

A man in a dark suit, white shirt, and patterned tie is shown from the chest up. The background is a soft-focus image of him. Overlaid on the image are various romantic phrases in a light blue, cursive font, such as "good girl, good guy", "standing firm", "fun good", "ful two become one", "in love free spirit", "her lover love", and "explore handsome".

MISTER
teacher

B.LOVE

MISTER TEACHER

THE MISTER SERIES



B. LOVE

PROLIFIC PEN PUSHER

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PROLOGUE



Tyreek

Tyreek rolled his tongue across his teeth. He checked the time on his Rolex again before shaking his head. All evening, he hadn't wanted to pull out his phone, fearful he'd see a text from Janae that said she wouldn't be able to make it to dinner.

Like always.

Janae had never been a consistent lover since they met months ago through his brother, Kahlil, and Honey. In the beginning, Janae being an on-call nurse was admirable. Tyreek loved the chase and proving himself valuable of what little free time she had. The more he got to know Janae, the more he realized she wasn't so hard to catch because of her devotion; she was hard to catch because she didn't want to be caught.

When he couldn't take it anymore, Tyreek pulled his phone out of his pocket. Sure enough, he had a missed call and text notification from Janae.

Nurse Feel Good: I'm so sorry, love. I got called in. Let me know when I can make it up to you.

Shoving his phone back in his pocket, Tyreek gave the waitress that was hovering over the table his attention. She'd been coming back every few minutes for the past hour, each time looking sadder and sadder.

“Are you... ready to order, sir?”

Tyreek’s eyes shifted to the woman pulling the empty chair back that was across from him. “He is,” she said, sitting down.

Admittedly, she was beautiful. Tyreek had noticed her at the bar when he first arrived, but he wouldn’t do more than let his eyes linger. His mother raised him and Kahlil to be gentlemen, and she was an advocate for women. He’d never cheated a day in his life, and he didn’t plan on starting now.

Tyreek hadn’t bothered to look over the steakhouse menu, partly because he was sure he’d just leave the waitress a hundred-dollar tip and leave. Now that he had a dinner companion, he didn’t mind staying.

“Let me get whatever cocktail you have with whisky and ginger beer,” Tyreek said, eyeing the woman’s face intently. “And you can put her bar tab on my ticket as well.”

“Yes, sir,” the waitress agreed before walking away.

“You’ve been watching me,” Tyreek said more than asked.

She nodded. “I have. I take it your date stood you up?” Her soft voice and red lipstick kept drawing his attention to her lips.

“She did. Thank you for rectifying that.”

Her smile was small yet seductive, and Tyreek hated how attracted to her he was. She had a feminine style, her face was heavily made, and her long bundles went down to her waist in loose curls. On top of all that, she smelled good as fuck. Like cherries.

“You’re much too handsome to be stood up.”

“Looks aren’t everything.”

“Agreed, but I would sit here just to look at you.”

Tyreek chuckled. “Are you flirting with me?”

“I am.”

“I’m not used to women being so forward. It’s refreshing.”

The waitress returned with his drink and a martini for the stranger. “Are you okay with sticking to what you were drinking at the bar?” she asked, and his new dinner date nodded.

“Yes, thank you.”

They looked over their menus quickly, both choosing steak, macaroni and cheese, and broccoli. Once the waitress walked away, Tyreek asked, “What’s your name?”

“Are you single?”

Her abrupt change in conversation caught Tyreek off guard, but he recovered quickly. “No.”

“Then it doesn’t matter.”

He laughed quietly. “So we’re going to sit here and eat together without knowing each other’s names?”

“Yes. Are you going to take me home after this? If not, we don’t have to talk either.”

Tyreek considered her words. If he was raised differently, he would have taken the woman home with no hesitation. Not only was he not getting quality time with Janae; he wasn’t getting her pussy either. At this point, he was about to say fuck this shit and move on. But there was something about Janae... something that told him she was worth the wait.

Plus, Tyreek wasn’t used to women making him wait. Most women found his love, charm, and money captivating. He was a protector, too, the kind of man women always felt safe with in every way. Hardly ever did he have to wait for sex when he actively pursued a woman.

“I’m going to be honest with you,” Tyreek said before taking a sip of his drink. “I don’t find women who are okay with being the side chick attractive. If I was single, I definitely would have taken you home though.”

“Side chick?” She chuckled. “Baby, one night with me, and you wouldn’t want any other woman *but* me. I take men; I don’t share them.”

His dick began to rise, proving yet again that it had a mind of its own. “What makes what you have to offer so valuable that you have men out here leaving their women for you?”

Her mouth twisted to the side before she said, “Give me one night, and you can find out...”

PROLOGUE



Janae

This had become their routine. Janae would miss a date, and she'd show up at Tyreek's place with flowers and food. He'd forgive her and give her a foot massage. They'd cuddle for the rest of the day or night. This time, Janae wasn't sure that would be the case.

Every time she texted or called Tyreek throughout her shift he didn't answer. The only reason she knew he was okay was because she'd talked to Honey who mentioned overhearing a conversation Kahlil had with him. It was clear Tyreek was upset with her, or maybe even disappointed, and Janae couldn't blame him.

He'd been more than patient and understanding, and honestly, Janae had no idea why she was even stringing him along. As much as she liked him and wanted to take things to the next level, she simply wasn't ready. And it didn't seem fair to take her frustrations out on him because of how horrible things went with the last man she was with. People always said the first healthy relationship a person was in after being hurt was the most difficult. The last thing Janae wanted to do was punish Tyreek for her ex's choices.

The right thing to do would have been cutting ties with him until she was ready, but Tyreek was much too good of a catch for that. She kept telling herself things would work

themselves out with time. All she could do was pray Tyreek still had time to give her.

Her hand lifted to knock on Tyreek's door, but before she could, her phone was ringing. With a groan, Janae pulled it out of her purse and hoped it wasn't her boss asking her to come in for a double shift. Before she could answer, Tyreek was opening the door. His face was covered with confusion as he looked down at her.

"Hey," she spoke, ignoring the call. "That's the first time I've ever done that," she admitted with a nervous chuckle.

"Did what?"

"Ignored a call from Miranda. I'm sure she was going to ask me to come in for a second shift."

Crossing his arms over his bare chest, Tyreek leaned against the doorframe. "Why did you ignore her call?"

"We need to talk. I know you're upset with me, and you have every right to be but..."

"Last night, this beautiful woman threw herself at me." His confession caused the arm that was holding a half dozen roses for him to fall to her side. "The whole time we were having dinner, she tried to convince me to take her home."

"You cheated on me?"

"I turned her down over and over again." He scoffed. "And I don't even know why."

"Tyreek..."

"I sat there looking like a damn fool, waiting for you for an hour, Janae. A whole hour."

"I know, and I'm *so* sorry."

"I'm tired of hearing that, so I know you have to be tired of saying it."

Silence settled between them. After a few seconds, Janae lifted the flowers again. Tyreek looked from them to her before taking them and moving away from the door so she could walk in.

“Um... You’ve been ignoring my calls.” She followed him to the living room and sat on the opposite side of his wide blue sofa. “Does that mean you don’t want to talk to me right now or that you don’t want to talk to me period?”

Tyreek licked his lips and sighed as he looked away from her. “Honestly, I’m not sure yet. I’m still trying to decide.”

“That’s fair.”

She released a shaky breath.

“I wouldn’t mind the wait if I knew what I was waiting for, Janae, but I’m losing my patience. I don’t feel like you put forth any effort at all. What am I waiting for?”

“I...” Janae snapped her mouth shut. “I want to say you’re waiting for me, but I don’t want to waste your time. I want to be ready for a relationship, ready for you, but I don’t think I’m ready yet. It wouldn’t be fair of me to ask you to wait for me, so maybe we should stop talking for a while.” She chuckled and shook her head. “Honey’s going to kill me.”

“Why do you say that?”

“She’s already planned our lives together in her mind. I’m supposed to marry you so we can be sisters-in-law.”

Tyreek laughed with her this time. “Yeah, she’s already told me that. Does that have anything to do with how you’ve been moving?”

With a bob of her head, Janae squeezed the back of her neck. “I think so. I’ve been holding on to you, hoping I can heal and let you in, but it’s not working.”

Closing the space between them, Tyreek took her hands into his. “Are you giving yourself time to heal, Nae? Honestly. Because to me, it doesn’t seem like you make time for anything. Not even yourself.”

Her head lowered briefly and eyes watered. “Maybe not. No. It’s just... easier to focus on work because it hurts.” She swallowed hard, trying to push back her tears. “I’m sorry, Tyreek.”

“Hey,” he almost whispered, cupping her cheeks and kissing the center of her forehead. “It’s cool. I just want you to be aight, Nae. I can love you, but I can’t heal you. I’m not God.”

“I know.” Janae’s smile was crooked as her tears finally fell. “And I appreciate all that you’ve done to create a safe space for me to heal, but I don’t want to hurt and disappoint you in the process.”

“The only way you’ll disappoint me is if you don’t start taking better care of yourself.”

“I will,” she promised, crumbling a little more when he pulled her into his arms. “You breaking up with me only makes me want you more.”

She laughed, even though she was serious.

“I’ll be here. Just do the work and take care of yourself. I know you’re worth the wait.”

Janae was glad Tyreek believed she was. Softening her body against his, she found solace in his arms, because she had no idea when she’d be able to feel them wrapped around her again.

