga. What’s the woman’s name that has you tryna settle down though? She gotta be special.”

“Lynn Jolivet.”

He frowned like he was trying to figure out how he knew her name. After taking another pull from his blunt, he asked, “Mo 2 Luv?”

I gave him a one cheeked smile. “Mm hmm.”

“That’s what’s up, man. She got her shit together. I met her at a benefit in Houston. She good people.”

Benefit? This nigga was involved in everybody’s circle, from thugs to politicians. Hell, I supposed sometimes those people were one in the same. That was why his business was so successful though. He catered to everybody. “Yeah. I like her a lot.”

He nodded and continued smoking his blunt. “Let me get outta here before I get a contact high. Just my luck, they’ll drug test my ass Wednesday when I get back.”

He chuckled. “Yeah. Get yo’ ass away from me, because this some good shit right here.”

I slowly shook my head and got out of his car. Honestly, I was glad to have somebody like him watching my back. He watched all our backs, even when we didn’t know it. Ali was always paying attention to shit, even if he didn’t speak on it. He was resourceful as hell. He was the one who’d helped Shy find out bullshit about the FBI. One of their agents was in the whole fiasco with the warden, senator, and that other nigga at Chad’s job. He was the one that was specifically over Chad’s case. He also had affiliations with Knowledge... Earl Riggs.

That was why the FBI needed a continuance. After that shit, they would probably settle out of court. I didn’t know

how Ali found shit out, but he did. It was like the muthafucka was never scared of shit. However, to know that he had an issue with being too sensitive toward women was something I never expected. I'd never seen him entertaining a woman, and now I knew why. I hated that he had to grow up seeing that.

A lot of times, I didn't realize just how blessed I was. I had two loving parents who did right by us and loved each other. We didn't always get the things we wanted, but we didn't grow up in a toxic environment, constantly having to deal with bullshit either. I took that for granted sometimes like it wasn't a big deal, but listening to Ali made me reflect. Here I was, a successful doctor, and it was because of my upbringing. I owed them for how I flourished as an adult.

I took a deep breath as I went back inside the house. After we all ate, I would be heading back to Houston. Ariana was walking around screaming. I stood there and watched her until she noticed me. She smiled big and made her way to me, nearly falling. One day, I wanted this joy... the joy of having kids of my own. I bent over and picked her up, throwing her in the air. She squealed in excitement as I chuckled.

I kissed her head and said, "You're so pretty, Ariana. Unc loves you."

She smiled, showing her two bottom teeth as she stared at me. I knew she was waiting for me to throw her in the air again, so I couldn't let her down.

CHAPTER 10

LYNN

I was sitting on my couch waiting for Arrow to get here. He said he got a late start on the road and ended up in traffic. Houston was notorious for traffic. It could happen at any given moment, but it was a sure thing Monday through Friday between seven a.m. and nine a.m., then again between four p.m. and six p.m. When he called me, it was nearly three.

Today had been rough at work. The fans made me feel amazing though. Instead of doing my segment, I decided to just let people call in to tell me what they'd been up to while I was out. Most of them were asking questions about me, though, asking if I was okay. Realizing how much influence I had over their day was humbling and made me take my job even more seriously than I already did.

One lady was nearly crying about how I kept her day going and how I kept her in good spirits despite her circumstances. When I wasn't on the radio last week, she said she was so depressed. She missed me like she knew me personally. I swore that woman had me shedding real tears over the airwaves. The impact my show provided proved to be significant in that moment, to not only men, but to women as well.

My segment, *Stroke the Male Ego*, wasn't about downing women. It was about uplifting hard working men who loved their families. I felt like there wasn't enough of that. However, I never let anyone talk negatively about black women as a whole. That wasn't what the show was about. Women appreciated that, especially when I had to check one guy about

him generalizing and stereotyping. I'd later found out that he wasn't even a black man.

Thankfully, I'd started feeling better throughout the day, but the smell of Mexican food nearly took me out. A couple of the engineers had ordered food. I literally wanted to go snatch the tortilla right out of their hands. They were having fajitas and had the nerve to ask me if I wanted some. Jesus definitely had to be a fence between me and that food. I was only working on my second week post-op.

As I sat reflecting on my day, the doorbell rang. A smile immediately made its way to my face, knowing that Arrow had made it. I opened the door with a huge smile on my face, but when I saw that his hair was still loose, my clit pulsed. He was wearing a nose ring and diamond studs. *Lord have mercy.* I'd never seen a man so sexy until he took my breath away.

He smiled slightly. "Hey, beautiful. You good?"

I nodded as I stepped aside to let him inside. Once I closed the door, I turned to see him still standing there. He licked his lips, and I lost all restraint. This man had the potential to have me acting like a naïve teenager from his looks alone, but then he had the audacity to be smooth, sweet, tender... I could go on forever.

It felt like I'd glided on thin air to his arms. He embraced me and kissed my forehead, but that just wasn't enough. I stared up at him and leaned in. He met me halfway and lowered his lips to mine. The softness of them only pulled me further in. As he tried to pull away, I damn near fell following him. The fire lit in his eyes as he grabbed my hand and led me to the couch.

His gaze felt like it was seeking something from me. It was hard to describe, but I felt a pull to him that was so strong, I couldn't deny it. When he sat, he pulled me between his legs and stared up at me. I wanted to straddle him so bad. *Girl, you better not sit your big ass on that man.* I closed my eyes as I tried to drown out the thoughts in my head. I didn't even know where they came from.

As I tried to step to the side, he gripped my legs. “Where you going, Lynn?”

“S-sit next to you.”

“Naw. That’s not what you were showing me a minute ago,” he said as he stared up at me.

Was I ready to experience sex with him? Was I ready to take it there? We needed to establish some things. We were only getting to know one another. Would I be okay if I gave him my goodies for him to just walk away? I would be hurt. Crushed. I looked away, and he released me. I glanced back at him only to catch a glimpse of his hard dick. What if I was just another conquest?

My thoughts were driving me insane. I didn’t know why I couldn’t just go with the flow and tell fear to go fuck itself. I sat next to him, and the silence was slightly awkward. I turned to him. “I’m sorry. I just... I let fear overtake me. I’m trying to be the mature, confident woman that I know I am, but I haven’t been with a man in years.”

He turned to me and grabbed my hand. “Fear of what?”

“Of this not being real. Of being used or taken advantage of. Of being hurt.”

I felt so uncomfortable under his gaze. I quickly stood from my seat. “You want something to drink?”

He shook his head as he watched me walk away from him. When I went to the kitchen, I opened the freezer and practically put my head in it. I was so fucking embarrassed about the way I was feeling. It felt like I was about to break out in a sweat. When I felt his arms wrap around me from behind, I just knew this ice in this freezer was about to melt. I heard him chuckle, so I spun around in his arms.

There was a look of amusement on his face. “Why the hell you got yo’ head in a freezer?”

I rolled my eyes as he backed me into the countertop. He squatted some and grabbed my legs, lifting me to the countertop. My lips parted, but words failed me. I knew he did that to prove a point. My body would swallow his if I lay on

top of him. “You think I would pursue a woman I couldn’t handle, Lynn?”

I turned away and he said, “Naw. Look at me, for real.”

I looked back at him, and he kissed my lips tenderly. “You started this shit. I promised myself that I would allow you to lead the way. I didn’t want you to feel like I was pressuring you for sex, because I didn’t want you to think that I was taking advantage of you or using you. Hurting you that way is the last thing I wanna do. I know it’s soon, but I want you to know that you can trust me, Lynn.”

I nodded as he stepped closer to me, between my legs, and slid his arms around my waist. I relaxed in his embrace as he said, “Now come on. Let’s blend up a couple of protein shakes.”

He backed away, and I slid off the countertop. My face was hot as shit. The embarrassment still hadn’t worn off. I turned my back to him and asked, “So how was the rest of your time in Beaumont?”

“It was cool.”

His tone was a little flat, like monotone, so I turned to him to find him leaning against the fridge, staring at me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said as he stood up straight. “So what all you put in your shake? Are you using Benefiber?”

“Yeah, and unsweetened almond milk. You sure you want one?”

“Yeah. I’m familiar with them.”

“You cool with oats?”

“Mm hmm. Come here.”

I turned to him as he bit his bottom lip. When I got close to him, he pulled me to him and hugged me again. I closed my eyes and did my best to relax. “Cool out, baby. What’chu stressing for?”

“I feel like I overreacted.”

“You did, but it’s all good.” He chuckled as I side-eyed him. “You can’t be too careful, right?”

“Yeah. You can,” I said as I left his arms to get my protein powder and other ingredients for our shakes. “You can push away your blessings sometimes by doing that. Actually, again, it’s fear, not being too careful. Being too careful is checking the door more than twice to make sure it’s locked.”

He grabbed the can and scoop from me and began measuring everything and dumping it in the blender like he was the dietician. Before I could ask him how he knew how much to put, his phone rang. He pulled it from his pocket and answered it. Instead of standing here and eavesdropping, I walked away from him to go to the front room to find a movie to watch.

The last thing I had on my mind was watching a movie when he got here. I wanted him to make love to my body and make me feel again. It was like I had been *12 Years a Slave* to celibacy. This gorgeous man was dropped in my hospital room to be the man in my life that I’d always desired, but I let fear ruin our night. The blender started just as I cued up *Black Panther*. I needed to refresh my memory on it since I planned to see *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* when it came out.

After fluffing the pillows, I made my way to the kitchen only for Arrow to meet me midway. He had a look of panic on his face. His brows were slightly raised, then it turned into a frown. He handed me my shake and said, “I have to go check on my sister and her kids right quick. That was my boy Seneca who just called. He said her and her ex were into it. I’ll be back if it doesn’t take too long.”

“O-okay. I hope everything is okay.”

“Me too.”

He kissed my head then practically ran to the door. I was still standing in the same spot, wondering what had happened. My mind wanted me to believe that was his way of getting away from me, and for some reason, it was starting to win. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath then walked back to the

couch. I took a sip of my shake and imagined it came from Sonic then started the movie.

I looked toward the kitchen to see the rest still in the blender and his glass sitting next to it. I was slightly worried about his sister. My heart knew Arrow wouldn't make up something like that. I decided to call him. I remembered him telling me that his sister lived in Atascocita, so I knew it would take him a while to get there. As I was about to call him, he called me. "Hello?"

"I'm sorry I had to leave the way I did. I should have asked if you wanted to ride with me. I mean, I know you haven't met my family yet or anything, but I could have used the company on the drive."

"Well, you have me on the phone. I can still keep you company, Dr. Vaughn."

"Dr. Vaughn, huh? Okay, Ms. Jolivet. You didn't get to tell me how the rest of your day went. I can see that you started feeling better."

"Yeah. After an hour or two, I was good."

"I heard what you did in place of the segment. That was cool. Your fans love you so much."

"Yeah. One lady had me in tears."

"I heard."

"My supervisor saw the flowers. She told me to tell you that she's so jealous."

He chuckled. "She single?"

"No. She's married," I said, then giggled.

"I was looking forward to holding you in my arms tonight. I need you to pray that everything is okay when I get there. My boy called me, because he knew if he went there, he might kill him. I don't know if I'm much better."

"Just think about your sister and her children. You'll do what's right. Did you call your parents?"

“Yeah. That’s why it took me a little bit to call you. I wanted to let them know what was going on. I *am* thinking about them. If either of them are hurt, it’s gon’ be hell to pay. My brother is pissed that he can’t get out there tonight. He has a meeting with the hospital board in thirty minutes. He’s a member. It’s probably best that he didn’t come though. He has a temper.”

I was hoping Arrow stayed in pocket when he got there. He’d told me his sister’s kids weren’t that old, both still under the age of ten. They didn’t need to see their dad in a fist fight with their uncle. However, I would definitely understand if he’d hurt anybody. Then he would deserve whatever Arrow gave him.

“I suppose it’s a good thing you’re off tomorrow.”

“Yeah, but I would have no problem calling off to go see about my sister. My family is important to me. I don’t work hard because I’m strapped. I work like I do because I genuinely care for the patients. I just hope that I can get there and diffuse the situation before it gets any worse.”

“I will pray that you will.”

I began praying aloud immediately. He didn’t need me to pray later. I begged God for his mercy and grace and that He would intervene like only he could. When I finished, Arrow said, “And she prays too? She’s definitely a keeper.”

I giggled. “If I have in my mind to pray for someone, I try to do it right then. If I don’t, I might forget.”

“That’s a good mantra to have.”

I smiled slightly, and we continued talking like we didn’t just have a huge ass awkward moment at my house. After a few more minutes of talking, there was a knock at my door. The doorbell rang shortly after. Nobody ever dropped by unannounced. “Was that your doorbell?”

“Yes,” I said quietly as I remained seated.

After a few seconds, it rang again. I stood from my seat and quietly made my way to the door to discreetly look through the blinds. Had I looked through the peephole,

whoever was there would have probably noticed. I didn't want to take that chance in case I didn't know who it was. It was a young-looking man standing there. There was no way in hell I would answer. It looked like he had papers in his hand.

"Who's at the door?"

I whispered into the phone, "I don't know."

"You're not going to answer it, are you?"

"No."

I walked away from the door quietly and went back to my couch to finish my shake. My curiosity had my mind racing though. People I knew didn't pop up, and I never had strange visitors show up at my place. Once again, they knocked. I was hoping they would just catch a hint and leave. "I can't believe they are still knocking."

"I know. Maybe they know I'm here. I'm not about to open the door for someone I've never seen before, let alone a man... not while I'm here alone."

"That's smart, baby."

"How far are you away from your sister?"

"About twenty minutes."

We continued talking for the duration of his drive, and when he arrived, he promised to call and update me, no matter the time. I ended the call and pressed play to resume watching *Black Panther*.

CHAPTER 11

ARROW

“What are you doing here, Arrow?”

“Just open the door. I drove an hour. I know you aren’t going to have me make a blank trip.”

“I will, because you should have called first.”

“Kaysyn, I’m trying to keep my cool. You know there is only one reason I would be here right now.”

“Arrow, you need to leave. For real.”

“Man, if you don’t open this fucking door, I’mma kick this shit in.”

It was quiet for a few seconds, so I started counting like I was a white mother trying to discipline her kid. When I got to five, I heard the locks disengaging. She opened the door, but it was dark in the house, and she didn’t have the porch light on, so I couldn’t see shit. As I tried to walk in, she put her hand to my chest. She was fucking tripping. I pushed her hand away and walked inside, being sure to turn the light on.

When I did, I went back to the door in a blind rage. “Arrow! No! That’s why I didn’t want to let you inside.”

She was holding on to my shirt as she screamed. That muthafucka had hit my sister. Her eye was dark as fuck. “The police already picked him up, Row! Please!”

“How I know you ain’t lying? You could just be saying that shit so I will leave it alone. You been hiding all kinds of shit.”

She released the grip she had on my shirt and slowly walked to the couch. “Come sit, Arrow.”

I did as she asked, prepared to listen until I couldn't stand to any longer. If she tried to make excuses for that nigga, I was gonna be done with this conversation sooner than right now and faster than immediately. “Since you're here, I take it you know about me and Seneca,” she said as she lowered her head.

“I've been known. I saw y'all leaving the movies together one night, nearly three months ago. Why? Why you fucking with him like that? You probably ain't gon' ever be with him, so why lead him on like you will?”

“I'm not leading him on. I told him in the beginning that I wouldn't be with him.”

“Kaysyn, you a smart woman. Don't fucking treat me like I'm a kid. You know damn well what y'all got done escalated well past what y'all had in the beginning. Shit, have you even filed for a divorce yet?”

“Yes. That was why Luckey was here. He tore the papers up in my face, saying that he would never give me what I want. He said he didn't give up on his family. I did. We've been having problems for over a year, almost two. He spends all our money. I had to move most of the money to a different account he doesn't have access to, to assure we could pay our bills. He spends every dime we have.”

I frowned slightly, remembering that Seneca knew some shit about him. “How long this been going on with you and Seneca?”

“Not too long after Ax and Alexz got married.”

“Over a year.”

“Right at a year.”

I slowly shook my head and pulled at my beard. “You playing a dangerous game. You know if Seneca had shown up, Luckey would be dead right now, and my boy would be going to jail. You need to fix this shit, Kay. You can start by telling the fucking truth about everything. You keeping your family in the dark, and that shit ain't cool. We here to support and love

you. You act like we some fucking strangers and gon' spread your damn business."

"Arrow—"

"Naw. This is bullshit that you've kept us in the dark all this time. I'd been trying to wait for you to say something... anything! But you been giving us radio silence like we the fucking enemy. Sunday, you need to go to Mama and Daddy house and let them know what the hell is going on. We all have a right to know in case that muthafucka show up at one of our houses."

She lowered her head. "Luckey is following in Jamel's dad's footsteps. He's on drugs, Arrow. The Luckey I know would have never raised a hand to me."

I rolled my eyes and stood from my seat to get some ice to put on her shit. He must've hit her hard as hell. Not only was it black, but her eyeball was red as hell. I was surprised the shit wasn't swollen completely shut. It was definitely swollen though. When I got back to her, I put the ice on her eye. She flinched but then allowed me to take care of her. "Where are the kids?"

"In their rooms. When he got here and pushed past me inside the house, I yelled at them to go to their rooms. They were so scared. Ell was trying to stay and protect me, but I pushed him out of here. Had he hurt my baby, I would have died trying to kill him, Arrow."

She broke down crying. I closed my eyes and put my arm around my big sister, the one who always had everything together and took care of us while Mama and Daddy were working. "It's okay, Kay. It's okay," I said, trying to console her. "How long has he been on drugs?"

"He was always a weed smoker. I think he got a hold to something bad, and it went downhill from there. He used to get it from Seneca. When Seneca stopped selling, he started getting it from someone else. That was when I knew something wasn't right. So maybe two or three years ago. I don't know. Everything is just fuzzy right now, Arrow. I'm dizzy as hell, and I have a horrible headache."

“You need to go to ER. I can take you. The kids can go to Mama and Daddy’s house. Your eye is red because it’s bleeding. I’m hoping you don’t have a retinal detachment. Can you see out of it?”

“Yes, but my vision is blurry.”

“How long ago did the police leave?”

“About ten minutes before you got here. I was just about to take a bath.”

“Hold this compress on your eye while I get the kids together. Don’t apply pressure. Did they recommend you going to the hospital?”

“Yeah, but I said no.”

I slowly shook my head. “Hardheaded ass. Starting now, you are going to allow your family to be here for you. Okay?”

She lowered her head as more tears left her exposed eye. “Okay.”

“I’m gonna pack you and the kids a bag.”

I left her and headed upstairs to the kids’ rooms. I quickly sent Lynn a text. *It’s gonna be a long night.*

I knocked on Ellington’s room door. When he didn’t answer, I slowly cracked the door to see him in a corner on the floor, holding his sister in his arms. That shit broke my heart. Kaysyn had adopted Jericka about two years ago, but the process had been long and tedious. When the proceedings started, she and Luckey were in a good place.

He only stared at me for a second, then he and Jericka stood and ran to me. I went to my knees and hugged them, doing my best to comfort their fears. “Is Daddy in jail?” Jericka asked.

“The police arrested him. I don’t know if he will stay in jail. But I don’t want y’all worrying about that, okay?”

“What if he comes back though?” Ell asked.

“That’s why I’m here. Pack some clothes so I can take y’all to Grandma and Grandpa’s house.”

“What about Mommy?”

“I have to take her to see a doctor.”

Jericka started crying more, and Ell tried to console her. I closed my eyes for a second. “Uncle Arrow, aren’t you a doctor?” Ell asked.

“I am, but I only give people medicine to put them to sleep before they have surgery. She needs to see an eye doctor.”

“Okay. Come on, Jericka. Let’s pack some clothes,” he said to his sister. He looked back over at me as I stood to my feet. “Are we going to school?”

“No. Not tomorrow at least. I’m gonna go pack your mom a bag.”

“Is she okay?”

“She’ll be fine. We just have to get her eye looked at.”

“He hit her, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, man.”

The anger that embodied him matched my own, and I couldn’t say anything to calm him down, because I was just as angry. I grabbed Jericka’s hand to lead her to her room on my way to Kaysyn’s room. “How many outfits should I pick?”

“Get at least five, baby girl. I don’t know how long you will be staying. If need be, we’ll get you more to wear if you run out.”

“Okay,” she said as more tears fell from her eyes.

I knew she didn’t fully understand what was going on. She was only six years old. Ell’s comprehension wasn’t too much better. He was only nine. These kids didn’t deserve this, and neither did Kaysyn. I squatted in front of her as we stood outside of her door and gently wiped the tears from her cheeks. She fell against me, sobbing uncontrollably. This shit was hard as hell. However, for a moment, Jericka made me forget how angry I was. I was only concerned with comforting her. They didn’t need the angry version of me.

She pulled away from me and went inside her room and grabbed her gymnastics bag from her closet. Lil mama was fire on her floor routine. It was like she embodied Dominique Dawes, Gabrielle Douglas, and Simone Biles all in her little body. I proceeded to Kaysyn's bedroom and went to her closet to pick a few fits when I heard her doorbell ring.

I quickly left her room as Jericka ran to Ell's bedroom. When I got downstairs, Kaysyn was trying to make her way to the door. "Naw, sit down. I got it."

When I got to the door, I looked out the peephole to see Seneca standing there. I opened the door, and I could see the anger all over him. "I figured since you were here, he would be gone by now."

"He was gone when I got here. She called the police."

I stepped aside so he could come in. His eyes landed on Kaysyn, and he stopped in his tracks. His body stiffened even more than it already was. "Did they arrest him?"

"She said they did."

He walked to Kaysyn as she stared at him, and what I witnessed, I would have never believed had someone told me. Seneca went to his knees in front of her and gently stroked her cheek then pulled her in his arms. He was whispering in her ear, and she started crying all over again. I left them to head back upstairs. I had a feeling she was gonna ghost him, especially after what had happened tonight, but they still needed privacy.

If Luckey bonded out, I knew he would be dead soon after. Seneca wouldn't stand for him walking this earth after the way Kaysyn looked right now. He would probably do the honors himself. He was a good shot too. He proved that when he was protecting Chad. I stopped to Ell's room to see Jericka still there.

"You can go back to your room, baby girl. You don't have to be afraid as long as I'm here. I'm not gonna let any harm come your way. My friend is here to look after y'all too."

She nodded and made her way back to her room. I nodded at Ell, and he gave me a slight smile. I was happy that he stepped into the role of protector for his little sister. She trusted him to shelter her. I got to Kaysyn's room and remembered that I'd messaged Lynn. I pulled my phone from my pocket and saw her text. *Is everything okay?*

I chose to call her so I could continue packing Kay's things. We needed to get out of here so we wouldn't be in the ER all night. She answered on the first ring as if she was sitting with the phone in her hand, waiting for my call. "Hello?"

"Hey, baby."

"God. Is she okay?"

"She will be. She has a mean ass black eye. Thankfully, he's been arrested already so I don't have to be. They'd already picked him up when I got here."

"Thank God. I was worried."

"Yeah. I'm about to take her to ER to make sure her eye is okay. It's bleeding inside, so I want to make sure it's good. I have to get the kids to my parents' house too. I haven't even called my brother yet to update him, but I'll call him when we leave. He was heading to a meeting anyway."

"Okay. Well, just update me later. I know you have your hands full right now. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"A'ight. You good?" I asked, thinking about the state she was in when I left.

She was doubting herself and overthinking things unnecessarily. I was prepared to give her all this slow fucking. I knew my past wasn't squeaky clean, but shit, whose was? I fucked around, but I wasn't a liar. I didn't deceive people to believe I was something that I wasn't or ready for something that I wasn't. It wasn't in me to break anyone's heart.

Seeing love firsthand through my parents, I knew that it was something I would eventually want. Now that I wanted it, my past was making the process a little more tedious. There was no one I wanted more than Lynn. While I was fiending for

a taste, or like 50 Cent said, just a lil bit, I would wait as long as she needed me to, within reason.

“I’m okay. Why do you ask?”

I remained quiet as I grabbed a handful of Kaysyn’s underwear and put them in the bag. I wasn’t tryna look at my sister’s shit like that. When I heard a presence at the door, I saw Kay and Seneca. “I’ll pack my bag, Arrow. You probably throwing all kinds of shit in there.”

Seneca had his arm around her waist like he was helping her to keep her balance. I gave her a slight smile as I stared at her. She could possibly have a slight concussion for her to be dizzy still. “Okay.”

I made my way to the door and shook Seneca’s hand on my way out. When I got to the hallway, the kids were staring in our direction. “Who is that, Uncle Arrow?”

“He’s a friend of mine and your mom’s. Don’t worry. He’s gonna take care of y’all just as I would.”

Ell’s eyes stayed glued to his mother’s bedroom. I didn’t blame him. I thought they’d already met, but apparently not. I could understand why she hadn’t introduced them since she said she didn’t want a relationship with Seneca. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, I could tell she had feelings for him. She was fighting it for whatever reasons. I knew one of those reasons had to be because of her situation with Luckey.

When I heard noise in my ear, I realized that I still had Lynn on the line. “Damn, baby. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. You’re busy. We’ll talk later.”

“Okay. I hope you sleep well.”

“Thank you, Arrow. Good night.”

I ended the call and went to grab the kids’ bags and assure they had everything they needed. The talk between Kaysyn and us would definitely happen before Sunday. I was more than sure when I called Ax, he would be like the Tasmanian Devil traveling from Beaumont. I’d better get ready for the turmoil and call Mel and Ali for reinforcement.

CHAPTER 12

LYNN

I felt for Arrow's sister and her children. The next day, he called me and then came over when I got off work, filling me in on the details. Our time together was short, though, because I wasn't feeling well. He massaged my belly and held me until I fell asleep, despite how tired I knew he was. This weight loss journey was eating my fucking lunch, but I knew it was so worth it. I'd made it my first week at work... barely.

I was depressed as hell. Part of the reason was because of a new development since my surgery. I was overthinking shit and constantly doubting myself. Although I'd lost twenty-one pounds two weeks post op, it was like I still saw myself the way I was before surgery. While I knew I would lose even more weight as time went along, I was hating the process.

On top of that, I hadn't spoken to Arrow. I was at war within myself. He seemed to be everything I wanted, and I was getting in my own way. He'd been calling me every day since Wednesday morning and had even sent flowers to my job on Friday. I hadn't been to the gym since Tuesday, and I just felt like I was dying inside.

Jazzy had said that maybe I came back to work too quickly. I didn't know what it was. I just knew that I didn't want to be bothered with anyone... not even Arrow. There were times during those days that I just wanted him to show up at my place and rescue me from myself. Then there were other times that I knew if he did, I wouldn't even answer the door.

I lay on the sofa, wishing that I could pull myself out of the funk I was in, but I knew that I would just have to wait for it to pass. This wasn't something Arrow should have to deal with, and at this point, I was feeling like he was too good for me. No one wanted to be in a relationship where they had to put up with shit like this, especially if they were barely together. Arrow and I hadn't even established whether we were even exclusive or not. While I felt like I was probably the only woman he was seeing, I knew that it wasn't fair to him.

He was the only man I was interested in, for sure. He was the only man that had caught my attention and rendered me speechless in years. The man was physically perfect. We hadn't even been talking long enough for me to know if he was perfect in any other way, but so far, to me, he was the complete package. He had an amazing career, was financially stable, kind, compassionate, and loving.

God, what's wrong with me? This had never happened to me before. I was always pretty confident. So this mental space I was in was taking me for a loop. As I had my woe is me moment, there was a knock at my door. I didn't even get up. There was no point since I didn't want to see anyone. However, they knocked again, showing their persistence.

My phone chimed with a text message. I grabbed it to see a message from a number I didn't recognize. The line I saw on my lock screen caused me to open it. It read, *Your father died. Please open the door. I'm the one knocking.*

It felt like my heart dropped to my feet. While I didn't have a relationship with him, I felt so heavy by the news, especially since he wanted to reestablish our connection. I stood and went to the door to see the same young man from Monday. I opened the door to see him holding some papers in his hand like last time.

I swallowed hard as I skeptically invited him in. "Hi, Lynn. I'm your brother, Thomas. I live in League City. Umm... our father died in a car crash Monday."

I nodded as I stared at him. "Was he still in California?"

He frowned slightly. “No. He was living here. I have these papers because they were addressed to you. I found them at his place. I also have a copy of his will and obituary to share with you.”

This was too much. I felt like I was about to pass out. “Was it the wreck on 59 South?”

“It was. Did you see it on the news?”

“Yeah. I didn’t really pay attention to it enough to hear names, because I thought he was still in California.”

He slowly shook his head as he placed the papers on my coffee table. “He really wanted to reconnect with you. You were all he talked about. He said he did you wrong and he needed to make it right. I’m glad he was afforded the chance to reach out before this happened.”

“When was the funeral?”

“Today. I tried coming over a couple of times before. I didn’t want to send that through a text message. I even called twice. The only reason I sent the message today was because I felt like you had been ignoring me, because you didn’t know who I was. For some reason, I didn’t feel like me saying I was your brother would warrant a response either.”

He was right. I wouldn’t have responded, and now I felt so bad about the way I treated my father, thinking he had an ulterior motive. He was genuine in wanting to get reacquainted. This was doing nothing for my depression. He stood from his seat in front of me and said, “I’m sorry. You have my number if you need to talk.”

I stood as well, still stunned by the news and led him to the door. I finally managed to get out, “I’m sorry for your loss. Thank you for not giving up on contacting me.”

He gave me a soft smile as I opened the door then walked out without another word. When I closed the door behind him, I went back to the couch and sat, then searched through the papers for his obituary. When I found it, I nearly stopped breathing. Seeing his face produced that out of me. It was like

it made it real. I opened it to read the obituary, and when I saw my name there, it produced tears out of me.

I believed they weren't tears saying that I would miss him but tears of guilt for not allowing him to make his wrongs right. I scanned all the pictures in there of family and grandchildren and noticed there was one picture there of him and me. I stared at it for the longest before I brought my attention back to what was written.

According to what I read, I had two siblings, Thomas and another brother named Allen Junior, affectionately called AJ. They were both married and had five kids between them, a set of twins in the mix that my father called Thing 1 and Thing 2.

After reading through every word, I set it on the table and grabbed the envelope addressed to me. I opened the clasp and pulled out the contents to see a few pictures, one of which was in the obituary. My eyes zeroed in on the envelope with my address on it. He knew where I lived. After taking a deep breath, I carefully opened it to see one sheet of paper in his handwriting.

Hey, baby girl. I'm sorry things are the way that they are between us. I'm even sorry for what I said the other day. While it was the truth, I shouldn't have told you, because it hurt you. I could hear it in your voice. I didn't mean it as harshly as it sounded, but I supposed there was no other way for you to take it.

My absence didn't affect who you'd become, because you had a strong mother who instilled good values into you. However, I'm sorry how my absence may have made you feel. I hope you never thought you were unworthy because of my horrible decisions. I was the one who didn't deserve you. You went your entire life without a present father and that's on me.

I just want to work to make it right with you. I have no hidden agenda despite how you're feeling about me right now. The only thing I ask for is some of your time. I don't want to talk about anything to try to justify my absence because there isn't an excuse good enough. You're my only daughter, and I

failed you. I skipped town when you needed me most. That's unacceptable.

I know I apologized already, but I feel like I could never apologize enough. I don't deserve your forgiveness, but I humbly ask for it anyway. I messed up, and it's hard living with myself these days knowing what I did to you and your mother. I feel like I contributed to her demise. I broke her heart.

I had to take a break. Tears were falling from my eyes uncontrollably, and I could no longer see a word on the page. I was so in my feelings about this. I'd written him off, and now that he was no longer here, I regretted my decision, especially now that I knew how much he wanted to reconnect. After getting myself together, I went back to the letter.

I know it seems like this letter is going forever, but I wanted to say everything I had on my heart to say, because I don't know if you'll contact me or not. I need you to know how proud I am of you. I listen to your segment on the radio nearly every day. I'm happy that my absence didn't cause you to hate men altogether or generalize them based on my actions. The way you uplift people is amazing.

You're a beautiful woman, Lynn. You deserve to find love so overwhelming that you have to pinch yourself to see if it's real. As much love as you give, I hope you receive ten times that amount. Your heart is huge, and you deserve all the blessings God has for you. I really don't want to end this letter. I'm smiling as I visualize you actually reading my words. You get your fiery temperament from me, so hopefully you have enough curiosity about what I have to say to even read it. Continue to do great things, baby. I love you always.

Your father, Allen Jolivet

I sat back on the couch and closed my eyes as I held the letter in my hand, wishing I had another opportunity to talk to him. I grabbed my phone and stared at it for a moment, thinking of reaching out to Arrow. Life was short, and it would kill me if I never got to talk to him again. I closed my eyes and dropped my phone to my side, not knowing what to say. Maybe I should just let him go. He would be much better off.

CHAPTER 13

ARROW

Two weeks. Almost two whole fucking weeks had passed since I'd heard from Lynn. I didn't know what the fuck was up with her. At first, I thought something had happened. I'd gone to her apartment complex and caught a glimpse of her walking to her unit. That shit made me angry. She had to know how she was torturing me. How could she not?

I'd tried to keep myself busy with work and staying in Kaysyn's business. She'd gone back home a week ago, and Ax and I had gotten her locks changed. He'd lit into her ass when he got there the day after her assault. I knew he would. Once he was done chewing her out, he sat next to her and held her for nearly an hour. She had a mild concussion, but thank God, her eye would be fine. It was still a little discolored the last time I saw her, but that should be gone within another week or so.

Seneca had called her constantly while she was at Mama and Dad's house. It didn't help that Jericka had spilled the beans on that. When she said it, Ax was literally quiet for thirty minutes. I timed his ass. My parents had asked quite a few questions, and I heard Kaysyn arguing on the phone with who I assumed was Seneca. I didn't know how she expected that man not to check on her when she knew how he felt about her.

The only reason he knew about it was because she was on the phone with him when Luckey got there acting a fool. She didn't end the call right away, so Seneca had heard more than what he should have. I was grateful for that, though, because

she probably wouldn't have told us. He'd only called me once, to make sure she was okay, when she stopped taking his calls. Just as I figured she would do, she'd ghosted his ass.

Besides Kaysyn and all her drama, I hadn't done shit but work. I'd canceled on Jamel and Sandrene when I couldn't get ahold of Lynn last weekend. I was dangerously close to saying fuck it all. I'd flirted with Melanie at work Friday, and I was seriously contemplating going to her place and fucking her into paralysis when I got back to Houston. *Why should I wait for Lynn?* We weren't a couple, but I thought we were on track to becoming one.

Lynn had been on the radio every day, not missing a beat. She made it seem easy to just move on with her life like I never existed.

"You and Seneca sitting here like y'all lost your best fucking friends," Ali said as he sat close to us on the couch.

Seneca didn't give him the satisfaction of even acting like he heard him. I only stared at him for a moment. We were at the Berotte's for Sunday dinner. I almost didn't come because I didn't want to seem like I was being anti-social. If I wasn't going to talk to anybody, I could have stayed my ass at home. I bounced Mariena on my leg, and Ariana made her way over to me. She was so damn jealous. According to Ax, she was just like her mother.

I picked her up and set her on my leg behind Mariena and bounced them both as they laughed hysterically. The other babies were looking on like they wanted to be a part of what we had going on. They were too young though. I'd be afraid I would drop them trying to bounce them on my leg. Once they could effectively hold themselves up, I'd let them go for a test ride on the pony.

When Shy walked through the door, he said, "Y'all ready to celebrate?"

Everybody turned their attention away from the babies to him and Brittany. She had to be about five months pregnant now. Because she was having twins, her stomach was huge.

She looked like she was ready to deliver at any moment. Chad grinned slightly, so I figured it had to do with his case.

“What are we celebrating?” Zay asked as Shy helped Brittany sit on the couch.

“The attorney for the FBI called a week ago and offered to settle with Chad for five mil. Y’all cocky ass brother said that was too far away from the billion he asked for.”

Everyone died in laughter. “Nigga, who the hell you ’posed to be?” Dylan asked, only causing everyone to laugh harder.

“Apparently, I’m that nigga. You ain’t getting a damn dime for questioning that shit,” Chad responded.

Mr. Sheldon slowly shook his head without the slightest smile. I truly believed Chad worked his last fucking nerve most days. “So what did he get, Shy?” Mr. Sheldon asked.