PREFACE

Several Months Later
Before the Wedding

CHAPTER 1



T yreek
February

My arms were outstretched as I stared at the wall directly across from us. I hated this part of coming to see Ahmad. It didn't matter how long we'd known each other, how trustworthy I was, or how many times I'd offered my services to him, Ahmad's paranoia made it difficult for him to trust anyone. I wasn't sure that was a lifestyle I could maintain—doing things that had me so fearful and on edge that I couldn't even be alone or feel free.

My father had always taught Kahlil and I that fear wasn't real; danger was, and that was what made us as fearless and unstoppable as we were when we were fully in the streets. With nothing to fear, we were able to move with a confidence that made even the most established men and organizations insecure.

It wasn't my brother or my father with me here today, though. While I carried my father with me in spirit, he hadn't been around to handle business with us for years. Losing him had changed all of us in some way or another. For Kahlil, he was filled with guilt. For our mother, Adrian, she clung to God and us even more. For me? Honestly, I still hadn't seen the effects of our father being murdered in my life yet. It was easier to see other people's issues than your own, I suppose.

"You're good," Cory, one of Ahmad's guards said, motioning for me to enter with his head.

I stepped forward, but I wouldn't go inside without Antonne. Antonne had taken on the role of protector within our crew just like I had. We all went to war behind each other, but Antonne and I were the only two that were still heavily invested in this street shit, so we had less to care about while our brothers had more to lose. Not too many knew about my dealings with men like Ahmad, though, and I liked to keep it that way.

Above all, my mother had raised me to be a gentleman... the world didn't need to know just how truly gangsta I was. Just thinking about all the shit I'd gotten away with over the years had a lazy smile lifting the corners of my mouth as I closed my eyes briefly and silently thanked God. Being a henchman for the last fifteen years had its pros and cons, but not a day went by that I didn't thank God for keeping me free and alive. As crazy as it sounded, the life I lived was the reason I was as close to God as I was. I wouldn't be foolish enough to say God was pleased with the way I was living, but I found solace in the fact that He shielded and protected me until I had the strength to leave. It was a long time coming, but I was finally at that point.

Watching my brother go legit fully and find his happily ever after with Honey had inspired me in more ways than one. I may have been the oldest by a mere year, but Kahlil had always been the more mature and rational one. The one that thought things through before making choices. As I aged, I started being slower to act, but with my line of business, you died if you weren't quick to act. That quickness was almost always the difference between you being the one to shoot or getting gunned down.

"All's well, brother," Antonne coaxed, trying to get me to go inside. "Handle your business."

"I will," was all I said, cupping my palms in the center of me.

Antonne chuckled with a shake of his head. Usually, he was the one hovering to make sure everyone was straight, but I was always the one returning that energy for him. Antonne was calm but lethal. Anything could set him off, and if you

didn't get him out of that situation quickly, there was no telling *what* his crazy ass would do. While I didn't think Ahmad would try anything when he heard about my desire to retire, Antonne insisted on coming with me since I didn't tell my brother about what I was doing, and I appreciated that. I had no problem handling things on my own, but it always increased my power and confidence when I had someone I trusted by my side.

When Cory was done searching Antonne, we made our way down the hall toward Ahmad's office door. Instead of meeting him at his home, I came to one of his legal business establishments—a car lot. It wasn't because I thought being in public would make this meeting go smoother. Quite frankly, if Ahmad wanted to try me, he'd do that shit in a fucking church. Ahmad had no qualms about handling an issue immediately, and that was one of the reasons I saved him for last. I had several powerful clients that I needed to detach myself from... politicians, pastors, athletes, drug dealers—anyone with an image they wanted to protect, I served.

Unlike henchmen in movies, bodies who stood around with no true value, my services were highly sought out and valued. I was the one who allowed my clients to keep their hands clean. Whether they needed something taken or someone handled, it fell on me to make it happen. A lot of the jobs weren't always murders, but some were, and I often handed those to Antonne. I didn't mind the kidnappings, torture, or beatings, because often they were well deserved, but after losing my father and seeing the devastating effects it had on me and my family, it became increasingly difficult for me to kill. That was another sign that it was time for me to retire.

By the time we made it to Ahmad's office, the decision to quit had settled a bit more in my spirit. When we first arrived, the moment was bittersweet. Though this was something I'd been wanting to do, I felt like I had no real reason to. Now, I was finally teaching tenth grade English along with having my gentlemen's club, and my students were my motivation to leave this shit behind. While I knew the chances of my double life affecting any of them were slim, there was always that

possibility of getting a job that was more dangerous than anticipated. The last thing I wanted was for someone to follow me and try to harm any of my students or try and hold anyone I loved and cared about hostage.

Plus, a lot of them looked up to me, and I didn't want being arrested or killed because of this life to make them lack trust with other men in their lives. A lot of the young men in my classes didn't have role models that weren't in the streets or celebrities, and I was someone they looked up to that lived a *normal* life. Something about that gave me a deeper pride that nothing else in my life had, and I wanted to keep it that way.

There were two guards standing by the door, and I found it amusing that his customers never questioned why a car dealer had so many guards on his lot. Maybe they were too wrapped up in the deals they were getting to question him. Either way, that would no longer be my concern after this meeting. With one bob of my head, I greeted both men, and the one on the left opened the door to let us inside. When we stepped in, Ahmad was wrapping up a call. At the sight of us, he stood and gave us a crooked smile.

"Tyreek," he greeted, extending his hand for me to shake. "Antonne."

Antonne bobbed his head, crossing his arms over his chest and standing by the door.

"You sure you didn't want to talk at home?" Ahmad clarified as we both sat down on both sides of his black and brown desk. "I'm sure my daughter would have loved to see you. She's there for the weekend."

I was sure she would have loved to see me too, and that was exactly why I wasn't taking my ass over there.

"This won't take long," I assured him. "We don't have any open contracts at the moment, making this the perfect time for us to part ways. I don't know if you've heard the news or not yet, but I'm retiring. As of now, I will no longer be available to accept any jobs. If you need them, I can provide recommendations for replacements."

Our eyes remained locked for several seconds as Ahmad processed my words. His brows began to slowly bunch as his head tilted. Slowly, he sat up in his seat and cupped his hands on top of his desk. With looks, he reminded me of Uncle Phil on *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. With attitude, he reminded me of Alonzo Harris from *Training Day*—a cocky motherfucker who had way more power than he should have had because of fear and the lack of confidence from those around him it took to put him in his place.

“What do you mean you won’t be available to accept any jobs?”

“I mean what I said,” I replied calmly, hoping Ahmad kept that same energy. If not, things could get ugly, real quick, and I was trying to leave the game in peace. Most often, men lost their lives or freedom when they tried to stop the illegal shit they were doing, and I didn’t want that to be the case with me.

“I’m confused. I thought what we had went beyond a professional relationship. You were almost my son-in-law...”

“What happened between me and your daughter has nothing to do with the work I’ve been doing for you,” I interrupted him to say quickly. The last thing I wanted to do was talk about or even *think* about his daughter.

“I would think that would motivate you to have more loyalty toward me than you’re showing right now. To just show up and tell me that you’re quitting with no warning or time to prepare.”

“If I would have given you time to prepare, you would have given me more jobs or tried to find ways to keep me attached to you. I said I would give you recommendations to replace me. That’s as good as I can do.”

Ahmad’s head shook. His shoulders sagged in disappointment as he released a long, slow breath.

“I don’t trust anyone else with your position, Tyreek. You know way too much about my dealings for me to just... let you walk out of here freely.”

“Is that a threat?” Antonne checked, slowly sauntering over to the desk as his arms dropped to his sides.

Ahmad chuckled, pushing the button that was on top of his desk, like I figured he would. It didn’t matter, though. If we really wanted to harm him, either one of us could have hopped his desk and snapped his neck before the door even opened.

“It’s a declaration,” Ahmad corrected. “Tyreek’s next words will determine if it’s a threat or not,” he added as the door opened. The two guards that were outside came in and closed the door behind them.

My head shook as I stood. “It’s not a threat because I don’t consider you one. I’m done, Ahmad, whether you accept that or not. It’s in your best fucking interest to let me leave without issue.” I pushed Antonne back gently with my hand to his chest. “Let’s go.”

“Are you sure this is what you want to do, son?” Ahmad asked. “You know how this business works. The value you have in my life can’t be duplicated. On top of that, like I said, the secrets you know...”

“Should be insurance. I’m not a snitch, but tread lightly. The shit I know could cause damage in the streets, fuck the police. Let me go, Ahmad, with love and respect, just like I came in.”

I didn’t look back or wait around to see if he would agree. It didn’t matter if he agreed. I was done, and there was nothing Ahmad or anyone else could do to make me change my mind. For the first time in my life, it felt possible for me to live a normal life. My brother was proof of that with his future wife and baby girl, and finally... I wanted those things for myself as well.

CHAPTER 2



Janae
I couldn't get out of bed. My chest felt like it had a cement block sitting on top of my heart. Each time I tried to move, I couldn't. It simply... hurt too much. Felt too suffocating. Each breath I took was shorter and choppy than the one before.

I was probably going to die today—die of a broken, crushed heart—I was sure.

Today was always hard.

This week was *always* hard.

Hell, this month was torture.

It didn't matter how much I tried to prepare, the memories of what I lost exactly two years ago always haunted me and left me debilitated today... this week... this month.

But this month needed to be different. This month, my best friend was getting married, and I needed to get my shit together. This month, my best friend had a beautiful baby girl who was my goddaughter, and though I hadn't given birth to her myself, she was like my own. This month, there was so much love that would be surrounding me... I could only pray I had the strength to let it drench me. Because the truth was, only love healed pain, no matter how much fear had me running from it.