“They gave this nigga one hundred million!”

“Wait a damn minute! How they go from five mil to one hundred mil, Shy?” Isaiah asked.

“Man, y’all not fu... I mean, y’all not listening,” Chad explained, filtering himself when he saw Mariena’s eyes on him. “Dylan, get yo’ baby out of grown folks’ conversation.”

Shy stood in the middle of the floor and said, “I told them that was the minimum in order to avoid court. They wanted to seal the case where Chad couldn’t talk about it, but I told them if they wanted our silence, they was gonna have to come off that billion. A nigga like to brag too much. You know how many people already know that I done won a case against the FBI?”

“Let me guess... all of Beaumont,” DJ said.

Shy frowned hard like DJ had insulted him. “All of Beaumont? For real? I said I won a case against the FBI. I posted that shit on Facebook for the *world* to see! Had I thought I could have gotten away with it without tarnishing my reputation, I would have told them to suck my you know what on national TV.”

Mrs. Anissa turned red as hell. She should have been used to their asses by now. Before Shy could say another word, Alexz cranked up “Atomic Dog” and Chad started barking loudly. Mariena started barking with him as Dylan frowned. He began our stroll, scooping up Mariena along the way. DJ, Ax, and I joined him. Ariana was laughing so much from me hopping with her in my arms until she was basically just screaming.

I couldn’t believe this nigga had won a hundred million dollars. That shit was unbelievable. By the time the song went off, Chad looked in Alexz’s direction. She smiled big at him as he frowned. “Hol’ up. Naw. Hell naw! You being all nice and shit ’cause you tryna get some of my money. You can forget it!”

Alexz hopped on his back as “Wipe Me Down” started to play. The kids were all laughing as Alexz said, “This is how you effectively ride a jackass, kids.”

Shy and Dylan was strolling and shimmying. The entire family would benefit from that much money. I sat on the couch as the women all pumped Shy up when he shimmied. I could only chuckle in response. The turn up had definitely begun. My phone vibrated in my pocket. I wasn’t even in a hurry to see who it was anymore, because I knew it wouldn’t be Lynn. However, I pulled it out anyway to see a message from Melanie.

My pussy is on the table. When you coming eat?

My dick woke the hell up as I stared at a picture of her pussy. Before I could respond, a video came through. There wasn’t a chance that I would watch that now. She would have my dick hard as a damn hammer and make these niggas’ wives drool at the sight.

I FELT LIKE SHIT. SO SICK INSIDE AT WHAT HAD HAPPENED LAST night until I called off from work. Why in the fuck was I upset about fucking the shit out of Melanie and her friend? I needed

that shit and thought it would make me feel better. I thought it would help me forget about Lynn, but all it did was make me think about her more. She wasn't my woman, nor was she committed to me in any way.

The problem was that whether I wanted to be or not, I was committed to her. She was the woman I wanted, and I was tired of waiting for her to come around. I'd let Mel and some woman I didn't even know suck my dick until I'd nudded twice all over their faces then watched them lick the shit off each other. How did I engage in such freak nasty shit and be upset about it? I would have been excited about that a year or two ago and would have bragged to Jamel about my night.

I felt so unfulfilled, and I knew why. I wanted her! Why couldn't she fucking see that? A blind person could see how strongly I felt about her. It was in the way I stared at her, the tenderness I showed her, and the care I gave her. I had barely scratched the surface of who she was, but here I was, craving a woman I'd never had like a weak ass nigga.

I'd been at home all day doing nothing. My mama had called a couple of times, but I couldn't even answer. She knew some shit was up with me when I saw her Saturday. It was hard for me to hide how miserable I'd been this past weekend. Lynn's absence was taking a toll on me, and it was about time I did something about it.

I stood from the couch and went to shower, then threw on some sweats, a T-shirt, a hoodie, and my J's. Lynn was either gonna accept the fact that I wasn't going anywhere, or she was gonna have to tell me to move the fuck around. This silence was killing me. I pulled my hair up into a man bun and rolled the hell out of here looking like a man on a mission.

After stopping at the store to get flowers, I went to her apartment complex and just sat in the lot, waiting for her to get here. She got off work at seven, and I knew the station was about thirty minutes from her house. I'd gotten here at seven twenty, somewhat prepared for her rejection, almost expecting to hear it.

She had to be as miserable as I was, but I wasn't sure why she was putting us through this shit. She reminded me so much of Kaysyn until it was unreal. They were both private about what they were going through... so private until it became their downfall. We all needed somebody sometimes. If we were meant to live this life alone and without interaction, solitary confinement in prison wouldn't be a big deal.

Everyone wanted to know that someone cared about them or loved them. If I were honest with myself, I could feel that she was going to do something like this the last time I was with her. The shit with Kaysyn just took precedence. She was so relaxed in us then suddenly pulled all the way back like she knew something I wasn't privy to. She knew a lot about me. The crazy thing was that she even knew I was fucking Melanie.

As I waited, I received a text from my coworker, Katrina. When I opened it, I frowned when I saw, *Nigga what the fuck?*

It was rare that I called out, but I was only scheduled for one procedure today. I responded. *What?*

Shortly after, a video came through. I frowned even harder when I hit the play button and saw Melanie laughing. "Girl, we broke that fucking bow last night. That's why his ass called out. That shit was so good though. I'm still sore."

My face was hot as hell as I listened to Melanie tell some random ass nurse our business. Katrina had warned me about her ass. It didn't bother me at the time, but now that I wanted Lynn, it fucked with me. She continued yapping. "I'm used to him, but my girl said he stretched her shit out. It was like that for me the first couple of times. That muthafucka is a damn horse," she said in a hushed tone, but loud enough for the recording to pick her up.

The video ended, and I slowly shook my head. I went to the contacts in my phone and blocked her like Ali had already suggested. Sunday night shouldn't have happened, and she knew that. I'd told her that I was seeing someone, and she figured out I was seeing Lynn. That didn't stop her from coming at me, and I fell for the shit. I would have done better

fucking someone like her homegirl, who I didn't have a history with, than to fuck her again.

I'm sorry, Katrina. I should have avoided her like you told me to.

When I saw Lynn turn into her parking spot, I switched my phone to vibrate and grabbed the flowers from the passenger seat, waiting for her to emerge. She sat there for a minute before her taillights went off. I turned my car off and prepared to get out. I was anxious to see her. The last time I'd seen her, she was only ten pounds down or so. I was willing to bet she was down even more weight. What if she'd moved on to someone else?

I dispelled those thoughts when her door opened, and she got out of the car. *Shit!* She was so damn fine. I thought that the first time I saw her, but she had on heels and a form fitting dress showing off all her curves. However, the expression on her face was one of sadness. It pulled at my heartstrings. Despite the fact that she was the one who created the distance, my mind started filtering through the possible scenarios that caused her retreat.

She swung her coat around her shoulders and closed her door. When she began walking toward her unit, I got out of my car and nervously headed her way. I put a little pep in my step because she was moving faster than I anticipated. It was nippy outside, so that was probably why. She'd told me that she didn't like cold weather. I didn't mind it if it didn't get too cold.

When she turned to walk up the sidewalk to her door, she saw me. She dropped everything on the ground, and the tears immediately sprang from her eyes. I ran to her and pulled her in my arms. I didn't know if they were tears of joy and relief or tears of sadness and rejection. "Arrow! What are you doing here?" she said through her sobs.

"I miss you. I couldn't keep waiting for you to reach out."

She wrapped her arms around my waist and rested her head on my shoulder. I bit my bottom lip for a moment, then kissed her head. "Come on. Let's get inside."

She pulled away from me, and I extended the flowers to her. “Thank you.”

I nodded then picked up all her things from the ground and followed her to the door. After she unlocked it, she turned to me and said softly, “Excuse the mess.”

I frowned slightly. Lynn kept her apartment immaculate. The most I’d ever seen out of place was an empty glass on the countertop. When we walked inside and she turned the light on, clothes were all over her couch, the kitchen had glasses everywhere, and there were papers all over the coffee table and dining table. I set her things on the table, then immediately went to her. I grabbed her hand as I thought about what I would say. I wanted to word my expressions carefully. I didn’t want to offend or piss her off.

“What’s going on, Lynn?”

She looked away for a moment, then she went to her couch and pushed clothes out of the way. Once she sat, I sat next to her. For a while she was silent, then she laid her head against my shoulder. “I’m scared,” she whispered.

I gently lifted her head and stared into her eyes. “Scared of what?”

“I don’t want you to ever regret being with me. I’m having some issues with depression. I’ve tried to dress my way out of it and sleep my way out of it, but it won’t go away. My normal reaction is to eat my way out of it, but I can’t do that anymore. You shouldn’t have to deal with that. Your life is so put together, and I feel like I’m in turmoil. My father died in a wreck, and all he wanted was to love me. I was protecting myself from love. Who does that?”

I didn’t have an answer for *who does that*, but I had an answer though. “You just had surgery... a little over three weeks post-op. Your crutch and cure were stripped from you. The way you were used to coping with stress and fear is gone, baby. You have to find a healthy way. Let me be here to help you. We can do all sorts of things. There’s bowling, skating, shopping, exercising, and a ton of other things. I’m so sorry about your father.”

She laid her head against me again without saying a word. I supposed she was thinking about my reasoning. “So you think because I can’t eat like I used to is what’s making me depressed?”

“It’s your method of self-soothing. It’s like trying to wean a baby from a pacifier. When they can’t get it, they cry or throw a fit. In your case, you’re just as irritable, but it’s in the form of depression. But I need you to listen to me and listen good, because I don’t want to ever have to repeat this. I want you and all that comes with you. I don’t care about how soon it is or what you think I shouldn’t have to deal with. I have no doubts about what I want. I’m a grown man, and whatever you’re dealing with is something I’m prepared to handle.”

“But, Arrow—”

“Naw. No buts. I’m here. That’s it. Now, there’s a treatment for depression that can be temporary... like six months or so until you start feeling better, if that’s something you’re interested in looking into. I’m here to help you.”

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

I frowned. I didn’t know where her mind was taking her, so I decided to ask. “What?”

“That you want me to be yours?”

I gave her a soft smile. “I’m glad you’re listening. That’s exactly what I want, Lynn. You gon’ deny me?”

She gave me a soft smile and shook her head. I pulled her to me and kissed her lips. My eyes nearly rolled to the back of my head. I’d been fiending for a taste of her, and now that I finally had it, I didn’t ever want to let go again. I pulled away from her and stroked her cheek.

“I missed you too, Arrow.”

She pulled me back to her and laid those luscious lips on mine. However, she got the bright idea to slide her tongue in my mouth. I reciprocated that and placed my hands on her cheeks, holding her to me. I only wanted her to pull away when I was ready for her to. She moaned into my mouth as she

sucked my bottom lip. As I released my grip on her, she stared up at me. "I'm ready."

I slid my hand up her thigh and saw the goosebumps appear on her arm. While I wanted to believe that I knew what she was ready for, I didn't want to assume. "Ready for what?"

"You. All of you."

She slid her hand over my erection, and suddenly, I didn't feel so good. My mind thought about the shit I had just done last night, thinking I would never see her again. I convinced myself that I had needs. However, if I denied her right now, she would take that the wrong way. Pushing that shit from my mind, I asked, "You sure?"

"Yes."

She stood, so I stood, also, and followed her to what I assumed would be her bedroom. Surprisingly, it was spotless. She stepped out of her shoes, and when she turned to me, I could see her nerves through her gaze. I stepped closer to her and pulled her into me. I hadn't so much as grabbed her ass, and here we were, about to have sex. I felt it was going to be so much more than that though. Before we proceeded, I asked, "Why now?"

"Because I need you to show me what love feels like."

Her explanation put me on pause for a moment. It was then that I realized she was using me to self-soothe. She could use me until she used me the fuck up too. I slowly spun her around and slid my arms around her waist. When I lowered my lips to her neck, she let out another moan that had me wanting to dip into her immediately. I had to take my time though. I wanted her to feel loved like she said she wanted.

She needed to know that she was worth every second of time that it took to make sure she was thoroughly pleased. I spent minutes licking, kissing, and sucking her neck and earlobe as she trembled beneath my touch. My hand slid up her torso, and I gently glided them over her breasts. "You're so beautiful, Lynn."

I turned her to face me then went to the zipper at her side and began unzipping her dress. It seemed like she was holding her breath as I slid my hand inside her dress to help her take it off. She giggled as I stared at all the shit she had on under her dress. “I needed to smooth this out for this tight dress. Nobody needs to be able to count my dimples.”

I bit my lip as I fought back a smile. “Can I tell you something?”

She stopped unclasping her waist trainer as she stared at me.

“Naw. Keep taking that off.”

She giggled again and proceeded with what she was doing. “So what do you wanna tell me?”

“I’ve seen you naked before.”

Her eyes lifted to mine, and I could see the amusement dancing in them. “I somewhat figured you had. What did you think?”

“I had to think about everything *but* your sexy ass so I could do my job without having to try to focus with a hard dick.”

Her face reddened, and she glanced down at the tent it was making in my pants. “Well, I can’t wait to see what you have to offer me. I’m sure it will be breathtaking.”

“Mm hmm. Literally and figuratively.”

CHAPTER 14

LYNN

It felt amazing to have Arrow here, giving me everything I'd been imagining over the past two weeks. I didn't realize just how powerful depression could be. It was like I wanted to call him, but I couldn't make myself do it. My mind, body, and heart weren't in sync. In my heart, I knew he was the best thing that had ever happened to me. My body wanted him. It heated up with desire whenever I thought about him. But my mind told me that I wasn't good enough for him.

I was so glad he showed up when he did. I was drowning in my regrets and fears, thinking he probably hated me. Then he showed up with flowers. He was so forgiving and understanding it left me feeling grateful to have someone in my corner who really cared about me. Although he'd told me that it was like my spirit called out to his, I still couldn't fathom just how much he cared. It felt like he'd rescued me, given me a breath of fresh air.

He watched me as I took off my waist trainer, his gaze unwavering. The way he stared at me made me feel like the sexiest woman in the world. I must have been moving too slow because he grabbed me by the hair and tongued me down like I'd been missing. When he pulled away from me, I whispered, "Arrow, shit."

He looked at me as he helped me out of my waist trainer. "Damn, baby," he said as he scanned my body. "You so fucking beautiful."

The way he gassed me up was something that I loved. *God bless it.* I reached up and pulled his hair loose, sliding my

fingers through it. The moan that fell from his lips had my nipples so hard they were throbbing. I didn't know why God made him so sexy, but I was beyond happy about it. When I pulled his shirt over his head and saw his tatted chest, my lips parted. Doing my best to take him in, I let out a soft whimper.

“Arrow?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“Please make love to me. I need to feel you inside of me, hovering over me, and kissing me tenderly. Please...”

I went to my knees and pulled off his sweats, smelling just how good he smelled. He was fresh out of the shower. I licked his dick, then pulled it inside my mouth as I swiped my hair from my face. Pulling away from him, I was about to get up. “Where you going?”

“Get my scrunchie from the dresser.”

Since I'd gotten my braids taken out, it wouldn't stay out of my face. I was about to stand again, but his words halted me. “Don't be disrespectful, Lynn,” he said with a frown. “I'm the ponytail holder. That's my fucking job.”

I wanted to laugh, but I knew he was serious as hell. “My only job right now is to hold your hair out of your face and enjoy what you finna do to me.”

I bit my bottom lip as I restrained my smile and brought my mouth back to his dick, right where he needed me to be. It was exactly where I *wanted* to be. Arrow's dick was in a category of its own. I could see why he had a reputation. Women probably couldn't get enough of this. It was long, thick, and slightly hooked. Just the look of it made my G-spot excited.

I started a rhythm as he threaded his fingers through my hair then leaned over a bit to hold it in a ponytail, just like he said he would. “Relax your shoulders, baby.”

When I did, my throat opened more to receive more of him. He began guiding his missile right down my throat like he was performing an endoscopy. I wanted to ask him if he saw anything while he was in there. I was gagging like crazy,

and for a moment, I thought I was gonna throw up. I stroked his dick while admiring how gifted he was. This shit was made for pornos, and Arrow was giving all this dick away for free.

He withdrew himself from my mouth and watched the spit fall from it. “Mm.”

After stroking it a couple of times, he laid it on my lips as I stared at him. This was where I should have been two weeks ago, bowing in worship for this masterpiece God had created. When he insinuated that he was a ho, I should have known he had dick for days and that he knew how to use it. I hadn’t even felt it yet, and here I was, looking forward to the next time. I closed my eyes and began sucking him again.

He released my hair and slid his hands to my cheeks and gently caressed them with his thumbs. I opened my eyes to stare at him. His thick lips were parted, and his stare was intense. When he began subtly winding his dick into my mouth, I slid my hand between my legs, moving my panties to the side. I couldn’t take his movements and his stare all at once.

I began flicking my clit back and forth as he slowly pulled his dick from my mouth. “Let me please you, Lynn. Let me taste them flavors that’s been marinating all day.”

He helped me from the floor and led me to the bed, then removed my bra and panties. When he took my panties and licked the crotch of them, I knew he was a nasty ass nigga. He sniffed them and closed his eyes. “Get in the bed, Lynn. I’m about to give you all the shit you deserve.”

I took my time and climbed in bed, trying to be careful not to fall. My equilibrium had been off lately. Before I could roll to my back, Arrow had slid under me. I supposed I was taking too long. I stared down at him, nervous as hell. “You gon’ sit that shit on my face or what?”

I lowered myself slightly, and I saw him roll his eyes. He grabbed my ass and pulled me down on him. There was no way he could breathe like that. I had rolls everywhere, and my fupa was hanging on his head. The shit was embarrassing. He

popped my ass. “If you don’t drop this fat ass pussy on me, girl... I know how to survive.”

I closed my eyes and did my best to relax. I grabbed ahold of his hair and began grinding my hips a bit. It was feeling so damn good. Arrow had skills with his tongue, and he was using those skills to bring me insurmountable pleasure. The way he sucked my clit had me on the brink of orgasm already. It had been at least seven years since my pussy was eaten, and I surely didn’t remember it feeling this good.

For the longest, I wasn’t even a fan of it. Most niggas were down there exploring. When you told them what to do, they got offended, like they knew your body better than you. On top of that, I would be wet as hell. When they’d put their dick in me, I didn’t feel shit. I didn’t think I would have that problem with Arrow. As he slurped and sucked, I could feel the tremble in my legs, knowing I was about to release my hopes and dreams all over his tongue.

“Arrooww! I’m about to cum! Shit!”

He only held me tighter, pulling me even further onto him. I released his hair to pinch my nipples, and that was all it took. I’d forgotten that quickly that I was on his face and was bucking all over him. That orgasm was so strong I damn near went deaf and blind. I fell from his face to the bed as I panted. Arrow’s beard was soaked. Watching him rub his hand over it and then slowly lick his palm had my fruit juicing even more.

He went to his pants on the floor, and when he turned back to me, he was strapped up. Sliding up my body, he took his time to kiss me in various spots along the way. He pulled one of my nipples into his mouth as he gently caressed the other one. I could feel his dick resting between my legs. I didn’t even know if I should have said resting. That shit wasn’t in relax mode. It was in demolition mode. This was the only time that I looked forward to being destroyed and demolished. His missile had its sights set on its target, and I refused to do anything to avoid the destruction it was about to bring.

When he released my nipple, his eyes met mine as his dick slowly made its entry into my territory. I released a moan as I

held his gaze, waiting to see just how much of his dick I could take. He retreated some and released a groan that touched my soul. I was thankful that he was being gentle with me. It had been a while, and I nearly felt like a virgin all over again.

Arrow brought his lips to mine, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. As he pushed further inside, I sank my nails into his back as I said, “Oh my God! Shit!”

He held his position, letting me get acquainted with the depths he’d reached. Bringing his face to my ear, he bit my earlobe. “Mm. Damn, Lynn. I hope you okay, because this pussy already holding me tight as fuck, baby.”

His voice was so low and laced with passion I could feel the chill go up my spine. “I’m okay, Arrow. Please don’t stop. God... please.”

The tingle coursing through my clit was telling me that this would be an orgasm I would never forget. The first one was already mind blowing, but I knew he would tear that experience to shreds with the next one. As he began stroking me slowly, he kissed my neck then lifted his head to stare at me. The intensity of the frown on his gorgeous face had my eyes rolling to the back of my head. My orgasm was trying to run to him and show him just how much she appreciated him for bringing her out of hiding.

Celibacy had me extremely sensitive to the places he was taking me, and I could barely stand the pleasure he was serving. I could only focus on how good he felt, and it was overwhelming as hell. He gave it to me a little stronger, and he went deeper, sweet talking my orgasm right from the depths of me. “Arrow! Fuck!”

“Yeah. Give me all of it,” he said calmly.

He stroked me a couple more times then pulled out, pushed my legs further apart, and put his face where his dick had been. I knew that nigga had to have catapulted me to heaven’s gates, and now he was trying to give me clearance to enter. I gripped his hair as he ate me for everything I was worth, and dammit, my pussy must’ve been a rare delicacy. He pulled away and massaged my clit until I felt the warm liquid leave

me. He licked his lips as he watched my pussy gurgle and drown in her own juices.

When Arrow pushed back inside of me, the gentleness was gone. He was stroking me roughly, but I knew he still hadn't given me all his length. He leaned over me, hooking my leg with his arm in the process as he closed his eyes. His grunts were sexy as hell, and the sound of them had me about to orgasm again. Knowing that I was giving him as much pleasure as he was giving me had my heart melting in my chest.

He opened his eyes as he pulled out of me then rolled me over to my stomach. I went up on my knees and slowly twerked my ass for him. I could feel the shit bouncing against my lower back. That was probably why my back was always hurting. He stunned me when he smacked it then entered me with haste. The pace of his assault increased, and he felt even deeper than before. Those pearly gates had to have opened at this point.

I moaned loudly as he said, "I need your body to recognize what I'm bringing to it. I need it to submit and allow me to have complete control. When it does, just staring at me will have you cumming in your panties."

I lost my breath for a moment as my body responded to his words. She was beginning to acknowledge the power Arrow possessed. His arrow below felt like it was piercing my damn uterus while his gaze had pierced my soul. When he began winding his dick inside of me like he was dancing, I began squirting. "See... that's the shit I'm talking about. Give me some more."

He reached beneath me and lightly pressed my abdomen right above my mound then massaged it, causing more fluids to squirt out of me. I swore this man knew more about my body than I did, unlike the fools in my past that *thought* they did. I supposed there were benefits to dating a doctor. "Damn, Lynn. You so fucking sexy, and your pussy feels amazing. I'm not gon' be able to get enough."

“I hope not, because I know... I won't be able to... ahh... get enough of you! Arrow!”

I came hard that time, and my arch completely dropped. I fell flat on the bed. How he made me cum back-to-back like that was a mystery to me, but I almost didn't care to know how. The point was that it happened, and he was capable. Not long after mine had ripped through me, he gripped my ass and growled out his release as well.

Arrow lay on top of me, lightly kissing my shoulder, then rolled to my side. I turned my head to stare at him. Hopefully he could feel the words that I couldn't quite express at the moment. I literally wanted to lay here and cry because of how good he made me feel and how much attention he showed my body. The man was a damn expert, and it showed.

He swiped the hair from my face and asked, “What are you thinking about?”

“That if this is what it feels like to surrender to you, then just call me your servant. I will submit to you in every way if I can get this every day.”

He chuckled. “You have it backwards though. I need you to submit and relinquish control so I can serve *you*. It's not so I can have power over you, it's so I can put power into you. Lynn, you are a beautiful, strong sister, but you don't have to do everything alone. You don't have to be strong when I'm here. I'm here to be your strength. I need your mind clear of all the clutter from the day and completely focused on me so you can have the best experience you've ever had.”

I stared at him in awe, wondering when I was going to wake up from this dream and be forced to live in the real world. Arrow was perfect, so perfect until I'd forgotten about everything that had me down and depressed. He'd taken it from me and bore it himself so I didn't have to. Yeah... he was perfection personified.

CHAPTER 15

ARROW

“**Y**ou know those muthafuckas are going to let Tip out?”
Jamel asked.

I frowned hard as I stared at him. Tip was the owner at the strip club Sandrene used to work at and was also her father’s side chick when he got killed. I supposed you could say she was his full-time woman too. No documentation was ever provided to prove that he actually married her, but there *were* all kinds of shit set up to take care of her and her children in the event something happened to him.

He didn’t provide those same provisions for Sandrene’s mother. He’d, however, left money for Sandrene but had left Tip in charge of it. Something was up with that, and I wondered if Sandrene would ever have a sit down with her to find out all the shit she didn’t know.

“Why?” Seneca asked, then took a bite of his burger.

“Because she basically sold her kids out. She said the idea and everything was on Dalonna. She provided more info to prove that. That she had no intention of ever harming Sandrene,” Jamel responded.

“Bullshit. Let me look into her ass,” Ali said.

He got up and threw his trash in the receptacle. We were sitting at a table in Steak ’n Shake. I didn’t know which one of them had picked to eat here, but this shit was horrible. I only ate half my burger and threw the rest of that shit in the trash. I had to be back to work in an hour. I turned to Jamel and asked,

“Is Sandrene gonna proceed with the civil suit? Tip could have warned her, so she’s just as responsible.”

“Yeah. We called Skyler yesterday. She said Skyler had asked her about filing charges not long after it happened, but she wanted to wait to see what sentences would be handed down. Obviously, Tip won’t be getting sentenced if she’s being released. How’s everything with your lady?”

I smiled slightly. Lynn and I had done some serious fucking the other night. After our first round, we’d gone a couple more rounds. I nearly had to call out again. Having sex with her was the last thing I expected to do. I thought we would be talking the entire time about what had been up with her. We did finally talk about her dad and the brother that came to give her the information. She was actually thinking about reaching out to him so they could get acquainted.

However, sex with her was everything I knew it would be. Her ass was way too juicy looking for it not to be. The moment she said she wanted me, I was all in. Had she changed her mind, there was no telling how I would have reacted. When my dick slid into her rainforest, I was ready to live in her waters forever. Just the heat from it nearly took me out the game. I had to think about some of the most unappealing surgeries to keep from nutting after three strokes.

“Things must be good with that silly ass grin you got on your face.”

“Yeah, they are. We made up Monday. We’re supposed to be going to dinner when I get off.”

“Didn’t you say she had the weight loss surgery?” he asked in a low voice.

“Yeah, but she’s back on solids again. She’ll probably just eat from my plate. She said she couldn’t just avoid food altogether. So we’re going to Steak 48.”

“Sounds like a plan. Oh! I can’t believe I forgot to tell you this shit. Yolanda is talking about going to Sandrene’s pole dancing class. My mama told me that shit. You know if her ass show up there, she gon’ get her ass handed to her in front of

everybody. Mama gon' be pissed at me, man, when she find out Yolanda and I fucked around."

I slowly shook my head. "Well, looks like you won't have a choice but face it head on. At least Sandrene knows about her, and your relationship won't be in jeopardy if some shit pop off."

"I guess," he said as he killed the rest of his fries.

My phone alerted me of a text, so I pulled it from my pocket to see a message from Lynn. *Hey, Arrow. Can we change plans? My brother wants to come over this evening, and I really don't want to miss the opportunity to get to know him.*

I was somewhat looking forward to going out with her, but it was cool. I knew this was important to her, especially because of how her father died. She didn't want to take any moments for granted. I sent her a text back. *We can stay in. Do you want me there?*

Of course!

I chuckled slightly as Seneca said, "So it's just me and Ali, huh? You over there looking all in love and shit. I ain't talked to yo' sister since she went back home. I wanna pop up on her, but I'm trying to respect her wishes. She don't even realize how big of me that is. The old Seneca would have gone down there and took over. I would have moved her out of that house she in and bought her something else to live in with me. I mean, her kids were looking at me like I was Freddy Krueger or somebody, but that meant they wouldn't disrespect me either. They'd be too scared to."

I slowly shook my head. I was glad he wasn't who he used to be because had he snatched my sister up, Ax and I would both come unglued on his ass and give him everything Zay should have given him for putting a gun in his face. As my thoughts were about to take off on the what ifs, Seneca said, "Real shit though. I respect the hell out of you and Ax. I would never hurt her, if for nothing more than that. But you know that I respect the hell out of her too. I just hate that she's

wanting to go through that shit alone. That nigga still locked up, and it gotta be God keeping his ass safe.”

“That’s good. I know you wanna get at him, because I do too. Despite him being absent, I know that it would hurt my niece and nephew if anything happened to him. So I need your word that if he gets out, you’ll let it go.”

Seneca slid his hand down his face and nodded. “Only because you asked, because they would have just had to grieve that nigga fucking with me.”

WHEN I GOT TO LYNN’S PLACE, I WAS SLIGHTLY NERVOUS. SHE hadn’t met my family yet, but here I was, trying to comfort her with getting to know a brother she’d only met once. All she told me was that his name was Thomas. The name Thomas Jolivet was slightly familiar to me. I wondered if he had once been a patient of mine. That happened to me a lot though. Almost everybody’s name sounded familiar.

I knocked on the door, and almost immediately, she opened the door looking sexy as ever in a pair of high-waist jeans and a shimmy shirt. Her shoulder-length hair framed her face perfectly, and the gloss on her lips made them look extremely juicy. “Hey, Arrow. Come on in.”

“What’s up, baby? How was your day?”

“It was good. How about yours?” she asked as my mind journeyed to how I had to check Melanie’s ass.

When I got back to work after lunch, I went straight to the nurse’s station in recovery and requested to speak with her privately. I wanted to just snatch her ass, but I knew that would cost me my license. The way the nurses she was talking to looked me up and down irritated me. In the past, I would have found that dumb shit flattering.

When I got her to the secluded hallway, I told her about herself, and she had the audacity to be offended. I told her if she didn’t learn to close her fucking mouth, we were gonna

have problems. I hated to throw people's stupid ass comments in her face, but I did. I told her how all the people she talked our business to thought she was a ho and how they talked behind her back every chance they got. She needed to keep my name out of her fucking mouth. I'd also let her know that she had better cherish that nasty ass shit we did, because that would be the last time.

"It was cool. It was work."

I stopped in my tracks when I saw the man sitting on the couch. He looked familiar as hell too. Apparently, he knew exactly who I was, because he had a frown on his face. If he didn't know me, there would be no reason for him to have a frown on his face. He stood from the couch as Lynn kissed my lips. She turned to him and said, "Thomas, this is my boyfriend, Arrow Vaughn. Arrow, this is my brother, Thomas."

He extended his hand to me and said, "Nice to meet you, Dr. Vaughn."

My frown matched his, because I was trying to figure out how he knew I was a doctor. I could see Lynn from my peripheral, and she looked confused as hell. I shook his hand as he said, "I work at Methodist in radiology."

"Oh, okay," I said, still unsure of what the frown was about.

Maybe my reputation had preceded me. It wouldn't be the first time, but this was the only time that it actually mattered. I supposed I shouldn't be worried since Lynn wasn't really close to him. They were just trying to get to know one another. I supposed he checked himself, because the frown fell from his face as we all sat.

"Arrow, I made grilled chicken salads. We were waiting for you to get here. I'm gonna go prepare our plates while the two of you get acquainted."

"A'ight," I said, then leaned over and kissed her lips again.

When she went to the kitchen and I turned back to her brother, he was frowning all over again. I wasn't one to bite

my tongue, but I tried to in front of Lynn. Since she wasn't in earshot of us, I frowned back. "You have a problem with me?"

"Actually, yeah, I do. I'm trying to figure out how you have a relationship with my sister but fucking Mel and her friend not even a week ago."

I had to be red, because I was furious. I visualized myself choking the hell out of Mel. Nothing was private with her ass. There was no way out of this conversation but to tell the truth. "Lynn and I didn't establish what we have until this week. Actually, she ghosted me for two weeks, making me think she was done with me. So exclusivity didn't happen until I popped up on her to see what was up with her."

He twisted his lips to the side. I knew he didn't believe me, but I honestly didn't care. Before he could say another word, I added, "I told you that out of respect for you as Lynn's brother, but I want you to know that I didn't have to explain shit to you. I'm never intimidated, so don't take my cool demeanor and my professional personality to mean that I won't fuck you up. What I did on my personal time as a single man was my fucking business. Period."

I didn't know why I allowed my cocky side to emerge now, but he pissed me off. This shit was gonna bite me in the ass. I truly had that feeling. I was more than sure he knew a lot more than what he'd just said. He slowly nodded but didn't say a word in response. "Okay. The food is ready if the two of you want to come to the table."

He quickly stood from the couch, and I followed suit as Lynn glanced between him and me. She knew something was up. The tension was thick as hell. We would need a fucking chainsaw to cut this shit. When we got to the table, I pulled her chair out then sat next to her. Seeing the small amount on her plate, Thomas asked, "Is that all you're eating?"

She smiled as she grabbed my hand for grace. "Yes. I had weight loss surgery, so I can't eat a lot."

He glanced at me and frowned harder like he thought I was the one that had told her to do it. Finally deciding to acknowledge shit, Lynn asked, "Is there a problem?"

“No. I’m sorry.”

“Okay... umm... let’s say grace.”

As she bowed her head, my eyes met his, and for some reason, I knew that the shit was about to hit the fan.

CHAPTER 16

LYNN

Arrow and Thomas seemed to already know one another. The frowns they were trading had my nerves bad. I couldn't figure out for the life of me what could have gone on between them to cause this type of reaction. We all ate our food quietly for a moment until I said, "I'm not sure what's up between the two of you, but I'm not fond of being left in the dark."

Arrow turned red as he stared at me, his mouth full of salad. Something was foul, and I wanted to know what the fuck it was. Thomas spoke up first. "I know we just met, but I'm not sure if this is the guy you should be entertaining."

"You're right," I said as I repeatedly nodded. "We just met. How would you even have the audacity to tell me who I should or shouldn't be entertaining?"

I knew about Arrow's past, and after what Thomas said, I had a feeling that was what it was about. I remembered the day I brought up that my nurse wanted him. He'd never responded to me. In a way, he was telling me that day after my surgery that he and Nurse Melanie had history. It didn't help that he'd admitted to being a ho the day before.

Thomas shifted in his seat. "I just don't want to see you hurt. That's all. I know for a fact that you aren't the only woman he's seeing. My friend said she's been sleeping with him."

My eyes widened slightly as I turned to Arrow. His frown only grew harder, and it looked like he wanted to go across the

table to fuck Thomas up. Although we'd first met a month ago, we'd just established that we would be a couple and that we wanted the same things. I knew he had needs. This was the thing that worried me about him. Constantly being confronted by his past was something I didn't want to deal with, but in this short amount of time, he had me rethinking all that shit.

Arrow hadn't spoken a word in his defense. "Thomas, who's your friend?" I asked him.

"Melanie Mitchell. She works with us."

Fuck my life. The woman that was my nurse was Thomas's friend. Arrow was fucking her... the shit I already knew. I hadn't taken my eyes off Arrow, and he hadn't taken his eyes off Thomas. "Arrow," I said softly. When he turned to me, I gently stroked his cheek. The sadness in his eyes caught me off guard. I assumed I would see anger. "When was the last time?"

Any day before Monday wouldn't be as serious as if he'd slept with her this week. He looked away from me and turned back to Thomas. When I saw his lip twitch, I knew this was about to get dangerous. He looked like he wanted to attack him at any moment. "Sunday."

I nearly choked on my own spit. *Sunday?* We'd made love for the first time on Monday. It was before we established what we were doing, and it was also the day before he popped up on me. I'd ghosted him for two weeks. My eyes closed as I turned forward in my chair. "Please leave," I said softly.

"Lynn, please don't do this. It was after that when I decided to just pop up on you. I was tired of being without you, and I thought doing that would help me get you out of my system, only for me to feel guilty afterward. Thinking about it makes my heart feel like it's sinking to the depths of hell. We weren't together, but I felt like I was cheating on you," he rambled.

"I just need both of you to leave," I reiterated.

I needed time to think about what was said and what had happened. This hurt. If he cared for me as much as he said he

did, why didn't he try popping up on me first before going to fuck that woman? Arrow grabbed my hand and kissed it. He held it between his hands as Thomas stood from his seat. "I'm sorry, Lynn. Again, I just don't want you to be hurt. I don't want him using you for his own selfish desires. I hope he isn't the one who convinced you to have weight loss surgery instead of losing weight the old fashion way."