My mind instantly went to Tyreek as I closed my eyes and allowed tears to slide down my face, onto my ears. He'd

wanted so desperately to love me... yet I allowed the pain of the man before him to hold me hostage. I wanted to say it was foolish, but I knew deep down in my heart that I'd done the right thing. Tyreek deserved a woman who was whole and healed, or at least, whole enough to not have so many holes in her heart that his love would immediately seep out. I imagined he felt extremely empty trying to constantly fill a woman who didn't have the capacity to receive let alone return what he was giving.

But right now... my God... I wished I could hold the love he had to give. If I could, maybe I wouldn't feel chained to my bed with all this... pain.

Lifting my hand to my throat, I swallowed hard before pulling in a deep, shaky breath. I sobbed, rolling over onto my side in a fetal position. I wanted to get out of bed... needed to get out of bed. I wanted to work... needed to grab my phone and let people know I was okay. It wasn't like me to go ghost—to completely shut down. I didn't even have the strength to grab my phone on the nightstand. I was sure if I tried to stand, I'd crumble into a million little pieces... like a puzzle that had been forced together with pieces that didn't fit.

Deciding to just surrender to the paralyzing state I was in, I wrapped my arm around my legs, closed my eyes, and cried.

CHAPTER 3



T yreek

When I walked into Kahlil's man cave, he was in a deep sleep. I took a picture and sent it to the group chat. His head was tossed back on the recliner he was seated in, mouth wide open as he snored. He talked big shit about how having my niece wouldn't affect his sleep and energy, and for the last three months, Kayla had been giving him and Honey a run for their money. She was worth it though.

She was the most perfect baby I'd ever met... no question about it. Even when she was fussing or throwing up on my shirts, I loved that little girl more than anything in this world. Kayla was a determining factor in my decision to leave the streets too. When it was just me and Kahlil, I didn't give a damn. Now that he had a baby and soon to be wife, I had to take into consideration how my actions would affect his life. He'd left the underworld, but Kahlil would always be attached to me because of blood.

I started to wake Kahlil up to fill him in on my meeting with Ahmad, but he looked to be getting some much-needed sleep, so I cut the TV on a low volume just to create a sound barrier around myself. I didn't really watch TV much, just sports and a few movies here and there, but I didn't like being in silence too much. It let my thoughts wander more than I would have liked for them too, and that was the last thing I needed right now. While I was confident Ahmad wouldn't be a threat, I didn't know what he would do, if anything, to try and make me come back.

What he'd said was true—I knew a lot of his secrets. A lot of the dirt and illegal things he wanted done, I did. If I was to get locked down, I could easily snitch on him to have my sentence reduced or avoid jail time altogether, but I wasn't that kind of man. I'd never snitch just to avoid accepting responsibility for my actions. The fact that Ahmad thought that was even a possibility let me know he didn't know me as well as he thought he did—even with me almost marrying his daughter.

While I waited for Kahlil to wake up, I decided to read the answers to the discussion questions I had my students to answer on our online forum. Instead of giving them homework to take home every night of the week, I devoted two class days to being spent in the computer lab so they could catch up on any work they may have been behind on. It wasn't lost on me that some of them didn't have internet access let alone the time, quiet environment, help, or peace to complete homework assignments. My students were set up to succeed, so if they failed, it was truly because they had no desire to. So far, I only had one with that failure mentality. That hopelessness that made them believe life, or education for that matter, had no value.

There were also a few knuckleheads that thought it was cool to joke around and appear to not be interested or involved in schoolwork, but I learned quickly half of them were actually the smartest in the class and weren't being challenged enough while the others were underdeveloped and needed a bit more help and private attention.

At the sound of Kahlil groaning and clearing his throat, I looked up and chuckled. He looked around the room as if he didn't even know where he was.

“I was sleep?” he asked, wiping his eyes.

“Yeah, man,” I replied through my chuckle.

“I came down here to get my charger. I don't know how long I was even down here.”

That would explain why my call went straight to voicemail when I called to let him know I was outside.

“Well, you obviously sat down and fell asleep before you even put the phone on the charger because it’s dead.”

“Damn,” he grumbled as he stood and shook his head, looking around the room with red eyes.

“You know you and Honey can take a break anytime, and I’ll watch Kay Kay, right? Mama will too. Hell, everyone will.”

Kahlil nodded as he walked over to the bar area he had customized and plugged his charger up. “I know, and I appreciate that. It’s hard to leave her though.” He smiled as he connected his phone to the charger. “The trip before the wedding and the honeymoon will be the first time we’ve been away from her. I’m looking forward to it, but I’m going to miss my baby like crazy.”

“That’s understandable, but you still need to take that time to yourself, with your wife, and with your niggas. Balance, brother. If you drain yourself, you won’t be any good for Kay Kay or anyone else.”

Kahlil sucked his teeth before giving me a playful smile. “Look at you, sounding like the big brother for a change.”

All I could do was chuckle as he came and sat back down. I couldn’t get offended because that was the truth. We were so close in age I didn’t have the chance to learn from our father and plant those things in Kahlil. We learned from him and lost him at the same time. Though Kahlil and I matured at the same time, he was forced to grow up and become more serious with life before I was. I felt pride in the moments I was able to look out for my brother and his growing family in any way possible, that was why I couldn’t wait to share my news with him.

“Get outta here with that shit,” I said, stuffing my phone back into my pocket.

“What’s up, though? You good?”

“Yeah, I’m great actually. I stopped by to share some news wit’chu, but you looked like you needed that sleep, so I didn’t want to wake you up.”

Kahlil laughed softly and nodded his head. “I did. More than I realized. But what’s up? Is this about the meeting you had today?”

“Yeah. I officially released my last client. I’m done.”

He covered his mouth with his hand, shaking his head as his eyes temporarily closed. Flopping back in his seat, Kahlil nodded compulsively.

“Don’t play with me, Tyreek.” His expression was serious as he sat up in his seat. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“Yeah, brother. I’m done. I retired today, officially.”

He blew out a whistle and grinned widely as he stood. Kahlil grabbed my hand and lifted me from my seat, pulling me in for a hug as he laughed heartily.

“I’m so proud of you, man. This is the best news I’ve gotten since I heard about my baby. I’m so, so proud of you.”

He held me tighter, and I didn’t have to see him to know he was fighting back tears. This was something that had been a long time coming. Kahlil had been out of the game for years and had been begging me to do the same. Even when he continued on with the journey books, he stopped everything else after our father died. Sure, we still had favors that we owed, but when he got out, I directed all traffic that was meant for him to me. I didn’t want my brother touching anything while he was trying to go legit.

When he released me, he squeezed his eyes, brushing away his tears in the process. I looked away and did the same. I couldn’t imagine how much relief this filled him with. Even with his legal dealings, there was still worry and concern because of my choice to stay. Now, he was finally free of that.

“How are you going to celebrate?” he asked as we sat back down. “This is monumental, and it can’t just be slipped under the rug.”

“I’m staying lowkey for now. If anything, I’ll just turn up a bit more when we get to Vegas for the joint bachelor and bachelorette parties.”

His head tilted as he eyed me skeptically. “Anyone giving you a hard time about your decision?”

My head shook as I avoided his eyes. I didn’t want him to worry about Ahmad. That was something I’d handle if necessary. “Nah, I’m good, brother. Don’t worry about me.” I returned my eyes to his as Honey knocked on the door.

“Come in,” he granted, and she quickly scurried in, holding Kayla on her hip. As soon as she saw me, her eyes widened and she gave me a gummy smile, almost hopping out of her mother’s arms to get to me. When I first arrived, Kayla was in her bed.

“Gimme my baby,” I demanded softly, holding my arms out for Kayla.

“Say hey Unkie Ty,” Honey directed, but Kayla wasn’t paying her any attention as she opened and closed her fists and giggled at the sight of me.

“Hey, shuga buga.” I took her and covered her face with kisses. “I missed you.”

As I prepared to take her upstairs so Honey and Kahlil could be alone, Honey stopped me with, “Um... I know this is probably a long shot, but have you talked to Janae?”

I turned to face her, finally taking in her worried expression. Her brows wrinkled as she nibbled on her bottom lip, frame rigid.

“Not since we called things off. Is everything okay?”

“I’m not sure. She isn’t answering her phone. I called her job and they said she didn’t come in, and you know that’s not like Nae. I’m a little worried.”

“I’ll go check on her. Do you have a key to her place?”

“Yes. I was coming down here to tell Kahlil I was gonna go and check on her myself, but...”

“Nah, I got it. Let me get the key up off you.”

“Okay,” Honey agreed softly before heading out of the room. When she returned, I gave Kahlil Kay Kay as I asked

Honey, “Do you have any idea why she might not be answering? Has she mentioned not feeling well or something?”

Honey’s head shook. “Not exactly. I have an idea of what’s going on. It’s... this week is really hard for her, especially today. This is the first time she’s ever gone ghost like this, though. Usually she just works all day, and I do mean all day, if she’s sad or upset. Last year she fell asleep in her car because she worked twenty-four hours straight. So for her to shut down like this...” Her eyes watered and she blinked rapidly as her nose flared. “Call me as soon as you get there, okay?”

I agreed before heading out. Now, she had me even more concerned. Janae and I weren’t speaking but I knew that would change soon enough because of the trip and the wedding. We weren’t necessarily friends but there were no ill feelings between us. A relationship didn’t work for us, but we’d ended things on good terms.