"Get out! Get the fuck out!" I screamed. "Arrow, why? This hurts like hell. You know why? I love you! I fell in love with a man that can sleep with other women on a whim. I just... I need y'all to leave. Please..."

Arrow stood from his chair then released my hand as he pushed it under the table. The tears were threatening to fall at any moment, and I just needed them out of here so I could let them loose and think. Before Arrow could walk away, he stared at me then leaned over and kissed my head. He gave Thomas a look like he was silently saying that he would catch him outside then he left.

Thomas came to my side and grabbed my hand. "I know it seems like I just wanted to start shit. I promise that isn't the case. The minute you called, my heart immediately began attaching itself to you. I used to always want a sister... somebody to protect and love. Knowing that you were receptive to a relationship with me made me extremely happy. I'm hoping that this won't change things. I'll go and give you time. I'm sorry."

I nodded as he kissed my hand and left also. As soon as he closed the door, it gave my tears permission to stream down my face. I heard some loud talking soon after, and I was more than sure Arrow and Thomas were outside arguing. I didn't even care at this point. I went to the door and locked it then went to my bedroom, leaving all the food on the table. I felt like I wanted to throw up, and I was more than sure that it would be happening before the night was over.

How could he even sleep with me on Monday knowing he'd just fucked that woman the night before? Was he thinking about her while he was with me? I just had so many questions, but I didn't want to go on a rant. I wanted to be organized with

my thoughts to be sure I found out everything I wanted to know. I didn't want to just fly off the handle in a rage. I wanted to be calm and to be able to talk to him without my emotions getting the best of me.

I couldn't believe that I blurted out that I loved him. How could I have fallen for him already? Was he just that smooth with it? Did he really feel the way he said he did? His actions from Sunday not only hurt me, but they confused me as well. I supposed because in my adult life, sex was a sacred thing for me. I never just fucked anybody. So it made me wonder if he had some sort of feelings for this woman.

I sat on my bed as the tears continued to fall and grabbed my notepad and pen from my nightstand. I began writing down all the questions that came to my mind about the situation. Arrow had played me. He could argue all day that it was my fault for ghosting him, but if he felt for me like he said he did, why didn't he exhaust every avenue before moving on or rather, dipping back? Regardless of what he thought, he'd put me in a crazy ass predicament.

I was a thinker, and my mind had gone to if we were to ever have problems in our relationship, if he would cheat on me. My thoughts were all over the place, and I knew I needed to get them subdued before I could even think of having a conversation with the man I loved. *I'm so stupid.* This was my fault. I shouldn't have told him to fuck me Monday. Maybe he felt like he couldn't tell me no. I was the one who'd initiated things.

Arrow had gifts and he utilized them perfectly with me... and apparently, with Melanie, too, since he'd recently fucked her. This was hard, especially since I had just come out of a dark place. As I sat writing down my thoughts, my phone chimed. I picked it up to see a text from Arrow. I couldn't open it though. If I wanted to hear what he had to say at this moment, I wouldn't have put him out. The pendulum had swung my way, and the choice was mine to make, based on the information I received. What I would choose was still a mystery to me.

“YOU’RE DOING AMAZINGLY WELL, LYNN. YOU’VE LOST almost fifty pounds in the first month. That’s a lot! How are you feeling?” Dr. Schrapps asked.

“A little drained, fatigued...” I paused as I thought about how depressed I was again. It had been a little over a week since I put Arrow out of my place. “Slightly depressed,” I said softly.

The doctor frowned, but it was more of a look of concern than irritation. “Depressed? I thought you would have been happy with how things were going.”

“I am. I’m very pleased with how things are going. Just... my personal life is a wreck. I haven’t been eating like I should.”

He grabbed my hand. “It’s important that you eat when you’re supposed to. There’s a positive aspect to that though. You used to crave food when you were depressed. Now you’re doing the opposite. That means you’ve beat the food addiction.”

I guess. I was here at the doctor’s office for my one-month post-op follow up. They’d told me that I would probably lose thirty pounds the first month, and I’d far exceeded that. Most of the month I was in my head and trying to sort through my feelings. While Arrow didn’t convince me to get the weight loss surgery, Thomas’s words were playing on repeat in my head. Did Arrow only want to be with me for what he knew I would look like in the future?

My heart rejected that theory. It forced me to think about how he kissed and caressed every roll and how he lifted them to bathe me when we took a shower together. My mind would try to interject and say that he was an amazing actor, but I couldn’t allow that. I’d come to the conclusion that Arrow felt everything he said he did. The problem was whether I wanted to be bombarded with his past.

We hadn't been a couple a week before this happened. How did I know it wouldn't keep happening? How did I know I wouldn't run into women that knew about everything he had to offer and wouldn't be afraid to say so? There were so many unknowns, and I just didn't know if I wanted to take a risk on love. I'd already taken a risk based on the things I knew, and this was where it had gotten me.

“Ms. Jolivet?”

I lifted my eyes to the doctor's. I hadn't heard a thing he'd said. “I can prescribe you something for depression. I think it will help. You don't need this to get any worse. The improvements we want to see in your health will all go down the drain. I need you to find that woman within that said she wanted to be better. The woman that said she wanted to live because she had so much in life to accomplish.”

I nodded and closed my eyes. That woman had gotten lost in my sorrow, and I hated that. I was putting others in positions they shouldn't be in. I'd based my happiness on Arrow being in my life. He shouldn't have been my only source of happiness. I was happy before I met him, so I wasn't sure why I was depending on him to feel happy now.

People fucked up at times. Both Arrow and I had made mistakes and bad decisions regarding our relationship. Maybe we just weren't supposed to be together. The timing was messed up. He'd been messaging me every day though, begging me to talk to him. Eventually, I would, but I needed this time to myself to refocus my energy on the things that mattered. My love for Arrow would have to take a back seat until I was ready to face it.

I needed to get myself together. My life couldn't end like this. I was too young to be facing the health challenges I was currently battling. After losing fifty pounds, that blood pressure problem should have been so much better, but it wasn't because of the depression and stress that all stemmed from my love of Arrow. None of it was his fault. So maybe I was the one that wasn't ready.

“Okay. I’ve sent the prescription to your pharmacy. Start taking it immediately. We’ll call you when we get the results from your lab work, okay?”

“Okay.”

I stood and made my way to the door behind him. Today, I had taken the entire day off. I just couldn’t deal with the stress of work today too. I was in desperate need of a breather. I’d only had Sunday to try to recoup from that blow at dinner Saturday night then I was at work Monday morning. Jazzy knew something was up and so did Charlene, but they kept their distance. I knew they were worried, but I couldn’t be concerned with them right now either. I had to focus the little energy I had on myself.

After that first depression stint, I should have worked on myself. I was so happy Arrow had popped up on me, I based all my happiness on that alone. He’d popped up on me because he felt guilty about what he’d done Sunday night. These were times that I could really use my mom’s advice. While I knew she didn’t have all the answers, her advice would always make me think about things from a different perspective.

I left the office in a brain fog and just got in my car and drove around town, ending up at Dance Is In The Heart dance studio. I didn’t know why I was here, but I didn’t take the guidance lightly. I was led here for a reason. I got out of my car and walked inside. It was so beautiful inside. It was filled with light pink, white, and gray décor, not to mention the crystals and mirrors everywhere. The winding staircase caught my attention, and as I stared at it, a beautiful dark-complexioned woman began descending them.

She smiled at me and put a little more pep in her step. When she got to the front and approached me, she extended her hand and said, “Hello! Welcome to Dance Is In The Heart! Are you here to inquire about classes?”

I shook her hand and smiled slightly. “I suppose I am. I umm... was just driving and ended up here.”

Her eyebrows lifted slightly, and she scrunched them together while laying her hand on my shoulder. “Well,

whatever the reason, maybe we can provide the outlet you need. Dance is how I cope with stress and even depression. I dance my way right out of it. We even offer yoga classes.”

“Okay. Umm... what type of dance classes do you teach Ms....?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Sandrene Jallow. I instruct beginners ballet and hip hop, but my most popular class is pole dancing.”

“Sandrene? That name sounds familiar to me for some reason. You wouldn’t happen to know Arrow Vaughn, would you?”

“Oh my God, yes! That’s my boyfriend’s best friend! Jamel Dent is my boyfriend.”

I smiled, and suddenly I was slightly embarrassed to say who I was. I was supposed to go to dinner at their house three weeks ago with Arrow, but I’d ghosted him. “I’m Lynn Jolivet. I was uhh... Arrow was...”

I couldn’t even get the words out to call him my ex. Technically, I hadn’t broken up with him. She gave me a slight smile. “It’s okay. I know who you are, and you don’t have to explain anything.” After grabbing my hand, she said, “Let me show you around.”

We went from room to room, and she excitedly told me what each one was for. There was a yoga class going on, and there were also a couple of hip hop classes going on as well. She explained that most of the adults came early in the day, because the evenings were filled with kids. “The only class that’s steady all day is the pole dancing class. It’s this room here,” she said after we’d gone upstairs.

When I entered the room, my lips parted. It was so gorgeous and sexy. It was the only room that had red and black décor. Poles were situated throughout the room, and there were mirrors everywhere. The crystal chandelier was gorgeous. It was like the décor gave it a boudoir feel. Glancing at her, I saw she had a huge smile on her face. This was her element. “Do women wear lingerie when they come for class?”

She giggled. “Some do. They don’t have to though. I wear it, but I’m used to it. I used to be a stripper, so it’s comfortable for me.”

“What was your stripper name?” I asked.

“Obsession.”

“Ooooh. That sounds really sexy.”

She smiled big. “I wore a masquerade mask at all times too.”

I frowned slightly. “Were you on a billboard?”

“Yes ma’am. That was me.”

I felt so comfortable with this woman, and I couldn’t understand why. However, Arrow’s words came to mind. He’d said that Sandrene and I had a lot in common when it came to our family dynamic. We stood there quietly while I took everything in, then I turned to her. “Can I ask you something?”

Her face turned serious as the smile slightly faded from her lips. “Sure.”

“Is Arrow...” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I could feel my emotions wanting to take over me. “How is he?”

She grabbed my hand and led me to a room that I took to be her office. After closing the door, she offered me a seat. When she sat next to me, she said, “Just from conversations I overhear him having with Jamel, he’s missing you.”

I lowered my head as my heart sank. I missed him too, but I was so conflicted. Sandrene squeezed my hand and said, “I know it’s hard. I had some moments with Jamel where I wasn’t sure. He and Arrow were probably some of the biggest hoes known to man. What I’ve come to learn though is that neither of them are liars. Arrow has been searching for the one for a while. I remember him telling me that he was tired of the single life and fucking around. He wanted a woman to come home to.”

I stared into her slanted eyes. “But how do I know that I’m the one? What if I’m not and I get hurt all over again?”

“If he said you’re the one, then I promise you, you are. You should talk to him when you feel up to it. I know sometimes it can be hard to convince yourself that you’re making the right decision when it’s all based on feelings. I was alone in this world and somewhat lonely, so I didn’t trust my feelings easily. My father died when I was sixteen and my mother when I was twenty-five. All my family is in Cape Verde. I had to cope with that and the mess my father left, all alone.”

“Arrow said we had some things in common. I’m all alone too. My mother died five years ago. She was my best friend. I didn’t have a relationship with my father. He died in a car crash about a month ago. Before he died, he was trying to establish a relationship with me, and I turned him down. So his death hit me hard with guilt. My mind kept telling me that he had an ulterior motive, but he didn’t. He just wanted to get to know his only daughter. I denied him that opportunity.”

“No, you didn’t. He had twenty-eight years to do what was right by you. You reacted from a place of pain... pain that he caused. So don’t be hard on yourself for how that turned out. It was his loss, not yours. Don’t let anyone make you feel guilty about your decisions.”

I brought my hands to my face to try to calm my emotions. This was why I was led here. Sandrene’s words were comforting to my soul. She grabbed my hand and said, “When my father died in a plane crash, I found out he had another family. I chose not to know them, because the little girl that teased me all throughout grade school was the woman’s daughter. My dad did nothing to protect me. I recently found out that he left me money, but that woman was the overseer of that instead of my mother, who gave her all for him.”

She lowered her head and closed her eyes for a moment. “I left the strip club because I was assaulted. Afterward, I found out that the man that sexually violated me was my brother. I still don’t regret wanting nothing to do with them, although my mind tried to make me think otherwise at first. So I know what you’re going through. His death nor your decisions

before that are on you. They're on him. You did what was best for you."

I nodded. She put her arm around me, and I leaned against her. "So when will you be pole dancing?"

I giggled. "Give me a list of the classes and the times. I may want to attend the yoga class as well. Thank you, Sandrene."

She gave me a smile then hugged me. "You know, I told Arrow when he found someone that he could introduce me to, maybe I would have a friend. It's funny that I met you anyway."

I smiled slightly as she stood to get the class schedule and price list for me. I would have to call him soon, but I had an even better idea. "Sandrene, are you busy this weekend?"

"No, not at all."

"Can you invite me and Arrow to dinner without telling him I'm coming? I guess I'm asking for a do over," I said nervously.

How in the hell was I inviting myself to this woman's house? "I mean, I would help cook or do anything you need me to do."

She chuckled. "Girl, please," she said with a wave of her hand. "We already feel like old friends. I'll get Jamel to invite him over Saturday night. Is seven cool with you?"

"Yeah. Thank you. I miss him too."

She gave me a smile. I was grateful to have met her. We did have a lot in common as far as our family dynamics. Arrow was right. Maybe we could be there for each other, because I was more than sure she probably had rough days too. After hugging her again and signing up for her pole dancing class later tonight and yoga tomorrow morning, I headed home, ready for the weekend.

CHAPTER 17

ARROW

I had plans to go to Beaumont Friday night and kick it with the fellas, but Jamel convinced me to stay in town. He said that we could go for drinks Friday night, and Sandrene wanted to cook dinner for us Saturday night. I really didn't want to be a third wheel, but I reluctantly accepted the invitation.

It had been hard dealing with the turmoil my decisions had caused. I wasn't angry. I knew Lynn needed time. I hadn't spoken to her in almost two weeks, but I made sure to text her every morning and night to let her know I was thinking about her. She was always on my mind, and I was wondering how she was doing. I was calling her at first, but then I figured text messages were the best bet. I wasn't sure if she was reading them, but it allowed me to pour my heart out to her and cleanse myself of the heartache I was feeling.

She told me she loved me. My mind was blown with that revelation, because I never saw that coming. I knew she cared for me. She hadn't broken up with me, so it was my duty to show her that I still needed to be with her. I wasn't in love yet, but I knew it wouldn't take long, especially now that I knew how she felt. I had to respect her decision to be silent right now. I knew there was shit she needed to figure out for herself before she could talk to me, and I was doing my best to be patient.

I hated that I'd put us in this situation. Melanie had steered clear of me for the past couple of weeks. After I went off on her ass, she'd been avoiding me. I was happy about that. She wasn't normally a petty person that I knew of, but she loved to

run her mouth and gossip. If I left her ass alone, there would be nothing left to tell. I'd blocked her number and deleted her contact information.

"You have any weekend plans?"

I turned to see Katrina entering the lounge. "Yeah. I'm going to my boy's house for dinner. Last night, we went out for drinks at our favorite cigar lounge."

"Sounds cool. You know your girl been quiet as a fucking church mouse since you put her in her place. Maybe she'll learn her lesson about running her mouth."

"I don't think that will stop her from running her mouth, but hopefully it will keep *my* name out of her mouth. I could have lost the woman that I'm supposed to do life with. She told me that she loved me, but we haven't talked in two weeks. I miss her."

"Arrow, I love seeing the change in you, brother. I feel like if she hasn't reached out yet, there's still hope. Keep doing what you're doing."

"I plan to. I sent her flowers yesterday. I hope to hear from her soon."

"I'm sure you will. You have a good heart. I've noticed that. Continue evolving, friend."

She hugged me and said, "Have a good weekend."

"Thanks, Katrina. You too."

I closed my locker and headed out so I could go home and shower and change. Time wasn't on my side, because it was already six. It would take me nearly thirty minutes just to get home. Then it would take another twenty minutes to get to Mel's place. I would most likely be late. I sent him a text. *Just got off. I'm rushing, but I might be a little late.*

When I got to my car, I checked for his response. *No problem, bruh. Be careful.*

I started my car and headed home. Hopefully this dinner wouldn't be awkward. Sitting there watching them love on each other wasn't on my to-do list. While I was happy for my

boy, I didn't need to witness it all the time. It was only gonna have me in my feelings about Lynn. I didn't even ask what she was cooking, but whatever it was, I hoped it claimed all my attention.

WHEN I GOT TO JAMEL'S CONDO, I GRABBED THE BOTTLE OF wine from the front seat. Whenever I was invited to dinner, I always brought a bottle with me. This time, I'd gotten a bottle of Stella Rosa Mixed Berry. Sandrene had really enjoyed that one the last time I was here. My hair was blowing in the wind since I'd taken my twists loose.

I'd also decided to take some vacation time next week. I would only work Monday through Wednesday and then I would be off Thursday until the next Monday. I wanted to make plans for Lynn and me. She didn't know it yet, but once again, I was going to bring her back to my arms. I needed her, and life wasn't shit without her. I was even lonelier than before I met her.

The wind whipped through my hair as I made my way to his door. Hopefully, this would be the last cool spell before spring rolled around. This air was cutting a nigga to the bone, and I wore sweats and a hoodie under my coat. I rang the doorbell and then started knocking until that nigga opened the door.

He was laughing when he opened the door. He knew how I felt about the cold weather. I loved it when it was cool enough for sweats, but when it got this cold, I was wishing for summer. As soon as he opened the door, I ran inside. "Whew! Shat!" I yelled.

"Nigga, quit being dramatic. It ain't that cold."

"Mel, quit playing with me. Here," I said, handing him the bottle of wine.

I took off my coat and was heading to the kitchen to speak to Sandrene. However, when I got to the entrance, I stopped in my tracks. The sight in the kitchen took my breath away. Mel

patted my back as I remained still, staring at the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. Lynn was here. How in the fuck did they pull this shit off? My heart was pounding in my chest as I stared at her.

She smiled and came to me. At first, she just stood in front of me, staring into my eyes, not saying a word. Jamel grabbed Sandrene's hand, and they left the kitchen, giving us a little privacy. When they did, Lynn slid her arms around my waist and molded her body against mine. "I'm sorry I took so long, Arrow. I needed time to sort out things in my head. I'm sorry I blurted my..."

I put my fingers over her thick lips and wrapped my arms around her. I still couldn't believe she was here. Closing my eyes, I rested my head on hers. "Thank you for giving me a chance to prove how much I need you, Lynn. I'm sorry for the hurt I put you through. You are the only woman I want, for real. What I feel for you, I've never felt for anyone. I could never let you go."

She pulled away from me to look into my eyes again. When she puckered her lips, I gave her what she wanted, plus some. I didn't give a fuck that we were at someone else's house. Jamel and Sandrene would just have to see this show. I slid my hands to Lynn's ass and squeezed it as I slid my tongue to hers. She moaned softly, and I knew I had better stop before I had her ass against this wall.

"You staying with me tonight, Lynn. We'll go get some things from your place, but I want you with me."

"You're not going to Beaumont tomorrow?"

"I am, but I want you to go with me. When we get back to H-Town, I'll take you to meet my parents. Everyone has witnessed how sick I've been without you. I need them to see the woman that means the world to me. Please tell me you're ready for that."

"I'm ready. I love you, Arrow, and I plan to love you for the rest of my life."

"Damn, girl."

I stepped away from her and admired her figure. Since I'd last seen her two weeks ago, she'd lost even more weight. "How much weight have you lost since I last saw you?"

"Fifteen pounds. I've lost a little over sixty pounds total. I weigh three fifty-two. Can you believe that?"

"That's great, Lynn. I'm happy for you, baby. Although I liked the Lynn I saw in that hospital bed, I know this is important for you because of your health issues. How's that going?"

She proceeded to tell me that nothing had changed too much as of yet because of the stress and depression she was experiencing. It was at that moment that I took it upon myself to be her personal care physician. She had a primary, but I would be here, always, making sure she was as relaxed as possible, even if I had to cut back on my hours to do so. I wanted to be everything she needed.

"I got'chu, Lynn. Whatever you need."

"Can I ask you something? I don't want it to seem like I don't trust you, but I need to hear you say it."

"You can ask me anything."

"Are you only with me for what you know my body will start to look like?"

I closed my eyes. I knew this had probably stemmed from her brother. That muthafucka didn't know me. He only knew whatever Melanie told him. We'd argued for a couple of minutes outside Lynn's apartment. It took everything in me not to jack his ass up. The only thing that kept me in line was my livelihood. I couldn't lose my license over his bullshit. He'd better hope that I didn't hand that ass whupping over to someone else to carry out for me.

I closed my eyes for a moment then opened them and slid my hands to her cheeks. "You are the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on. I thought that the day I saw you lying in that hospital bed. I don't care about your weight. You are a fine woman just the way you are. However, because of your

health, I know it's important for you to lose some of this fineness. Girl, you the shit. Period.”

“What about Melanie?”

“That was a horrible decision. It won't happen ever again. I can promise you that. I'd watched you one day when you weren't speaking to me, because I was worried something had happened to you. When I saw you were fine, I tried forcing myself to let go. That was me trying to prove to myself that I'd moved on. It didn't work. I handed her ass to her. She's blocked and deleted out of my contacts and social media along with anyone else I used to fuck. I'm serious about you. I just hate the hurt my actions caused you and how it stifled your progress with your health. I promise to help you get back on track.”

She smiled and hugged me again. When she released me, she slid her hand through my hair and bit her bottom lip. I knew what that shit meant. I couldn't wait for her to grab ahold of the shit. I grabbed her hand and led her to the front room where Jamel and Sandrene were.

“Damn. It's about time. I'm starving,” Jamel said as Sandrene nudged him.

“Man, shut up,” I said. “Oh! How did y'all know how to contact Lynn?”

Sandrene stood and put her arm around Lynn. I could tell they were familiar. “She's one of my new dancers.”

My eyebrows lifted in surprise as they both giggled. “Lynn, you learning to pole dance, girl?”

“Yeah. For some reason I ended up at the dance studio. I now know it was so this beautiful woman could speak life into me and lead me back to where I belonged. In such a short time, she's become a great friend to me. So now you can come here more often because you won't be a third wheel.”

I couldn't help but chuckle and silently thank God for bringing her back into my life. As I sat next to Jamel while they went into the kitchen, he said, “She's a beautiful woman. Congratulations, bruh.”

“Thanks, man. I appreciate y’all orchestrating this meet up.”

He nodded then slid his hands down his face. “I’m still fucking worried about tomorrow.” He glanced toward the kitchen then continued. “I tried calling YoYo to beg her not to go to their class tomorrow, but she won’t answer my damn calls. If she goes to that class, Sandrene is gonna fuck her up.”

“You actually think she’s gonna show up? She might be saying that shit to fuck with you. Maybe you ought to tell your mama about her before it gets out of hand. Mama Nissa gon’ be pissed, no doubt, but at least she’ll know that Yolanda full of shit.”

“Yeah, maybe so. Mama shouldn’t have befriended her ass again after that bullshit she pulled when Mama first met Pop. We’d already fucked back then.”

“Yeah. I remember.”

“I just don’t want her to be pissed at me.”

“I don’t think it will last long. She’ll be angrier at Yolanda. I can’t believe her ass is acting like this. How old is she again?”

“She like forty-four, I think. She not the same age with Mama, but she still much older than me. Oh, and Chad said he had some shit to tell all of us. So everybody gon’ be there tomorrow... even your sister.”

“Aww shit. How you know Kaysyn gon’ be there?”

“Seneca told me earlier today that Chad invited her. So your parents might be coming too.”

“I hadn’t spoken to them today, so I’ll have to text them. That’ll be good. I won’t have to leave as early. I wanted Lynn to meet them too tomorrow.”

“Oh, she’s going?”

“Yep.”

“That’s what’s up, bruh.”

“So how’s Rondo doing? I haven’t seen him in a minute,” I inquired.

“He’s good. Still trying to decide if he gon’ make things work with his baby mama. They been talking a lot more, and they go to dinner whenever he goes to pick up his daughter. He’s gonna be there tomorrow too.”

“Damn. Chad ain’t leaving nobody out, huh?”

“Well, he left out Jungle and Jericho... for obvious reasons.”

We chuckled at the mere thought. Lexi had slept with both of them, and I could imagine that was still awkward for Chad. I believed it was easier for him to get over the shit with Seneca since he knew they hadn’t slept together. That shit with Jericho though? I was more than sure he’d seen more of that nigga than he’d wanted to see. However, as deadly as Jericho could be, he was kind and respectful until he was forced not to be.

He loved Lexi, and sometimes, I thought he *still* loved her. Whenever they were in the same vicinity, I could see the way he looked at her... the longing in his eyes. He was a good guy though. I didn’t know much about his past either, but I knew who he was now. I trusted him, Ali, and Seneca to have my back. It seemed I could trust Jungle too. I supposed it was good to have them on our team. I supposed it was a good thing Chad had gotten in trouble to even need niggas like them.

“Come eat, y’all!”

We stood and made our way to the table. They’d cooked what looked to be an extremely healthy meal. There was baked fish, salad, and vegetable skewers on our plates. It looked delicious. I went to Lynn and kissed her cheek then pulled out her chair. I could get used to this, and I couldn’t wait to be able to reciprocate her sentiments of love. Hopefully, we were done with the hiccups, because I needed her to be a permanent fixture in my life.

CHAPTER 18

LYNN

Dinner was wonderful. We'd stayed there for a good three hours, talking and laughing. Jamel was really cool, and I could see why he and Arrow were best friends. Sandrene and I had gotten even closer. It had only been a few days since I'd met her, but we talked every day this week. I believed that was mainly because Jamel was out of town until Friday morning.

When Arrow saw me in their kitchen, it was just the reaction I hoped for. He was stuck. Seeing him nearly had me that way too. He was so sexy, and I'd always thought that of him, but it was his heart that was the most attractive. It was why I fell in love with him so quickly. Staring into his eyes did unfathomable things to me. My soul felt light but heavy with passion at the same time.

After we'd gone to my place for me to pack a bag, we headed to his home. I had never been to his house, and the moment he turned in the driveway, I was in awe. The two-story beauty had taken my breath away. After pulling into the garage, he got out and walked around the car to open my door. Once he helped me out, he grabbed my bag from the back seat and led me to his back door. He punched in a code, and it opened.

The moment we walked through what had to be a laundry room and he turned on the lights, my eyes widened. "Oh my God. Arrow, this home is beautiful."

We were in the kitchen, and my eyes had scanned the polished cement floors and marble countertops. The mahogany

wood was gorgeous. “Thank you, baby. One day, it can be yours too.”

I gave him a slight smile as he led me to the stairs. I stared out at his family room and the extremely high ceiling. It looked to be twenty feet or so. I’d never been inside a home so gorgeous. Focusing on him again, I realized he’d shed his coat and hoodie. When he opened the double doors to what I knew had to be his bedroom, he turned to me and asked, “Shower or bath?”

“Well... it depends on which one would cause you to want to be in there with me.”

“Girl, I ain’t scared of bath water. I’m gon’ be in here wit’ you regardless. I ain’t seen yo’ fine ass in two weeks. I wanna be wherever you are.”

I smiled, then said, “Bath.”

He winked at me. “Make yourself at home. I’m about to run your bath.”

I looked around his room and admired how spacious it was. The crown molding was beautiful. However, it was the hues of gold and purple that I loved the most. It gave off kingly vibes. When that hair was free like it was tonight, he gave off those vibes anyway. *King of the jungle vibes*. I took off my coat then sat on his chaise and took off my boots. When he returned to me from the bathroom, he asked, “Did you bring anything in particular to put in a bath?”

“No. Only shower gel.”

“Okay. How do you feel about lavender?”

“I love it.”

He smiled and walked away, heading back to the bathroom. I pulled my sweater over my head, and by the time I’d gotten it off, he’d reentered the room, shirtless. He grabbed my hand and pulled me from the chaise then pulled my T-shirt over my head as well. When he did, his gaze immediately went to my big ass titties. Between them and my ass, I didn’t know which he loved more. Before I could address it, his lips crashed into mine.

In one swoop, he unfastened my bra and pulled away from me to suck my nipples. Only a playboy ass nigga could unfasten a bra that damn fast. I smiled at the thought of how he gave up all that shit for me. He hurriedly pulled my leggings and underwear off then stared at my ass. My skin was starting to sag a bit, and I knew that was because I was losing weight so quickly, but it still made me a little self-conscious.

My hands rested on my stomach, and Arrow quickly moved them. “What are you trying to cover up? You look so beautiful.”

I looked away for a moment then back into his eyes. His gaze mesmerized me every time. His tattoos and that damn loop in his nose only added to his sex appeal. I stared at him from the tattooed wings near his collar bones all the way to the thin trail of hair that led to the ultimate prize. “You see something you want, Lynn?”

“Mm hmm.”

I went to my knees and pulled his sweats, shorts, and boxer briefs down in one swoop, watching his dick spring out as it always did. I loved seeing that shit bounce and slap his thigh then his abdomen. Just the sight of it caused my eyes to roll to the back of my head. I wrapped my hand around it and stroked it, giving it a precursor of what was to come.

Arrow grabbed handfuls of my hair, forcing me to meet his gaze. I swore my breathing became shallow as he claimed my soul, pulling it into his. After what seemed like minutes, he guided my head to his dick then held my hair in a ponytail. I licked from his balls to the tip then took it inside my mouth. I loved watching his facial expressions to see if he was enjoying what I was doing to him. He never let me down.

His satisfaction satisfied me. It made me want to do even more to get more of a reaction out of him. Arrow was somewhat quiet during head though, until he was about to nut. He would just stare at me while he frowned and bit his bottom lip. I knew just how turned on he was though because he always leaked a good amount of precum before he achieved his orgasm.

I began bobbing on his dick, concentrating on taking as much of him as possible down my throat. Arrow's dick had to be destroying my digestive tract as far as his dick was going down. The tears were falling from my eyes, and the saliva was leaving my mouth uncontrollably. The way I was gagging I just knew that I was about to throw up. I thought that every time his dick graced the walls of my throat. When I started gurgling on his dick and spitting up the saliva it produced, Arrow groaned.

"Oh fuck," he whispered as he began winding his dick into my mouth. "I'm about to nut, Lynn."

Within seconds, he shot off down my throat then pulled me up from the floor. When he picked me up, I quickly wrapped my arms around his neck. He brought me to the wall then readjusted his arms to where my legs were in the crooks of his arms. He closed his eyes for a moment as he allowed his unprotected dick to breach my opening. I trusted Arrow with everything in me. I knew he got tested often, especially being that he was a doctor.

If he wasn't sure about his status, he wouldn't have entered me raw. "Oooh fuuuck!" he yelled.

He was so damn right with that sentiment. His dick felt so damn good inside of me. "Arrow! Oh God!"

He pulled out of me and brought me to the bed. When he released me, he immediately landed between my legs... face first. I hadn't waxed this week, and the thought of that had me pulling away from him. "If you don't quit running from me, I'm gon' eat this shit all night and have you begging for the dick. You don't want that torture, and neither do I. But I'll go through it just to prove a point."

"And what point is that?"

"That I don't give a fuck about no hair. You know how much fuzz I done ate off candy that I dropped on the carpet as a kid? This lil peach fuzz ain't stopping no fucking show. Na chill out."

He lowered his head again as I spread my legs as wide as I could. The minute his tongue touched my clit, I grabbed ahold of his hair and lifted my hips. The way he moaned into my pussy, sending vibrations throughout my body, had my orgasm showing her face quick as hell. When he reached up and pinched my nipples, I squirted on him. He lifted his head, only for me to see his beard dripping wet, then shoved his dick inside of me.

He'd always shown tenderness when we made love, but tonight, I knew we would be on something totally different. He was going to really fuck me up, and I was excited about that. I was nervous at the same time though. "Arroooow!"

"Yeah, baby. This pussy feel so fucking good. I need you so much. You my everything, Lynn. Whatever you need from me, you got that shit. You hear me?"

"Yes, baby. I hear you."

He was beating my pussy slowly. His thrusts were damn near lifting my big ass from the bed. I was crying out in pleasure and pain. *Jesus Christ*. Whenever I opened my eyes, his were on me, and it made my clit tingle every time. His pace increased slightly as he slid his hand to my neck. My head tilted back to accommodate his large hands, but my eyes stayed on him. "I'm feeling my middle name right now. Nothing else matters more than you. You give me complete and perfect happiness."

"Ahh fuck, Arrow! What's... your... middle name?"

I was barely able to get a word out. I didn't know how he was able to form complete thoughts while he was digging me out the way he was. His voice was always so calm until he was about to erupt. "Bliss."

I frowned slightly as I tried to concentrate on what he was saying to me. *His middle name is Bliss?* That was a weird ass middle name, but if he didn't have a problem with it, then that was all that mattered. My eyes rolled to the back of my head as I thought about what he was saying. He was losing himself in me. I slowly opened my eyes as he removed his hand from my neck and went up on his knees.

Grabbing my ankles, he spread my legs wide and slowed his assault once again. He watched the action below for a while, then turned me on my side and straddled one of my legs. When he pushed inside, he literally took my fucking breath away. “Oh fuck!” I mouthed.

No sound left me as he kissed my shoulder and head then slightly turned my upper torso so he could suck my nipple. “You good, baby?” he asked.

“Yes, Arrow. Yes, baby.”

What did I say that shit for? He began stroking me somewhat forcefully. I was screaming to the high heavens. There was no way his neighbors didn’t hear me. He was killing me, stabbing me like he didn’t know this violently heinous act was taking me out of here. He again gripped my neck and lowered his head to my ear. “I’m gon’ be all in this shit all night. I ain’t cumming until you do. So if you don’t make this muthafucka spit at me, I’m gon’ continue killing it.”

His low voice and his deep strokes had me erupting like the well God put in the desert for Hagar and Ishmael. My inner thighs were soaked. “Arroooooow... baby, I love you.”

My voice was soft and trembling as he continued to stroke me. Pulling my leg to the side, he fell in between them as I buried my face in the pillow. He smacked my ass several times as he gut checked the hell out of me repeatedly. His moans and groans were sexy as hell. Suddenly, he pulled out and yelled, “Fuck!”

He erupted on my ass and all over my back. The warmness of it covered me. “Shit!” Arrow yelled.

He jumped up from the bed right as I heard water hitting the floor. I stood and went to the bathroom, feeling Arrow’s nut traveling down my back. Water was everywhere. He’d forgotten to turn off the bath water. “See the bliss I was talking about? I forgot I was running this shit,” Arrow said as he pulled towels from the cabinet. “Yo’ pussy distracted me from everything, girl. Got me flooding my house.”

I laughed so hard then walked over to him for him to clean my back and butt. Once he was done, I turned to him and kissed his lips. “Let’s get this cleaned up before it starts leaking to the floor below,” I said as his eyes widened.

I laughed as I grabbed the remaining towels to sop up as much water as possible. This was the most beautiful disaster I’d ever witnessed. I couldn’t wait to experience even more with Arrow Bliss Vaughn.

WHEN WE GOT TO BEAUMONT, MY NERVES WERE A LITTLE ON edge. Jamel and Sandrene had ridden with us, so I wasn’t able to really express how I was feeling about meeting his entire family for the first time. Last night was insanely amazing. After we’d finally cleaned up the water, we still took a bath. It was so romantic. Arrow had lit candles and had played Aerosmith repeatedly. I lay in his arms as I enjoyed the hot bubble bath, and we relaxed in the quietness until he wanted to get nasty again.

I had to remind him that if we would have gotten going in that tub, we would have had to clean up water all over again. He quickly helped me out of the tub after that. He showed me around the house he said would one day be mine, and we made love again. Arrow took his time with me, and we did all sorts of sensually nasty shit. The way he dipped his fingers inside of me and fed us both from my waters was so damn sexy to me.

I already knew that I had better get on birth control though. After experiencing him raw, I didn’t want to feel not nare notha centimeter of latex inside of me. He shared my sentiments. With the weight loss surgery being so fresh, I definitely couldn’t risk getting pregnant. That could be potentially dangerous.