Honey was marrying into the family, so as long as they remained friends, we would be in each other’s lives. It was important to both of us that we always keep peace between us to not make things awkward for Kahlil and Honey, and I think that was why we held on to each other longer than we should have, knowing we weren’t making progress. Progress or not, if something was going on with Janae, I would be there for her—always.

CHAPTER 4



Janae
I heard the knocking on my door, but I didn't feel like getting up to get it. I couldn't even open my mouth to speak. All I did was close my eyes and pray whoever it was went away. More than likely, it was my parents, my brother, or Honey. They'd probably called my job after I didn't respond to their text messages and calls and decided to come and see about me. I hated making them worry, but I honestly didn't have the mental bandwidth to worry about their feelings *and* mine.

The front door opened, and my alarm system announced it. It was Honey. She was the only person that had a key to my place. She was light on her feet when she came to my room, but I heard her when she leaned against the doorframe.

"I'm fine," I said, then sniffled, hoping that would be enough to make her leave.

"Obviously you're not."

I'd never forget that voice, even though it felt like forever since I'd heard it. That deep, smooth voice that I'd been dreaming of hearing whispering in my ears again.

"Tyreek?" I almost whispered as my eyes watered all over again.

For some reason, I was happy it was him. For some reason, I wanted him to stay.

He walked over to the bed and sat on the edge of it. I didn't want him to look at me. I couldn't imagine how I looked. My eyes were swollen, I could tell. There was no telling how many dried tears were on my cheeks. My hair was probably all over my head, and I hadn't showered for at least two days. I felt the episode coming on, but I was able to push my way through it until last night.

Last night, I just couldn't take it anymore.

I didn't know what time it was, but I could tell by the sun rising and setting through my window that it had been several hours. I hadn't eaten or had anything to drink. None of that mattered to me. All I wanted to do was sleep, but all I'd been doing was crying.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked softly.

My head shook as I closed my eyes. Tears fell, but he caught them with the pads of his fingers, and that only made me cry harder.

"What can I do, Nae?"

Sniffing, I considered his request. I didn't think there was anything he could do to take this pain away from me. Could he give me my baby back? Could he remove the hurt that came from their father leaving me when he found out I was pregnant? Could he erase the relief Michael had when I told him about the miscarriage? He smiled, literally smiled. I snapped, literally snapped. I tried to beat the *shit* out of him at that moment. It was crazy how one act could show you a side of a person you didn't know existed.

Before the baby, Michael was perfect. He was romantic and caring, gentle and loving. We were talking about marriage, even going as far as ring sizing and shopping. I expected him to be happy about us having a baby on the way, but that wasn't the case. I would have been okay with him leaving if that was his desire. If I'd learned anything from my parents about relationships, it was to never hold on to a man that didn't want to be held. To not force love. To love and live freely. But there was something about him being happy about our baby being gone that... destroyed me. I'd never been one for violence, but

at that moment, I wanted to kill him, and had it not been for my parents being there when he came over, I probably would have.

After literally pummeling him with the hardcover bible that was next to me on the nightstand, I crawled into a ball and cried for hours until my throat burned and felt like it was about to close.

“Nothing,” I grumbled, pulling the covers up until they hit my chin.

“Will my presence make you feel better or worse?”

It didn’t take me long to think about it before I was replying with, “Better. But... I don’t want to talk, Tyreek.”

“Okay, we don’t have to talk.”

Nodding, I wiped my face as he stood. He did something on his phone before stepping out of his shoes and clothes. I’d seen his wide frame and muscular build enough to not be fazed by it, but it had been so long since I’d seen him in nothing but boxers that the sight was one I truly missed. Tyreek made his way behind me in bed, wrapping his arms around me.

“How long can you stay?” I asked as he entangled his fingers with mine.

“Until you tell me to leave.”

I didn’t plan to do that, but I couldn’t say that either. It was my fault that we weren’t together to begin with. He’d probably think I was crazy if I expressed how much I wanted him near me. I wasn’t exactly sure why his presence was filling me with so much peace, maybe because he’d always been a pure, loving soul. Whatever the case, I was so happy he was here.

His body molded around mine perfectly. My head rested just under his chin. Releasing a content sigh, I closed my eyes as they watered all over again.

Though I was the one who said I didn’t want to talk, I couldn’t help but say, “Thank you for stopping by.”

“Always. I told you, no matter what, I will always be here for you.”

“Can you tell Honey I’m okay?”

“I texted her and told her I had you, but I can’t lie and tell her you’re okay when it’s clear you aren’t.”

Nibbling my cheek, I considered what I wanted to say next. He was right—I *wasn’t* okay. I thought about my baby every day. Some days were harder than others. The month I lost them, though, was always the hardest. That month was always filled with hurt, anger, confusion, and grief. I’d always wanted a baby, a husband... the dog and white picket fence. It felt like God had given me hope that what I wanted was about to come to fruition just to rip it all away in an instant. I kept telling myself He’d taken my baby for a reason. Even if I never knew why, it was for a reason. That didn’t take away the anger fully, though, and I hated myself for that. Hated myself for hating *Him* for that.

I wanted to love Him just as much as I used to, but there was so much resentment stored up in my heart because of the miscarriage. I couldn’t even pray to be able to forgive Him. My baby was lent to me, not even long enough for me to hold them in my arms, but they were a loan no less. One that had always belonged to Him. While I first felt immense honor in being chosen to love and nurture my baby for Him here on earth, I felt like a failure when they died. Was my womb not strong enough to carry and birth them? Did He believe I wouldn’t be a good enough mother? My mind had begun to spiral with crazy thought after crazy thought to the point where I wasn’t thinking anything at all... just crying.

“I um... I had a miscarriage two years ago.” His arm loosened for a brief moment before he wrapped it around me even tighter. “Last year I was able to work my way through it but this year I was just... tired. I didn’t have the energy to go to work or do anything else for that matter. I haven’t been able to get out of the bed since... I don’t know when.”

“I’m so sorry, Janae. My condolences for your loss. I can’t imagine what you’re going through.”

I smiled with one side of my mouth as I pushed back my tears. “You’d think I’d be all cried out by now but that’s all I

have the strength to do.”

“Then cry. Let those tears cleanse you and heal you. Let them all out.”

I appreciated that. I appreciated the fact that he didn't try to stifle how I was feeling, offer advice, or tell me to stop crying. I rested my body against him a bit more as the tears continued to stream. He placed a kiss to the top of my head that broke me down even more. I turned in his arms, needing to feel closer to him. Needing to feel his heart on mine. Hoping that would strengthen me.

“I got you, Nae,” he whispered into my hair before kissing the top of my head again. “I got you.”

All I could do was cry harder. I didn't realize how much I needed this, needed him, until I had him.

CHAPTER 5



T yreek

Several hours had passed since I'd arrived at Janae's place. I was able to bathe her and convince her to drink a smoothie, but she didn't want any food yet. That was progress, so I would settle for it. I couldn't imagine how she was feeling, and I prayed I never did. Every person that I knew who had lost a child—either before birth or after—all expressed the same thing... that it was a hurt and loss that nothing else topped. That it was something they carried with them every day of their lives.

Instead of getting back in bed, Janae sat on the small cream loveseat by her windows. I sat in the chair next to it, wanting to give her space until she asked for my presence. Her knees were pulled up to her chest, and she had her arms wrapped around them. I never thought the first time I saw her naked would be to bathe her while she silently cried.

Janae had a natural beauty that shined through even when she was sick, tired, or depressed. Her bra strap length relaxed hair was pulled back into a low ponytail. There wasn't any makeup on her face, and even with her cinnamon brown skin, her lips, cheeks, and nose were red from all the crying she'd been doing. Her body was covered with an oversized sweatshirt, exposing nothing but her legs while her feet were covered in black tube socks.

Because of the layout of her home, including her bedroom, the open design and hardwood floors had it cold as hell. Even with her heat being on seventy-eight degrees, we still had to

turn two small space heaters on to get some warmth. The pads of my fingers were slightly shriveled, so I knew she had to be cold too. Unable to keep my distance any longer, I walked over to the loveseat and sat next to her. Pulling her into my arms, I covered her with the blanket that was tossed over the back of the sofa as she wrapped her arms around my waist. She released a quiet sigh and snuggled against me, breathing heavily against my neck.

“Have you looked into getting your vents and units checked out? It’s cold as hell in here.”

“Yes. Both units work and the vents are open. They said because my ceilings are so high and because my bedroom is positioned the way it is, it’s hard for me to get warmth and sunlight like the rest of the house. You know I’m hardly ever in here, so it usually doesn’t bother me. I have the fireplace on in the living room and that warms up the main areas. We can go upstairs to one of the guest rooms if you want. They’re closer to the sun and carpeted, so it’s cozier up there.”

“Yeah, let’s go up there.”

Janae chuckled as she sat up. “Okay.” As we stood, she asked, “Are you hungry? You don’t have to go without just because I’m not eating.”

“I’m cool for right now. I might order a pizza in a few hours.”

“You plan on staying that long?”

“I told you I’m not leaving until you tell me to.”

“Good, because I don’t want you to leave any time soon.”

I wanted to let that stroke my ego, but I couldn’t. Janae didn’t want me here because she loved me and enjoyed me; she wanted me here because she was hurting, and I made her feel better. I was honored to be that person for her, but I would have preferred her to be at peace, even if that meant it wasn’t with me.