Arrow turned in the driveway, and I noticed that there were at least five other cars already here. “Ax and Alexz are here already,” Arrow said.

Just from conversation, I knew that Axton was his brother. “Yeah. Chad ass ain’t here. Just because we all wanna know what he wants with everybody, he’ll be the last one to show up,” Jamel added.

Arrow winked at me and got out of the car. When he got to my door, Sandrene and Jamel had already gotten out. He grabbed my hand and must have felt the tremble in it. He stared at me for a moment. He knew that alone would calm me down some. I’d told him as much last night. “You have nothing to worry about, beautiful,” he reassured, then kissed my forehead.

“Lynn, if they can accept me, I promise you’ll be in there like swimwear,” Sandrene said.

I chuckled at her outdated comment, and we made our way to the back. There was a fire pit lit, and four men were sitting there talking. One was clearly Axton. He and Arrow could almost pass for twins. They slapped hands as I smiled. “Ax, this my baby, Lynn. Lynn, this is my brother, Axton.”

He grabbed my hand and smiled slightly. “Nice to meet you.”

I nodded and said, “Likewise.”

He went on to introduce me to Axton’s father-in-law and two of his brothers-in-law. I was told there were more to come. There were three more Berotte brothers that hadn’t arrived yet. I assumed one of those brothers was the man named Chad. Arrow grabbed my hand and led me inside with a huge smile on his face.

When the women inside turned our way, they got extremely quiet. Sandrene giggled. There was one lady staring at me like she was a deer in headlights. Finally, she said, “Damn. First Mel, now you. Wow. Time does bring about a change.”

Arrow rolled his eyes and said, “This my big head ass sister-in-law, Alexz with a z. She’s married to Axton. That’s their one-year-old daughter she’s holding, Ariana. Alexz, this is my lady, Lynn.”

I smiled at Alexz, and she extended her arm for a hug. “Welcome to the family.”

I only smiled harder as she took me around introducing me to her mother and sisters-in-law, Skyler and Joyy. There were four other babies in attendance, and they were the most adorable kids I had ever seen. As we talked, another lady walked through the door. She was big and pregnant, then two other ladies followed her inside. Arrow grabbed my hand and introduced me to Brittany. She looked like she was just over it all though.

When we got to the older lady, Arrow smiled big and hugged her. At that moment, I knew she was his mother. She cackled loudly, begging him to put her down. Once he did, he turned to me and said, “Lynn, this is my mama and one of my best friends, Shirlene Vaughn.”

She pulled me into her arms like we’d known each other forever. I closed my eyes and relaxed into her motherly embrace. When she released me, she said, “Although you took my baby from me, I think I love you already. It was past time that someone took him away from me.”

Arrow frowned. “Ma, for real?”

His mama laughed as the other lady extended her hand. I knew that she had to be Kaysyn. She favored them somewhat, too, but I also noticed that something was up with her eye. That nigga had to have fucked it up real good. It seemed like it had been a month or so since that had happened. “Hey. I’m Kaysyn, his older sister. It’s nice to meet you.”

I smiled and nodded. “I’m Lynn. It’s nice to meet you as well.”

Arrow hugged his sister, and I could see him whispering something in her ear. Giving them their private moment, I walked over toward Sandrene. She didn’t look too happy. When I sat next to her at the kitchen table, I asked, “You okay?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Mm hmm. You look like you’re getting mentally prepared for battle.”

“I am. Jamel is thinking that bitch won’t show up to the class, but if she does, all hell will break loose. He doesn’t want to tell his mother if he doesn’t have to.”

I frowned slightly, because I didn’t have the slightest clue what she was talking about. Noticing my confusion, she leaned over and said quietly, “He slept with his mom’s best friend, and now that bitch is trying to cause problems.”

My eyebrows lifted as she nodded repeatedly. “Recently?” I asked.

“Their last meet up was before we hooked up... before we officially met. He was a patron at the club I worked at. He told her that would be the last time that same night. When she found out about me, she started acting like she didn’t value her fucking life.”

I gently rubbed circles on her back, trying to calm her down. The more she talked, the more worked up she was becoming. “This isn’t going to be good. He needs to just be a fucking man and tell his mother what he did. At least it will keep me from getting thrown into the middle of the shit.”

“Hopefully, she won’t show up,” I said reassuringly.

Before I could say another word, an entire crowd of people walked in, and two of them started barking. Arrow and Axton joined them, and mostly everyone rolled their eyes. The oldest of the children ran to the big guy, barking like a little cute puppy with her arms stretched out. It was the cutest thing. He picked her up and threw her in the air as she squealed in delight. Her excitement brought a smile to my face.

The dark skinned one of the brothers came and snatched the little girl from him. I supposed that was his daughter. “You gon’ quit having my baby barking,” he said.

“Baby girl knows greatness when she hears it. Don’t you, Riena?”

She smiled at him and clapped her hands. I smiled at their interaction. However, I didn’t know whether to be happy about

all the people Arrow was introducing me to, including his father, or whether to be worried about the storm brewing within Sandrene.

CHAPTER 19

ARROW

“**Y**ou see how she fucking acting like she don’t know I exist? That’s why I carried my black ass outside. I wanna just blast the shit in front of everybody. Chad need to hurry up and say what the fuck he gotta say so I can get my ass up outta here. Yo’ sister better not call me after this,” Seneca ranted.

“Yeah, nigga, whatever. You pussy whipped,” Ali said then glanced at me. “My bad, bruh.”

“Change the subject,” I said as Jamel made his way outside with us, and Seneca shot Ali the finger.

We’d already eaten, and the women were about to leave to head to their pole dancing class. Lynn was beyond excited to go since she’d already attended a couple of Sandrene’s classes in Houston. When Jamel sat next to me, Ali rolled his eyes.

“You ain’t told her.”

Jamel looked up at him and frowned. I wasn’t sure if he’d told Ali what was going on or if Ali had peeped game a long time ago, but he seemed to know what was going on. As if sensing my questions, Ali said, “I’m a private eye. Ain’t shit private around me. I know a lot of y’all business. All I have to do is pay attention to your mannerisms and some of the shit y’all do and say. I get paid for that shit. It’s hard to turn it off. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to know that Mel done fucked that woman. I noticed before we met Sandrene.”

Mel ran his hand down the top of his head as Shy joined us outside. “Chad about to make his announcement. Y’all come

on.”

We all stood and made our way inside to find Chad standing in the middle of the floor. He pulled Lexi from her seat and said, “We finally set a date. June twenty-fourth. It will be a destination wedding in Fiji.”

“Nigga, in Australia? I know the hell not,” Dylan said.

Everyone frowned slightly. I could afford it, and I knew most of the people here could, but shit. That was an expensive ass trip. Who wanted to take off from work for a whole damn week for their wedding? Just the flight could be well over three grand, because who in the hell was gonna ride economy for a thirteen-hour flight? That was the minimum time. It could take longer if Houston didn’t offer direct flights to Fiji.

“My baby wants Fiji, and that’s what the hell she gon’ get. Y’all all are requested to be there. No question.”

Shy handed him a stack of envelopes, and he passed one out to everyone, including my parents, Kaysyn, Seneca, Ali, Rondo, and me. Of course, the couples only received one envelope. Everyone sat calmly with their envelopes in hand. I was sure it was something about the wedding until he asked, “Aren’t y’all gon’ open them?”

Alexz tore into theirs and started screaming at the top of her lungs. When she jumped on Chad, it caused everyone else to dive into their envelopes too. I glanced at Lynn as her eyes darted from person to person. I beckoned her to me as I opened my envelope. When I pulled out the cashier’s check, I stopped breathing. It was for a million dollars.

All his brothers dived on him like he was running a football and they were defenders. I figured he would take care of his family, but never in a million years did I expect him to include me. When Isaiah yanked him up from the floor, he said, “All of y’all had to put up with me when I was going through this shit. And the ones of you that didn’t, I see y’all as family. Everybody didn’t get the same amount, but it’s more than enough for y’all to take time off and make a trip to Australia.”

Seneca walked right over to him, and I swore it looked like he wanted to cry. He shook Chad's hand and pulled him in for a hug. "You saved my life, bruh. Had it not been for your quick thinking, I could have died that night," Chad said.

Seneca pulled away from him and went outside. I could clearly see Kaysyn watching him. I wondered how much money he'd given him. Ali was red as hell too. Since he was standing next to me, I asked, "How much he gave you?"

"Five mil. You know how much that's gon' do for my company? I can really do some shit with that and have plenty of operating costs after that."

"Congratulations, man. Y'all did a lot for him. You deserve it. I ain't do shit, and he still gave me a mil. I'm in shock, for real."

We made our way to Chad and shook his hand. He handed Ali two more envelopes. "That's for Jericho and Jungle. Despite the history, they still had my back as well as my family's backs."

"They gon' appreciate this. Thank you, Chad."

Ali clapped his back then left out, heading outside. "Man, for you to be a blessing like this to everybody is amazing. I appreciate you, bruh," I told him.

"You my bruh," he said then barked.

"I'm so fucking happy yo' ass can bark all damn day," Alexz added, causing everyone to laugh.

I barked right along with him as Mr. Sheldon pulled him into a slight headlock. He kissed Chad's head. All the women had made their way to Lexi to talk about the wedding plans. Just as I was about to sit next to my baby, Lexi said, "Lynn! You too! Come over here!"

She smiled at me and kissed my lips then made her way over to them. I knew she was probably feeling overwhelmed with family, but she seemed happy about it. I decided to head outside to see Seneca and Ali seated on the bench of the picnic table. As I was about to sit with them, Yolanda walked around the corner. *Aww shit.*

“Hey, y’all,” she said and kept walking toward the back door.

“Don’t carry your messy ass in that house,” Ali said.

My eyebrows lifted as did hers. She frowned and opened the door anyway. I knew I needed to go inside to not only help, but to be nosy. When I looked up, I noticed Ali was right behind me. “That bitch disrespectful. I don’t know how Mrs. Anissa friends with her ass,” he said.

“That shit is puzzling to me too.”

When I walked in, I noticed Sandrene was standing with her purse on her shoulder. Lynn was next to her, holding her hand. Evidently, she’d briefed her on what was going on. Jamel was leaning against the wall, looking like he wanted to fuck something up. I went over to him and said, “Get ready, because the shit is about to go down now.”

“Yeah. I ain’t never wanted to choke the shit out of a woman until now. She has to be crazy as hell.”

“Well, is everybody ready?” Mrs. Anissa asked excitedly.

I closed my eyes momentarily and bit my bottom lip. When I reopened my eyes, Sandrene had stepped forward. She cut her eyes at Jamel and said, “I’m sorry, Mrs. Anissa, but is she going with us?”

“Who? Yolanda?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh yes! She finally made the decision to join us.”

“Well, I apologize, but I can’t teach a class with her in it. I’m not sure who she thinks I am that she would get away with playing in my face.”

Yolanda’s lips parted like she thought Sandrene would be quiet about it. She had to be the dumbest broad known to man. She was behaving like a naïve twenty something year old instead of a woman in her mid-forties. Jamel was about to walk over to them, but I held him back. After what he’d expressed, I wasn’t about to let him mess around and catch a case.

Mrs. Anissa was frowning as she turned to Yolanda. “What’s going on?”

Alexz was standing right next to Mrs. Anissa, all in the business. This wasn’t going to be good at all. “I don’t know. I don’t know Sandrene personally,” Yolanda responded nervously. “It’s okay. I’ll just leave.”

As she tried to walk away, Alexz grabbed her arm. “Naw. Something is up, and somebody gon’ fucking spill the shit.”

“She slept with Jamel in the past and has been trying to start mess between us ever since she found out we were together,” Sandrene said without hesitancy.

Mrs. Anissa’s face turned beet red, and her eyebrows lifted as she stared at Yolanda. When Yolanda still hadn’t said a word in her own defense, she slapped the shit out of her. The minute she did, Alexz did the same. I knew she wasn’t just gonna stand there and not get a piece. “So you would rather him be with a fucking stripper? Every man in this room except Sheldon has probably seen her naked ass twerking in their faces! And she gets butt naked! So they probably seen her pussy too!” Yolanda yelled.

Sandrene crossed the room faster than light and punched her right in the mouth. Lynn immediately grabbed her and led her outside to the front porch. Before they walked out of the door, Lynn glanced at me as I shook my head. I could clearly see the tears streaming down Sandrene’s face. She was embarrassed. I was also sure that Jamel had seen her tears also.

He yelled from where I was holding him, “She’s more woman than you’ll ever be. Had I never met her, I still wouldn’t be with you. You served your purpose. I got what I wanted from you and now that I’m done, you wanna stir up shit!”

“Get the fuck out of this house, Yolanda. Don’t ever come back. I should have left you where your ass was the last time you played me and the friendship I freely offered. You ain’t no good. I can’t believe you slept with my son. Get out!” Mrs. Anissa demanded.

I had never heard Mrs. Anissa use foul language, but this time was definitely an understandable exception. Yolanda obviously wasn't moving fast enough for Alexz. She grabbed her by her hair and said, "Come on, bitch."

She tried to fight against Alexz. I wasn't sure why she did that, because that only caused her to get kicked. Lexi went over to Alexz by throwing a lick of her own and helped her drag Yolanda out of the house. Jamel broke away from me and went to his mama. "Ma, I'm so sorry."

She slapped his ass too, then cut her eyes at him and grabbed her keys. She went over to Mr. Sheldon and kissed his lips. He hugged her tightly and kissed her head. "I need to get out of here for a minute."

"Okay. Take someone with you," he told her.

She walked by Jamel like he wasn't standing there and left out of the back door. Jamel then went to the front porch, and I could hear Sandrene going off on that nigga. This shit shouldn't have gone this far. He should have just told Mrs. Anissa like I recommended he do. There still would have been a blowup, but Sandrene wouldn't have had to be the one to break the news. Mrs. Anissa deserved to hear it from him. When he walked back in the house, he flopped on the couch. "Lynn and Sandrene left with Mama."

I looked to see that all the women had left out the back door. Maybe they were just going to go to their pole dancing class anyway. Sandrene had said how much of a stress reliever it was for her. "Boy, you done really fucked up," Shy said. "That cougar pussy worth all this?"

Jamel only shook his head and took a deep breath. His face was red as hell. I was more than sure it was from him hurting the two women he loved the most and embarrassment as well. I patted Mel's shoulder and silently tried to encourage him and let him know that I was still here for him as I always was. That was my boy, and he'd have to really do some fucked up shit for that to change.

"Shy," Mr. Sheldon said as he shook his head slowly. Turning his attention back to Mel, he continued. "You have to

live in your truth now, son. The secret is out, and now everybody can heal from it and get over it. Everything will be fine after while. Your mom is hurt, but I can promise you one thing.” He paused for dramatic affect. When he was sure he had everyone’s attention, he said, “She gon’ be here loving on you before you leave. You her baby boy, and there’s nothing you can do to make her stop loving you.”

Everyone nodded in agreement as Mel voiced, “I fucked up. Hurting my mama was something I was desperately trying to avoid. That was why I ended things with Yolanda months ago. I had no idea she was this crazy. I never promised her anything. She knew we couldn’t be more because of her friendship with Mama. This is fucking crazy. And now Sandrene is hurt, angry, and embarrassed.”

Mel lowered his elbows to his knees and rested his hands on top of his bowed head. I could feel his pain. The room remained quiet for a moment. DJ stood from his seat and came sat on the other side of Mel and hugged him. Jamel had once told me that he used to hug him a lot when they were kids, and he was missing their dad. Not only did they have a brotherly bond, they damn near had a father-son bond as well. DJ always looked out for him.

My phone vibrated with a text message. When I saw it was from Lynn, I opened it to see a message I wasn’t expecting. *We’re going to pole dancing class. Your mom and Kaysyn are into it too. She said she could tell that something more was going on between her and Seneca, although Kaysyn is constantly denying it. Joyy is consoling your sister.*

I rolled my eyes and noticed Seneca was in the kitchen eating again. After texting Lynn back, telling her I was sorry for all the drama, I made my way to the kitchen. Lynn really didn’t need to be in this stressful situation. As soon as we got back to Houston, I would be rubbing her feet and telling her about the time I took off. Hopefully she would take some time off, too, so I could properly cater to her and rid her of all this stress.

When I sat next to Seneca, I asked, “Are you really done?”

He stopped chewing his food and turned to me, swallowing everything in his mouth at once. "I'm trying to be. This shit is toxic as fuck. I'm not trying to cause more shit. We done witnessed enough today. I just want her to love me back. That's it. She'd rather keep me and what we have a secret. I don't give a fuck what anybody thinks, and I know my attitude about it could get her into a world of trouble. So it's best I just walk away, even though bitch ain't in my blood."

"What if she changes her mind?"

"Then we'll talk about it, but I'm tired of fucking with her. She done already hurt a nigga's ego and reputation around here," he said with a smirk.

I patted his back. I knew he was only being open with me and possibly Ali about how he felt about Kaysyn. Honestly, even with as hot headed and reckless as he could be at times, I knew he would take care of Kay and those kids to the best of his abilities. "Can I ask you something?"

He glanced at me as he resumed eating his food. "Yeah. What's up?"

"You still selling that shit, ain't you?"

He took a deep breath. "I was still doing it here and there. That's how I know about Luckey. He was one of the ones I was still supplying occasionally. He was getting it from more than just me though. I think Kaysyn thinks I had something to do with him getting fucked up. I wouldn't do that shit. I mean, I would, but he ain't gave me a reason to do that to him. He was cool with me, but I knew Kaysyn deserved better... after he got fucked up anyway."

"You said was. How long ago did you completely quit selling?"

He bit his bottom lip and set his fork on his plate. He looked over at me and said, "When I got serious about her. So about four months ago. Now with these millions Chad blessed me with, I don't ever have to dabble in that shit again. The embroidery shop wasn't doing as well as I hoped, that was

why I readily accepted Ali's proposal. I sold the shop. It was a money pit, honestly, and it was draining me dry."

I nodded. His love for Kaysyn had caused me to look at him in another light. Before his affair with my sister, I saw him as a fuckboy. He sold women fantasies that he had no intent of fulfilling. He was toxic as hell. I paid closer attention to him after I saw them leaving the movie theater and realized my sister was the one being toxic. She wanted a toy. That would have been fine for Seneca had he not fallen in love with her.