As we walked out of her bedroom through the dining room and living room to the stairs, I held her hand. She stuck close to my side, like there was something in the house that would

harm her. As soon as we made it upstairs I immediately felt a difference in the temperature. We went into the guest bedroom that was directly across from the stairs, and it was decorated in the same brown and cream color scheme as all four bedrooms, including hers. She had a bonus room that she'd converted into a home theater and smaller room downstairs that she did her sewing and crocheting in.

It was clear she made a good living as a nurse but more than that, she seemed to manage her money well and have good credit. From her social media and the conversations she had with Honey, I could tell they used to travel a lot and be the plugs for hookups and tips on financial literacy. Those were traits I wanted my life partner to have. Though I made damn good money with all of my endeavors, I wanted someone who appreciated what I had to offer, not just someone who would blow it. I believed women were incubators and influencers. That they would increase whatever you gave them—good or bad.

“You know... that doesn't sound too bad. I wouldn't mind having some cheese sticks from Pizza Hut,” Janae said as we got comfortable in the bed.

I handed her the remote while I told her, “I'll order it then. Do you want wings too?”

Her head shook. “Nah. I don't want to say too much and not be able to really eat. I'll just stick with the cheese sticks.”

I nodded in agreement but decided to order a large supreme pizza and some boneless buffalo wings as well as the cheese sticks. Hopefully when she saw it and started eating, she'd realize how hungry and empty she was, even if she didn't have an appetite.

It didn't surprise me that she turned on one of her comfort shows, *The Golden Girls*. While we didn't know everything about each other or have sex while we were dating, we knew the basics and a few random things that were exposed during our time together. She was a year younger than me at thirty-four, and she was the youngest of two. I hadn't met her brother, Jason, before, but I figured they were close because he

either called or texted her while we were together for casual conversation. Both of her parents were still alive and together. Janae was a full-time nurse, but she used to sell the quilts she would sew and some crocheted purses that were unique as hell. Because of her schedule, she hadn't been doing much of either lately.

I knew that she loved watching series and 90s shows when she had time along with cycling. She also loved shopping for herself and others too. While I preferred reading paperbacks, Janae was an audiobook girl which made sense because of her schedule. Other than our love for reading, we didn't really have any of the same hobbies. I loved going to the casino or clubbing every weekend.

I also had a healthy appreciation for beautiful women, which was why my gentlemen's club offered private dancing on Wednesdays and Sundays. Other than that, it was a typical men's only social club for sports, games, and networking. What we did have in common was our love for novelty and fun, which was why I thought we would get along so well when we first met. Unfortunately, though, her past and schedule made it difficult for us to make the most of our time together.

We watched two episodes before the food was delivered, and thankfully, she ended up eating two cheese sticks, two wings, and a slice of pizza. I went down to the kitchen to put what was leftover on the stove, and when I returned, Janae said, "I guess I can tell you about my ex now and why it's been so difficult for me to let you in."

I had been curious about it, but I didn't want to pressure her. I knew she'd tell me in her own time.

"Only if you're ready, Nae."

Janae ran her hands up and down her thighs before exhaling a hard breath. "I think it's time. Maybe it'll help."

"I'm sure it will."

She nodded, crossing her ankles and lowering the volume on the TV.

“Our relationship was great until I told him I was pregnant,” she started, avoiding my eyes. “When I told him, I saw a side of him that I didn’t know was there.” Janae chuckled softly, voice breaking, but she didn’t cry. “He talked all this shit about how I was trying to trap him and that he wasn’t ready to be a father, then he left. I was blocked on all social media, and he changed his number. Two months later, I lost the baby. I hadn’t planned on telling him, but I posted about it on my social media and someone who knows him told him. He came over, and I thought it was to comfort me and admit how fucked up he’d handled the situation, but he was happy the baby was gone and that we could get back to us.” She scoffed, and I felt my anger rising. “I tried to bash his fucking skull in, with a hardcover bible at that.”

“He didn’t put his hands on you, did he?”

Her head shook as she finally met my eyes. “Not at all. My parents were there, and they pulled me off him.”

I took her hand into mine. “I’m sorry you had to go through that. What was supposed to be a beautiful moment had already turned ugly and having to experience that only made it worse, I’m sure.”

“Exactly. Like... I didn’t want a baby at that time either, but once I accepted the fact that I was pregnant, I fell in love with my baby instantly. I knew I was shifting into a territory that would require a lot of help, and knowing I’d gotten pregnant by a man who wouldn’t be in the baby’s life was enough to deal with, but I accepted it and trusted I’d be able to handle it with my family’s help. Then to lose the baby, on top of Michael’s rejection and abandonment... it just made it feel like it was all for nothing. And the disrespect of him coming back with that bullshit...”

Her head shook again as she pulled her hand from under mine. “The whole ordeal was devastating, to say the least. The way Michael handled me ripped me of my safety and security in that relationship. My control. I felt like a failure because I’d chosen such a horrible man to love, and honestly, I just don’t want to go through that pain again. People can switch up at

any moment... leave at any moment... I don't want to go through that again."

I didn't know if this was a moment that she needed to simply vent or if she needed my reassurance that she was wrong. That all men weren't the same. Because I wanted to give her exactly what she needed, I couldn't help but ask, "What do you need from me right now? To just accept your truth and experience or actually respond?"

Her smile was soft as she scratched the back of her head. "I know you're going to tell me all men aren't the same and that I shouldn't close myself off to love because of what he did. I know that in my mind, but my heart doesn't care about that reasoning. I am a very rational thinker, but when it comes to my feelings, I can be irrational as hell. My heart and mind aren't as connected as I wished they would be, and my heart doesn't give a fuck about what my mind knows. All it knows is that it was hurt by a man I trusted with it, and I don't know if I'll ever be able to come back from that."

"Do you want to?" A few seconds passed as she thought my question over, so I continued. "If you don't want to try to love again, I understand, but if you do... I think you have a better chance at it than you realize."

She chuckled softly with a shake of her head. "If God is love, I seriously doubt He'll bless me with it. I'm upset with Him, and I don't even know what to do with that."

"Nae," I called softly, taking her hand into mine. "You have every right to feel how you feel. You have every right to be angry, resentful, confused, hurt, whatever. Question Him about it. Seek clarity. He knows what you're thinking and how you're feeling even if you don't say it. At least, by getting it out, you release those ill feelings from your mind."

"But I just..." Her tears began to fall again, and she huffed as she wiped her face. "I feel bad for even feeling like that. I want to get to a place where I'm at peace and trusting Him again. Not blaming Him or resenting Him. Where I know even if it's something that hurts me and doesn't feel like it's for my good... it's for His. But I don't even know where to begin."

“Awareness.” My mind took me back to when my father was first killed. The anger. The hurt. The confusion. The denial. The resentment. I felt it all. “Then you have conversations. With yourself. With God. The order is up to you, but then comes healing and forgiveness. For some, forgiveness is the first step to healing. For others, healing is a sign of forgiveness. Either way, both are needed for the peace you seek.”

“How was it for you?”

“I had to heal a little first, and that came through doing some mental and emotional work. Then, I had to forgive myself, God, and the men that took my father from me. I had to forgive my brother for not being in that car. Then I had to forgive my dad for being in the car.” I laughed softly. “I had to ask for my father’s forgiveness for being grateful that my brother was still alive. I was all over the fucking place. I was upset about losing him but glad my father was alive some days, then other days I’d be resentful that my brother was alive and wished my father was here, though I didn’t want my brother to be in his place. I wanted them both here, and struggling with that filled me with a lot of confusion.”

“How did you get clarity? Peace?”

“By realizing it was beyond my control. That it was already done, and nothing could be done to change it. There was no point in me wishing and hoping for anything different because my father was gone. I had to accept that to make peace and just be grateful that I had him for as long as I did, you know?”

“That’s just it. I didn’t get to even hold my baby, Tyreek.”

“You held them every second they were alive.” Her eyes blinked rapidly and lips parted slightly. “You held them every second they were alive,” I repeated. “And now, you’ll always have them in your heart. I know the pain of preparing for that baby that never came will probably follow you all the days of your life, but I want you to remember something I learned about grief—it’s like a body of water. An ocean. Sometimes it’s calm and cleansing; sometimes it overwhelms and

destroys. The only thing you can do, Janae, is learn how to swim. I'm not going to sit here and tell you you'll stop grieving and that peace will be found easy. All I'm going to tell you is that I'm here, and I promise I'll help you swim."

I wasn't expecting her to crawl into my lap, but when she did, I wrapped her into my arms as she buried her face in my neck. Whether we had a title or not, I was going to help her with the ebb and flow of her grief for as long as she would allow me to.

CHAPTER 6



Janae
By Monday morning, I was unwillingly releasing Tyreek. He'd spent the entire weekend with me, and words couldn't express how much I appreciated him for that. There were moments we'd talk, watch TV, or listen to music, and there were others where we'd just sit or lay in silence. When I needed space, he'd give it to me, and when I needed him close, he gave me that too. Though he offered to get a substitute for his class, I insisted that he leave. He'd put his life on hold for me long enough; I didn't want him to miss out on work too.

As I walked him to the door, I resisted the urge to ask him to stay. He would if I did, so I kept my mouth shut. Besides, I needed time to myself. Time with my thoughts now that I felt raw and empty of my feelings. Clarity was on the horizon, and soon, I'd be able to function with society again. The pain wouldn't go away, and neither would thoughts of my baby, but I'd be able to be around people and not randomly sob.

"You know I'm only a phone call away, right?" Tyreek reminded, leaning against the front door.

"I know, and I really appreciate you for that. Thank you for being here for me, Tyreek."

"Always. Call me if you need me."

With a nod, I extended my arms and pulled him down to me for a hug. It was warm and calming, as always. After placing a kiss on the top of my head, Tyreek opened the door

and left, and not even a few seconds later... I was missing him already.

A pout formed against my lips as I trudged back to my bedroom, grabbing my phone for the first time in days. Tyreek was keeping my family updated through Honey, which I appreciated. I knew they would want to hear my voice to know I was truly okay, but I still wasn't ready for that just yet. I did, however, text everyone and let them know I was starting to feel more like myself and would reach out soon. Instead of getting back in my bed, I went upstairs to the guest bedroom Tyreek and I had been occupying. He'd only left once, and that was to pack a bag.

My sheets and pillows still smelled like him. Pulling one close, I held it tightly and inhaled a deep whiff of his scent, hoping sleep and peace would find me soon.



One Week Later

I was surprised when Tyreek called and asked if he could stop by. He'd texted me a few times to make sure I was okay throughout the week, but when I said I was, our conversations ended. I didn't blame him. For months he'd pursued me and there was no progress. Looking back on it, I could admit that I'd allowed what happened with Michael to keep me from feeling safe with men over the past two years. More than anything, I had no desire to try and trust someone else again. Sure, I would always say I wanted true love and a family, but knowing there was a risk of falling for the wrong man would always linger in the back of my mind and keep me from truly trying to have a healthy relationship.

Admittedly, I thought things with Tyreek would be different. He was such a loving, kind soul. A true gentleman. But he had that rough side and street vibe that excited me. Though we never had sex, I could tell by his energy that he knew how to work his dick. When he bathed me, he kept his

boxers on, but I'd felt it enough times while we cuddled to know he was working with something serious.

Tyreek was handsome, educated, financially stable, and all about commitment. Every time I would think about the way I didn't take advantage of having him because of my past, all I could do was shake my head and curse myself. I knew there were millions of fish in the sea, but Tyreek was the kind of fish you didn't let get away. I *had* let him get away, though, and I had to accept that. Accept the fact that there would come a time in the future where he'd move on, fall in love, and give another woman the future he wanted to have with me.

Because of how rough I felt and looked when we last saw each other, I tried to put a bit more effort into my appearance tonight. Even with it being a little after ten, I still put on a little mascara and lip gloss. Instead of putting on clothes, I kept on the bone-colored two-piece SKIMS set I had and added a few sprays of vanilla body mist. Typically, I didn't wear heavy perfumes before bed, but I'd put on a fruit or gourmand scented body mist faithfully.

When I heard the doorbell ring, I set my phone on the nightstand and headed to let him in. He'd told me he was coming from his club. There was no telling what he wanted to talk to me about. I wasn't worried about him drinking and wanting to have sex or confess more feelings for me. Tyreek wasn't that kind of man. If anything, he'd avoid me while he was inebriated before he said or did something drunk that he wouldn't say or do sober.

As soon as I opened the door and laid eyes on him, I couldn't help but smile. Relationship or not, Tyreek Roberts was fine as hell. He was a few inches taller than me, and he had a medium sized, muscular build. I loved his caramel brown skin tone and thick skin-colored lips. He had a mini afro with tapered, shaved sides, and it connected with a thick, long beard that I used to love gripping before giving him a kiss. Most often, he was dressed in slacks or a suit, and tonight was no different. The charcoal gray slacks and blazer looked like they were made just to fit his frame.

I didn't think I'd ever seen him wear stud earrings, but he almost always had on one to three necklaces or chains. Tonight, he had on a gold cross necklace trio set that hung in three different lengths. Resisting the urge to hug him, I pulled my arms behind my back and cupped my hands together.

"Hi," I greeted, mirroring his smile.

"You weren't sleep, were you?"

"No, come in."

I stepped to the side, allowing him entrance. Tyreek walked over to the living room, taking off his blazer and getting comfortable in the recliner loveseat that he seemed to favor. I sat on the sectional directly across from the mounted flat screen TV and fireplace.

"Are you bringing someone to Vegas?" he asked, getting straight to the point.

When Honey first told me she and Kahlil were doing a co-ed trip before the wedding I was a little nervous. I didn't know how things were going to be between Tyreek and I. Aside from Kayla's birth, me and Tyreek had done a great job avoiding each other. Before I went over to see them, I made sure they were alone to avoid outright asking if Tyreek was around. Now that we'd seen each other and spent a little time together, I was less nervous about things being awkward between us, but I was glad he brought up the topic of bringing someone else. It was one thing to be around him and the crew... but him with another woman?

"Are you?" I countered.

"I'm not if you're not. I was with the guys, chilling, and they brought it up. Figured I'd ask. See how you wanted to handle this."

I loved that about him. He was always so thoughtful and considerate. Smiling softly, I pulled my right leg up and folded it underneath me.

"I hadn't planned on bringing anyone unless you did. I wouldn't want to see you having fun with another woman and I be by myself. I'm not ready for that yet." I paused, not

wanting to tell him that I didn't think I'd *ever* be ready for that.

Tyreek leaned forward slightly with a playful grin lifting the left side of his mouth. "Is that your way of saying you want to have fun with me?"

"Depends on what kind of fun you're trying to have."

Lord knows I needed some relief. I hadn't had sex since Michael, and I was in desperate need of some fun and affection. Still, I wasn't quite sure if it was wise to get those things from Tyreek. I felt like I'd lucked out the first time around when I released him. It didn't hurt as much as I thought it would. If we spent the week together and truly enjoyed ourselves, would it be as easy to let him go when we got back home?

His eyes scanned my frame before he sat back, resting his ankle atop his knee. His arms stretched out, exposing his wide chest. God. Every little thing this man did drove me *crazy*.

"It is Vegas, Janae. I'm not interested in any kind of fun that has rules."

"So..."

"Parties, adventurous shit, smoking and drinking, trying new restaurants, sex..."

"Sex?" I repeated quickly, voice a little higher and squeakier than I'd anticipated.

"Lots of sex. Nasty, wet, drugging sex."

My pointer and thumb fingers rubbed my ring finger, a movement I often did when I was thinking something over.

"As just friends? Are we really about to be that cliché?"

Tyreek finally gave me a full smile. "After the time we spent together, I've come to understand and respect your stance more. I've finally accepted, fully, that we will never be in a relationship. That doesn't mean that I don't want to experience you in any way I can, though. I think you deserve to let loose and enjoy yourself for a change." He shrugged and licked his lips. "I'd love to help you do that."

For some reason, the sound of him giving up on us made my heart squeeze. We'd already called it quits, but this seemed more... final.

"I agree, I do need to unwind and have some fun. My only concern is how things would be when we made it back home. Would we be able to go back to how we are, or would we want more?"

"Would wanting more be such a bad thing?" Before I could respond, Tyreek was standing to leave. "Just think it over. No pressure. Regardless of what you decide, I hope you allow yourself to truly have fun in Vegas. You deserve it."

With a nod, I watched him leave. I didn't deserve to have fun just for a week in Vegas; I deserved to have fun every day of my life. Before Michael, I made sure I did things that gave me peace and happiness. I thrived in freedom and fun. There weren't too many days throughout the week where I wasn't going out and trying something new or hanging with my family or my crew. It was crazy how I'd allowed someone to change so much about me. There was no doubt in my mind that he was out living his best life; meanwhile, I was out working mine away.

They said what happened in Vegas stayed in Vegas, so I would commit to enjoying myself. But I was also going to do whatever it took to make sure that when I came back home, I had the courage to start returning to the old Janae. I'd allowed grief and guilt and pain to consume me long enough. It was time for me to finally live again.

CHAPTER 7



T yreek
Day 1

“Can’t take you niggas *nowhere!*” Haley, Hosea’s sister, complained with a teasing voice and smile.

I was happy she’d come because Antonne didn’t bring Christina with him, and I was hoping something would pop off between the two of them. He was faithful and Haley didn’t have side chick energy, but who knows? Maybe their time together would motivate him to leave Christina’s ass alone. I believed Antonne knew he was better off without Christina, but he was such a standup guy that he wouldn’t leave her without just cause, especially while she was so reliant upon him financially.

“I’m not surprised by Damien’s antics, but Janae really surprised me,” Cartier replied, looping her arm around Haley’s.

“What did I do?” Janae asked innocently before tugging her bottom lip between her teeth as she smiled.

“Girl!” Honey yelled before laughing. “Your ass passed out on the damn zip line!”

“So! It’s not like I did it on purpose. Damien was the one up there playing dead, scaring those little kids!”

We all laughed as we continued to walk and take in our surroundings. I’d come to Vegas several times, but I mostly just stayed on the strip. This was the first time we’d come to

the downtown area or done the ziplines at SlotZilla for that matter, and it was a hilarious experience to put it mildly.

The whole crew was with us, and while at least half of us had been able to do both lines with no issues, a few of their asses were anxious because of their fear of heights, like we hadn't come here on planes. Then there was Damien and Antonne, the jokesters out of the crew, who acted a fool the whole time they were up there. Like Janae said, Damien played dead, while Antonne pretended to surf while throwing up gang signs.

I laughed the whole time their crazy asses were up there, but Janae had me worried sick. I couldn't laugh at her until she was awake and down safely. The shit was funny as hell, though, because every time she regained consciousness and realized she was so high in the air, she'd yell and pass out all over again.

"Y'all leave 'er alone," I demanded playfully, pulling Janae into my side.

"I'm just tryna figure out how she was so afraid up there but was fine on the plane," Saint wondered, chuckling and shaking his head as he took Harmony's hand into his.