I took a deep breath and slid my hand down my face. I thought I was the one with drama. The shit I had going on didn't compare to all this shit that went down today. Chad's blessings had been overshadowed by the bullshit with Jamel and Yolanda. Kaysyn and Seneca's foolishness was affecting the women now because of Mama confronting her in front of everybody.

"All I can say is, I'm glad this shit ain't about me or something I have going on. For once, a nigga in the clear," Chad said, causing everybody to chuckle.

CHAPTER 20

LYNN

I held on to the pole and did my best to sexily walk around it.

The tip was to be loose and free. I was way too tense after all the bullshit today. I could only hope that I didn't end up dealing with that type of mess with Arrow. That nurse was the only stain right now, and I hoped she never got as bold as Yolanda.

Sandrene was so embarrassed by the things she said. She told me that she was right about all of them seeing her naked for Jamel's birthday. It was one thing she was worried about when she met the family, especially Arrow. He'd seen her more than once. She said it was why she wore a mask. Jamel's openness to his family about who she was had killed that air of mystery about her identity.

Her tears had me in tears with her. The mood was so heavy. Mrs. Anissa had hugged her for a while and whispered some things in her ear that had her crying even more. I was more than sure they were words of love and encouragement. Sandrene said she'd never felt so low about her profession as she did today, and that hurt my heart. She was already dealing with a lot with the pending case against her father's floozy, her words not mine.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, but I didn't feel like checking it at the moment. I listened to the song that was playing, "Safe" by Ye Ali, and tried to focus on the words. They reminded me so much of how I felt around Arrow. Apparently, it moved a lot of women here just by the expressions on some of their faces. Brittany, who I learned

was pregnant with twins, was seated on a plush, oversized chair with her feet up, watching us. Alexz had said that her husband would come unglued if she engaged in any activities other than walking. We'd all chuckled at her comment.

I could see how pole dancing could make a woman feel sexy. This moment just felt so sensual. I couldn't wait until I got better at it so I could perform for Arrow. When the song ended, Skyler went to the front of the room and hugged Sandrene. Everyone followed suit, then everyone hugged Mrs. Anissa. She had us form a circle. There was at least twelve of us in attendance. Arrow's mom and another older lady that I learned was Skyler and Lexi's mother, were holding Mrs. Anissa up emotionally and were on each side of her.

"I want us to pray. I mean, really cry out to God while we're joined together. Today has been a lot. I'm sorry that I even befriended that woman, but it hurts because she *was* my friend, and I loved her. I don't know how I didn't see this in her." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then said, "I did see it. I just didn't expect her to cross me and mine. I should have known that she would eventually."

The tears fell from her eyes as one of her daughters-in-law went to her and hugged her tightly. "Mama, this isn't your fault. This is on her. Let's pray about it."

We all began praying on our own, and there was a peace that fell over the room. When Sandrene broke out in tears, I wrapped my arms around her and held her up. The woman that provided me with so much comfort and advice needed me to do the same for her. I would gladly be the person she could lean on.

Once we all stopped praying, everyone brought the circle in and decided to call it a day. They said they normally did three to four songs. Today we'd only done two. One of the songs was one of my favorites and one that Arrow had played for me when I was feeling down, "Vital Transformation" by Georgia Anne Muldrow. It seemed to help Sandrene and Mrs. Anissa as much as it always helped me.

When we got back to the house, the guys were outside in a full-fledged football game. Chad had knocked Dylan over and done a victory dance. Skyler frowned and stared at her sister and said, “Tell your man to save that barbaric shit for y’all’s house.”

Lexi laughed hard as their mother chuckled too. All the babies were with their PaPa and Mr. Vaughn. They had their hands full. I watched Mariena run to her dad and grab his hand like she was trying to help him up. It was the cutest thing. The five of us got out of Lexi’s car, and Jamel ran straight to Sandrene. She slid her arms around him as more tears left her eyes. He scooped her up like she was a baby and headed to the front porch with her.

At first, I didn’t feel like him telling his mom beforehand would have changed anything that happened other than the slap he got from her. She would have had time to process things and speak to him privately about it. Then I started thinking had Jamel told his mom before today, it could have changed everything. Mrs. Anissa could have handled the situation with Yolanda beforehand, especially when she’d voiced Yolanda was gonna attend the pole dancing class. She would have never shown up at the house today.

I made my way to the field where they were and kissed Arrow. He pulled out of the game since Jamel had left. The teams were uneven. Soon after, they all abandoned the game and began playing music. The fire pit was lit, and there were a couple of electric heaters on the patio. Arrow led me to a seat where he sat and pulled me to his lap.

“I’m so sorry about all the drama today. I promise to make it up to you tonight when we get back. It’s been a lot for *me*, and I can usually tolerate a lot.”

“It’s okay, baby. I believe even through all the turmoil, I became part of a sisterhood. It was beautiful to be with a group of women who love and pray for each other. Our group prayer renewed us all,” I said as Mrs. Anissa sat on her husband’s lap.

I noticed Arrow’s mom and Kaysyn hadn’t made it back here to the backyard though. She’d lit into Kaysyn about

fucking around with Seneca. She accused her of cheating on her husband before their separation and everything, saying that was why what happened a little over a month ago had happened. I supposed she had been piecing things together since then. I felt sorry for Kaysyn, because this shouldn't have happened in front of everybody.

It didn't help that her ex-husband had bonded out of jail. Kaysyn hadn't told anyone that bit of information. I truly believed it was her way of keeping him safe. After what he'd done to her, had anyone in the family knew he was out and about, he would end up in a hospital or worse.

She begged Alexz and me not to tell Ax and Arrow about that. I didn't know her ex, and technically, I didn't know her, but what I did know was that I wanted to keep my man out of trouble. Seneca seemed like he could be dangerous. He and Ali both looked like thugs. I didn't know whether Alexz would honor her request though.

Arrow kissed my head and remained quiet. I remembered I'd gotten a text earlier, so I pulled it from my pocket to see a message from Thomas. I slightly rolled my eyes because I didn't need him looking out for me. Although he was my brother, he was a stranger to me. No matter how long he'd known *about* me, it didn't make him *know* me. He only knew *of* me. My personal affairs were my business. If we got to know one another, that could possibly change. I opened it to read what he had to say.

I'm sorry, Lynn, for bringing bullshit to your relationship. I found out that Arrow lit into her at work. He's no longer seeing her, and he's definitely serious about you if he went to those lengths. He's usually lowkey at work. I hope y'all have been able to talk and possibly work things out. I also hope that you will forgive me for butting into your love life and that we can continue getting to know one another. It was way too soon for me to play the role of protective big brother. I promise to stay in my place from now on.

I smiled slightly then glanced up to see Arrow was staring at my phone with a frown on his face. I lifted it so he could

read the message. As he did, I saw his frown lift. He nodded and kissed my head. “You gon’ reply?”

“Yeah.”

Thank you, Thomas. We have been able to work things out. I’m with him now. Yes, we can continue getting to know one another. I would like that. I would also like to meet your family and AJ and his family one day soon. Blessings.

Arrow kissed my head again as Jamel and Sandrene walked to the backyard hand-in-hand. I supposed that signified they were ready to go. Arrow patted my hips so I would stand, and he proceeded to telling everyone goodbye. I followed behind him, doing the same and letting them know how nice it was to meet them. After congratulating Chad and Lexi on the settlement and their wedding date, she and I exchanged numbers and we left.

“OOOH, ARROOOOW. THAT FEELS SO GOOD, BABY. I SWEAR you have healing hands.”

He chuckled. The man was massaging my scalp, and I swore I was in heaven. He’d already massaged my entire body, paying extra attention to my feet, back, and ass. I was at his house again, and it was so lovely I was dreading going to my matchbox tonight. He had to go to work in the morning, and I wasn’t trying to get up at the ass crack of dawn for him to take me home before he went to work.

“My mama called while you were in the shower.”

“Really? What did she say?”

“She wanted me to apologize to you for what you witnessed between her and Kaysyn and said how she should have waited until they were in the car alone. She just didn’t want Ell and Jericka to hear the conversation. She said she hopes she can have us come for dinner with her and Dad one day so she can have a do over with you.”

I smiled slightly. “Your mom is really sweet. Tell her that all is forgiven on my end. She didn’t owe me an apology anyway.”

“Well, she felt like she did. She said she’s been calling everyone to apologize. She apologized to Kaysyn on the way home. For some reason, Kaysyn is staying with her and Dad again for a while.”

I knew that it was probably because her ex was out of prison, but I wouldn’t dare say that to Arrow. Besides, I promised her that I wouldn’t. I surely couldn’t have her hating me already. He and Axton would eventually find out though. All that shit was public record. If they wanted to know, all they had to do was look it up.

Arrow continued massaging me, and when he made his way back to my ass, I already knew he was trying to work me up for something else. He didn’t have to work me up. Wet-Wet was already there.

“Lynn, I just want you to know that I’m happy you’re here with me. I can’t wait to spend time with you. I took off work Thursday and Friday. I want to cater to you. I hope you can do the same. If you can’t, I totally understand. After today, I feel like we need a break away from everyone. Then Sunday, instead of going to Beaumont, we can have dinner with my parents. Besides, we’re all millionaires now. Chad gave me and my parents a million dollars each. Can you believe that?”

“He shared the wealth for real. I’m gonna call tomorrow morning to see if I can take off and also put in for time off for the wedding. It’s coming up soon.”

He kissed my shoulder and continued rubbing on my body with baby oil. If I were any slicker, I would slide off cotton sheets. I turned my head to stare at him as he kneaded my ass cheeks. “You know I’m already ready, right?”

“Hell yeah. I can feel the heat and moisture from that thang. Let me get at it.”

He lowered his head, pushed me up on my knees, and began eating me out from the back. I was in the perfect

position to pass the fuck out from pleasure overload. He pulled away some and took a deep breath. Before going back in, he said, "I love you, Lynn."

EPILOGUE

ARROW

THREE MONTHS LATER...

“They are the most perfect little girls I have ever seen,” Shyrón said as he held his twins.

We’d come to Beaumont to visit Shy and Brittany. She had the babies about two weeks ago. I’d never seen Shy so soft-hearted and calm. Those little princesses had him wrapped around their fingers. Brittany was staring at him with a smile on her face. Every time he looked at those babies, he would lean over and kiss her. She’d had a rough last month from what I was told.

She was in a lot of pain, and the babies were threatening to come early. However, she made it to thirty-eight weeks and delivered two healthy daughters who were nearly seven pounds each and twenty inches long. They had to do a C-Section to get them out, because the one in position was breeched. That was probably why she was in so much pain.

Lynn sat next to me after washing her hands, and Brittany grabbed one of the girls and handed her to Lynn. “This is Kinsley. She’s trying to suck her thumb, so we keep her with a pacifier. That’s Kaylee. She loves to be snuggled against her daddy the most.”

“Aww, they are so beautiful. I bet they cling to each other though,” Lynn said as she slid her hand over Kinsley’s curls.

“They do. When they sleep, I put them close together. They are usually holding onto one another in some way.”

Shy was in another world as he kissed Kaylee’s hand. Dylan’s daughter, Mariena, walked over to Shy, and he lowered the baby so she could kiss her head. “She pwetty baby!”

Shy pulled her to his lap and kissed her cheek as she stared at the baby. The house was full. Sunday dinner was here, because they knew between Brittany being a nurse and Shy being overprotective, those babies wouldn’t see outside unless

it was totally necessary right now. That nigga had paid for the pediatrician to come to them.

I stared at Lynn as she stared at Kinsley. She'd been smiling since Brittany handed her to her. Lynn was down one hundred pounds already, and she was still losing. We did our best to minimize her amount of loose skin by exercising and doing some light lifting, but there was too much weight loss to even remotely keep up. She said she would have plastic surgery to remove it once she reached her desired weight. I was extremely proud of her.

We'd been going with the flow as far as our relationship went. We'd been dating one another... like actually going on dates. That was something we'd been neglecting at first, because of Lynn's surgery and all the drama. Every weekend, we did something, whether it was going to the movies, going skating, or just going to dinner. I wanted us to spend as much time together as we possibly could. I was even thinking about opening a private practice specializing in pain management. That would allow me more free time. Lately, I'd been working six days a week.

Everything I'd said to Jamel months ago, Lynn had fulfilled. When she got to my house, she would take a shower with me, wash my hair and grease my scalp on the weekends, and fuck me until I couldn't take anymore. Her stamina had increased something serious, and baby girl was riding me like a professional jockey at times. She told me that was something she'd never really been able to do, because she just had no endurance at all. That shit had changed for the better, and I was happy that I was the one benefitting from it.

She was still working at the radio station. However, she was only doing her segment on Thursdays so she could have more freedom to do other things. She often cooked for me while I was at work. Since I gave her the code to get inside my house, she would come over before she went to work. Her workouts were usually in the morning, so instead of going home, she would go to my house and shower and cook.

Chad and Lexi's wedding was in two months, and everyone was getting antsy. We were ready to get out of the

country and have an amazing time. Ali had said that he could actually let loose for a minute and enjoy himself. He was always on guard. The nigga didn't even realize how much attention he got from the ladies. Then again, he probably did. I wasn't sure why he didn't act on any of it though.

Seneca had stayed true to his word and had quit chasing after Kaysyn. He said she'd only called him a couple of times after that bullshit at the Berotte's house. She picked up on the hint quick as hell, because she hadn't called him since. I could tell that he was heartbroken about it though. Losing love never felt good. Although I didn't really have a clue of what that was like, I couldn't imagine not having Lynn's love and affection. I knew what it felt like for those couple of weeks without her, and I could barely function.

Sandrene and Jamel walked in bearing gifts. We didn't take the ride to Beaumont together this time, because we weren't staying as late. Jamel and his mama had made up, and Yolanda had stayed ghost like she was told to. If she knew what was good for her, she would continue to do that. I was more than sure her ribs were sore after those kicks from Alexz and Lexi.

Sandrene had a court date for her civil suit against Tip. Skyler was more than sure that they would win. They were going after all her assets, including the strip club and her restaurant. It wasn't that Sandrene needed any of it, but she didn't want Tip to have it. She said she would most likely sell the restaurant to someone else. As much as she loved dancing, she said she would keep the strip club and make some major changes. Besides, it was her dad's money that afforded all of it anyway.

She and Lynn had become nearly inseparable. Whenever Mel and I wanted to hang out alone, there was never an issue. They enjoyed their alone time together as much as we did. However, that only happened periodically these days. As much as I had been working, those niggas had been hanging out without me. On Sundays, I rarely saw Seneca anymore. Whenever he knew Kaysyn would be there, he wouldn't show

up. If he showed up and she was there, he would leave. My nigga was serious about keeping his distance.

I kissed Lynn's ear as she held the baby. Kinsley had gone right back to sleep, and Lynn hadn't taken her eyes off her. "If I didn't know any better, I would think you wanted one."

She glanced at me. "Eventually, I do. You can't tell me you don't."

Just as she said that, Ariana ran to me. I picked her up and kissed her cheek. "How could I say no to having one of these? You see these little girls? They're beautiful."

There were now more girls than boys around here. Skyler stood in the middle of the floor and got everyone's attention, and before she started speaking, Dylan joined her. "Aww nigga, y'all pregnant?" Chad yelled.

Skyler cut her eyes at him and said, "Yes! That's what we wanted to announce. We're having another baby. Kiss my ass, Chad!"

"That's for Dylan to do. I already got one ass to kiss."

Alexz immediately jumped on him. That shit never got old. Mariena and Arianna died in laughter as Chad ran around with her. Even Chad's seven-month-old son, Foster, had a huge smile on his face. I slowly shook my head at their foolery. As I glanced around the room at all the babies, I definitely knew that I couldn't wait until Lynn and I could add to the number.

She turned to me, and I leaned over and kissed her lips, grateful that she gave me a chance to show her... prove to her that I was ready to be everything she needed. My past was behind me, and with Lynn, I was all in.

The End

If you did not read the author's note at the beginning, please go back and do so before leaving a review. 😊

FROM THE AUTHOR...

Arrow was the sweetest! I loved him from the very beginning. Although he had ho qualities and tendencies, he was perfect for Lynn. There isn't much to say about him other than that. When drama arose, he nipped it quickly. He was never one to let stuff linger. Lynn, on the other hand, had to let things settle in her spirit because of what she knew about Arrow. The brother admitted he was a ho in the very beginning. LOL!

I honestly liked that. He didn't hide it. Speaking of hiding, Jamel's ass should have been told his mom the moment that bitch started threatening to go to that class. All of that could have been avoided. Anissa would have still been hurt, but none of that shit would have popped off that day, overshadowing Chad's good deed. Chad was just happy that it wasn't his drama.

Lynn was a sweetheart as well. Her story was heartbreaking with her dad. I could see why she felt a tinge of guilt. Thankfully, Sandrene helped her see differently. Her brother... I didn't know how to take him. I didn't know if he was being messy or if he indeed was being protective of the sister he didn't really know. It was hard to say since he wasn't really giving me any type of negative vibes. Maybe he *was* sincere. Who knows?

This situation with Kaysyn and Seneca has come to a head... or has it? Lawd have mercy! I can see that my nerves are going to be bad as hell for their book. Seneca is impatient, stubborn, and reckless at times. Not to mention, he's a thug. Since Chad broke him off financially, he's not ever going back

to selling, but is Luckey still safe? I'm more than sure he knows Luckey is walking around scot-free. As you can probably tell, his book is next, and I won't be able to promise an HEA. *cringe*

The Berottes always have their own and that includes their friends. I love Chad's gestures and how he included everyone but Yolanda. Maybe he knew beforehand about her and Jamel. He works with Ali at times. We will learn more about the PI firm, Watchful Eyes, in the upcoming books and all the shit they get into.

As always, I gave it my all. Whether you liked it or not, please take the time to leave a review on Amazon and/or Goodreads.

There's also an amazing playlist on Apple Music and Spotify for this book, under the same title that includes some great R&B, Pop, and rap tracks to tickle your fancy.

Please keep up with me on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok (@authormonicawalters), Twitter (@monlwalters), and Clubhouse (@monicawalters). You can also visit my Amazon author page at www.amazon.com/author/monica.walters to view my releases.

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