"First of all, I was drunk and sleep on the plane," Janae clarified, rolling her eyes and her neck. "And second, on the plane, I was in an enclosed space, not dangling in the air."

"Yeah, but you was over thirty thousand feet in the air, sis," Honey said.

"Don't say that. She ain't gon' wanna fly home," I told her, making them laugh, though I was dead serious.

"Listen, I'll drive back if necessary," Janae said, and I had to keep myself from telling her I'd drive with her. Regardless of today, her ass wasn't going to drive all the way back to Memphis. She didn't have the patience.

"Well, that was definitely an experience," Denali said as she wrapped her arm around Elite.

"You ain't even go up there!" Kahlil countered.

“Trust me, I had the time of my life watching and laughing at y’all crazy asses.”

As they continued to talk and walk, Janae and I slowed down our pace. She was looking beautiful as always, and I was happy to see a more relaxed and carefree version of her. She and Honey would always talk about the fun they used to have, but I hadn’t seen that side of her since we met because of her work schedule. This side of Janae was refreshing, and I really hoped she stayed this way even when we made it home.

She was dressed in a spaghetti strapped shirt with an oversized flannel, shorts, tube socks, and a fly ass pair of burgundy and cream Nikes that matched the flannel. It was in the mid-sixties, which was hot compared to the thirty-degree weather we were dealing with back home. Her long, silky hair was pulled into a high bun, exposing her pretty ass cinnamon brown face. She wasn’t wearing any makeup, and honestly, she didn’t need any, though it did always highlight her beauty.

“You good?” I checked. Even though we were all joking, I had to make sure she was okay.

“Yeah, I’m good.” She looked up at me with those beautiful, slanted, light brown eyes. “I pass out on rollercoasters too, so I figured that would happen.”

Janae said it so nonchalantly I couldn’t help but laugh. “Wait, are you serious? You just go around passing out when you’re in the air?” She nodded. “Then why did you do it?”

“I figured it would be fun,” she replied with a smile and shrug, making me laugh even harder.

“Was it?”

“I wouldn’t know. I was passed out half the time I was up there, but at least y’all had fun laughing at me.”

“Nah, that wasn’t fun for me at all. I was too worried about you to find amusement in that. Now when I did know you were straight, that shit was funny as hell.”

“Aww, you were worried about me, Reek?” Janae took my hand into hers.

“Of course I was worried about you.”

She looked up at me but didn't say anything, just smiled. We continued to walk with a slowed, silent pace behind the crew. I wasn't sure what was going to happen between us this week, but I was with whatever. When I went to see Janae a few nights ago, I meant what I'd said. I understood why she wasn't trying to be in a relationship with me or anyone else for that matter. What she'd gone through was traumatic, and until she dealt with that, she wouldn't trust herself with me or anyone else. I would never downplay that or try to rush it, so I was willing to get whatever I could out of her—even if that was just a week of fun before we returned to our friendship.

CHAPTER 8



Janae
Our first day in Vegas had been a blast. It was just like old times with me and Honey, and having everyone else with us only increased the fun and excitement. As much fun as I had with the crew, I was glad to be alone with Tyreek. When he invited me to cancel my hotel reservation and stay in his suite, I happily agreed.

Tyreek had a one-bedroom sky loft at MGM Grand, and both it and the outside view were absolutely beautiful. It was decorated simply in shades of brown, tan, and mustard. I absolutely loved the infinity edge spa tub and immersion steam shower and figured I'd be spending at least a good hour in the bathroom a couple of times a day, especially since there was a TV in front of the tub.

While I didn't really have a plan for what I expected to happen between me and Tyreek, I was down for whatever. After things ended between us, I wasn't willing to let a whole week with him go to waste. All I could do was pray I had the strength to let him go and not feel possessive of him when this was over. Though he said he wouldn't pursue me anymore, I felt like if I told him I wanted more, he'd give in to me, but I wouldn't do that to him or anyone else until I knew for sure that I was ready.

I think a lot of women struggled with understanding just how much power they truly had when it came to men and relationships. Yes, a lot of men initiated things, but we had the power to invite them to and decline when they did. Even with

marriage, it appeared men had the power because they chose when to propose, but it was up to the woman to say yes or no. I would follow Tyreek's lead this week and beyond, but I was fully aware of the fact that he couldn't lead me anywhere I didn't want to go.

At the sound of my phone chiming, I grabbed it off the tan side table. While Tyreek showered, I was in the living room area watching TV. Well, staring at the TV since I wasn't paying it much attention. Honey had texted me, and as soon as I read it, I chuckled.

Bess Fran: Sooo... y'all had sex yet? ☐

Ma'am. You're the one who's supposed to be having all the sex. Where your man at anyway?

Bess Fran: Chile, sleep! I'm about to go soon but I had to check and see if Tyreek made some shake yet ☺

Honey. Get your ass off my phone! Even if we did have sex I wouldn't tell you!

Bess Fran: Stop lying! You're going to tell me as soon as it happens.

I covered my face as I giggled. She was telling the *whole* truth.

Okay, I won't deny that. I told you I'm not planning or forcing anything. If it happens it'll happen, but it hasn't happened yet. We've just been chilling.

When she didn't respond, I figured she'd laid down and gone to sleep. That was one thing I could say about the both of them. Now that Kayla was here, it didn't take long for either of them to fall asleep, and it didn't matter if they were sitting or laying down. All it took was a minute of quiet with their eyes closed and they'd be knocked out.

Not long after my best friend fell asleep on me, Tyreek was coming out of the bedroom. I tried not to stare at him while he walked over to me, but it was hard not to make up for lost time. It didn't help that he was looking good as hell, shirtless, in a pair of black basketball shorts. He sat next to me,

allowing me to take in his scent—citrusy, spicy, fresh. His arm wrapped around me casually, pulling me into his side.

“Did you want to get into something else tonight or are we chilling?”

“I think I’m in for the night. I know a few couples are going to a few casinos, but I want to rest so I can have some energy tomorrow.”

“Same. I don’t usually do too much the first day if we spend too much time traveling.”

“Right. We spent like half the day in airports and on flights.”

Tyreek looked at the side of my face. I didn’t turn to look at him immediately, but when I did, his eyes lowered to my lips.

“Something on your mind?” I asked quietly, since it was clear he wasn’t going to say anything.

“Just... happy to be with you.”

That made me smile.

“I’m happy to be with you too.”

Our lips locked, and though this wasn’t the first time we kissed, it felt new. So new I felt myself weakening against him with each stroke of his tongue. Tyreek moaned into my moan before pulling away to say, “Nae... I have self-control, but if we’re not about to have sex, I need to have the discipline to control how far this foreplay goes.”

I straddled him. “I thought we were having deep, nasty sex?”

“You sure you ready for that?”

“Yes, Reek,” I agreed with a nod, ignoring my heart telling me to slow things down. We only had a week, and I wanted to make the most out of every day that we had.

Instead of taking me on the couch, Tyreek carried me into the bedroom. He undressed me, complimenting me on my body, my waist beads, and my spine tattoo.

“I didn’t think you would ever give me you, but I’m grateful you are, and I’m going to make sure you don’t regret it.”

Before I could reply, Tyreek was silencing me by placing the softest kisses against my thighs. It had been two years at this point. As desperate as I was for intimacy at times, I was proud of myself for waiting. And I was also pleased with the man I’d chosen to break my celibacy with. Not just because I knew Tyreek would make my body feel good, but because he made my heart and soul feel good too.

When he finally made his way to my pussy, I thought I was going to cum almost immediately. All the vibrators and dildos in the world didn’t compare to the warmth of having a man’s body be the reason for your pleasure. And Tyreek was definitely providing pleasure. Holding onto my waist beads, he licked, sucked, and slurped my clit until my legs were shaking as I came.

“You taste so good, Nae,” he moaned into my pussy as he stared up at me. “And you’re so fucking sexy.” Tyreek’s hands slipped up my stomach to my breasts. He massaged, caressed, and tweaked my nipples as he licked me into another quick orgasm. Then, his left hand went to my neck while the right lowered between my legs. I didn’t know what I was expecting, but him circling my clit and fingering my pussy while he licked my ass hole was not it. Warmth shot through me as my toes curled and back arched. At that point, I couldn’t even moan. All I could do was pull in choppy breaths and try not to squirt in his face. I knew I was about to fail when I felt that puddle at my core. Before my cum came gushing out, I tried to scoot up, but Tyreek’s hand went from my throat to my waist and he held me in place.

“I’m going to squirt,” I warned him, trying to hold it back, but I couldn’t.

Instead of replying with words, Tyreek tightened his grip on me. My entire body convulsed as I came and squirted. He waited until I was done to lift himself. My breathing was ragged as tremors shot through me.

“Damn, Nae. You gave it all, huh?”

The sexy chuckle he released had me biting down on my bottom lip as my body continued to shake. He stood and wiped his head and face then grabbed a condom. I watched as he pushed his boxers and basketball shorts down, and his dick was just as long and thick as I imagined it would be. No curve at the tip, just straight fucking *pipe*. My legs closed and opened in anticipation as I licked my lips. I was going to have a field day sucking his shit.

When he got back in bed, I scooted up and away from the puddle he'd created underneath me.

“Are you ready for more, or do you need a break?” he asked.

I was drained and felt like I needed a break, but I couldn't deny him that way, not after all the pleasure he'd given me.

“I want more,” was my answer, and Tyreek wasted no time lowering himself to me and placing himself at my opening.

As anxious as I was to feel him, I was also a little nervous because it had been so long. I didn't have to be though. Tyreek took his time with me, slowly stretching me and filling me to the hilt. His strokes were slow and soft, though long and deep. He kissed me constantly, begging me to breathe. When he was sure I'd gotten used to the feel of him inside of me, he sped up slightly, still keeping a slow, steady rhythm.

Tyreek lifted himself up slightly, staring into my eyes as my lips trembled.

He was so fucking sexy.

Just looking from him to his wet dick as it hid itself inside of me was enough to make me cum.

I wrapped my legs tighter around him, feeling my pussy leak even more.

He moaned my name, burying his face in my neck. My hands went to his back, scratching and squeezing and pulling him deeper until I came.

Tyreek lifted himself and picked me up off the bed, rocking me back and forth against his dick with a harder stroke.

“Shit!” I cried out before whimpering, holding on to his neck for dear life. “Oh my God,” I moaned, head flinging back. “Yessss, Tyreek.”

He released a throaty moan before grunting a low, “Fuck,” as his strokes sped up. His grip on me remained tight as his movements became more sporadic. Between his moans combining with my panting and his dick rubbing against my spot with each stroke, I knew it wouldn’t be long before I was cumming again...

CHAPTER 9



T yreek
Day 2

We all watched, danced, and rapped along as Saint performed. Technically, he wasn't supposed to be performing because of his contract, but tonight, he didn't give a fuck about none of that shit. Every time we came to Vegas and hit the clubs, if anyone found out Saint was in the building, they would beg him to perform. I was glad he was able to have this moment because I couldn't imagine how hard it had been for him to live without his music. From what my brother shared with me, Harmony had an idea to get the rights back to his music, but until it happened, I wasn't going to get my hopes up. Tristan was a stubborn, bitter ass woman. It was going to take a hell of a lot for her to release him.

"He looks so good up there!" Harmony cheered, to which we all agreed.

He was like a bird out of a cage, finally free.

As soon as Saint had completed his set and came from off the stage, Janae was saying, "Let's take a shot!"

Most of the women groaned except for Harmony and Nicole, Supreme's wife, which didn't surprise me. Their asses could hang with us easily. Denali could too but she'd hung back at the room. Elite came out, though, and it was nice for the entire crew to be together. Because of our schedules, we were rarely able to travel together as a collective.

“When is your ass going back to work?” Haley asked, and we all laughed.

“Fuck that. I love this side of sis,” Hosea countered, shoving his sister closer to the table playfully in the process.

“I love it too,” I admitted, lowering my hand to squeeze her ass. Now that we’d finally had sex, it was even more difficult for me to keep my hands off her. As I expected, her pussy was phenomenal. Beyond the actual physical act, I enjoyed connecting with Janae on a deeper level and becoming one with her.

“It’s been a long time coming,” Janae replied, shooting me a wink as she lifted her glass. “Here’s to Saint for the amazing performance and for Honey and Kahlil, the reason we’re even here. Congratulations again, you two, on my Kayla Pooh and for getting married in exactly eight days. I pray you all have a blessed, abundant, loving marriage protected by God and filled with everything you desire and deserve!”

“Asé!” I said before everyone else agreed and released a chorus of, “Salud!”

We all tapped our glasses on the table then took them to the head. It wasn’t long before they were trying to get Saint back on the stage, but he declined. We were getting ready to grab some weed and edibles before going to another club. I didn’t plan on getting cross faded tonight because I wanted to enjoy my alone time with Janae when we got back to the suite.

A lot of the activities we had planned were for the entire group except for the times and days Kahlil and Honey had decided to do their own thing. We were here for them, so everyone pretty much agreed to stick together. So far, Denali being pregnant was the only thing that kept her and Elite from participating in certain activities, which I could respect. I was looking forward to us having another baby in the family, and I didn’t want her doing anything to jeopardize her or the baby’s health.

“I’m hungry as fuck,” Antonne announced, rubbing his stomach.

“Of course, you are. Your ass been smoking all damn day,” Saint replied, taking the blunt from him.

“Hell yeah. He the reason we gotta go re-up now,” Damien added. “I thought the bags we had would last us at least three days. His ass went through the shit all-fucking-ready.”

“What y’all expect? His tolerance is high as hell. Of course he’s going to have to smoke all day to feel the effects of the one or two blunts y’all smoke,” Haley replied, and I wasn’t sure if she’d noticed she was taking up for him or not.

“Tell ’em, stink,” Antonne replied, and I chuckled when she rolled her eyes.

“I told you not to call me that.”

“You told me not to call you baby or pooh, so what else you want me to call you?”

“Haley works just fine, thank you.”

“Aight... Haley.” The way he enunciated each syllable of her name had me and Kahlil locking eyes and shaking our heads before we chuckled.

“If y’all don’t just get together already,” Hosea said, linking his fingers with Cartier’s.

“That man in a whole relationship,” Haley replied, moving from between Antonne and Hosea to the other side of Cartier. Even with everyone in our crew getting along, we still had our little clicks. Haley and Cartier were really close which made sense because Cartier was with her brother Hosea. Honey and Janae were locked in naturally, but Harmony had joined them to create a trio instead of a duo, and Nicole and Denali were like two peas in a pod.

They all were my brothers, but Kahlil and I were closest, as to be expected. I think I was closest to Antonne and Elite outside of him, though. Those were the two I hung with a few times out of the week, but I would kick it with everyone else on the weekend.

“How you feeling?” I asked Kahlil low enough for only him to hear. When he first told me that he was going to

propose to Honey, my first question was what the hell had taken him so long. I knew they were going to get married the first time he talked to me about her. His tone, expression, and word selection were different with her compared to the other women he'd dealt with. And when I spent time with Honey while he was taking care of business, I gained confidence that she could give him the love he had for her in return.

"I'm feeling good, brother," he replied, eyes glossy from the alcohol he'd consumed. "I'm with my people to celebrate marrying the love of my life. Only thing that could make this moment better is having Pops here with us."

My gaze was unfocused as I smiled slightly while sadness filled me. Kahlil recovered quickly, masking his sadness with a genuine smile.

"What's up with you and Janae? Something is different."

I shrugged, lowering my head to hide my grin. Felt like she had a nigga blushing and shit. "Something *is* different."

He stared at the side of my face for a few seconds before realization set in. When it did, his eyes widened and mouth hung open before he wrapped his arm around my neck and pulled me away from the crew.

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"We haven't committed but we did have sex. And that shit was the best I ever had. I'm even more sprung now."

Kahlil chuckled, and I smiled, but my statement was true. "So what are you going to do, Tyreek? You *know* she doesn't want to be in a relationship."

"I know she doesn't and I'm not on that with her anymore. Right now, I'm just focused on making sure we both have a good time."

"Yeah, but are you going to be content with that when we get back home?"

I looked back at her, smiling at the sight of her talking to Honey and Harmony while she looked at me. They were probably having the same conversation we were. Men swore

they didn't gossip as much as women did, but we did, and thoroughly enjoyed that shit too.

“I'll release her if she wants me to.”

“And what about you want?”

“If I put her first, I'll get what I want too. I'm confident about that. The better I treat her, the better God will bless me. If He decides there's someone better for me than her, my new woman will be my reward. If not, I'll get Nae when the time is right.”

“That's what I love to hear,” he said, dapping me up.

It wasn't lost on me that he and a few others believed I'd given up on Janae too easily. They weren't the ones struggling with her lack of effort the way I was though. Did I believe we could have a healthy relationship? Absolutely. But the right love at the wrong time was just as toxic as being with someone who was no good for you. Regardless of how much I wanted Janae, things wouldn't work until we were on the same page, and I had a feeling this trip was going to speed up that process.

CHAPTER 10



Janae
I knew my ass was good and drunk when I started trying to fuck Tyreek in front of everybody. We'd gone to this day party that had all of us drunk off mimosas. It hit me out of nowhere, and before I could stop myself, I was gripping his dick and kissing his neck like we weren't in a public place. Thankfully, it didn't take us long to get back to the suite, and as soon as the door closed behind us, I was pressing him against it and getting down on my knees.

"Look at me, Nae," he moaned, holding the sides of my head as he slowly fucked my mouth. "You look so pretty sucking this dick."

My brows bunched and I moaned as my clit throbbed. I wanted to rub it so bad, but I didn't want to let up on his pleasure, so I denied myself.

When his head flung back and mouth opened, I knew it wouldn't be long before he came.

"Mm," he moaned before releasing a sizzling breath. His hips began to circle as he grabbed my hair and looked down at me. Stomach clenching, Tyreek whispered a low, "Fuck," before trying to pull himself out of me, but I grabbed his thighs and kept him in place.

Gagging with watery eyes and all, I wasn't letting him move until his seeds were down my throat. When he realized that, he gave me that sexy grin before biting down on his bottom lip as he moaned. He cursed under his breath as his

dick throbbed inside of my mouth. I stood and wiped my mouth. Tyreek gripped me by my jaw and pulled me close for a kiss that had my pussy throbbing and clit swelling even more.

He lifted me up and carried me over to the couch, where we didn't bother undressing fully before I was sliding the condom down and taking him inside of me.

"I love this side of you," he confessed, gripping my waist as I rode him with a medium pace.

"And I love having you inside of me."

Tyreek smacked my ass, getting a moan out of me. I could tell he was reaching his peak when he started trying to switch our positions, but I wouldn't let up. When I was drunk, I liked to be in control. I gripped his neck, choking him slightly.

"Cum," I demanded, getting a growl out of him that had my toes curling.

"Nae..." Tyreek begged.

"Cum in my pussy, Tyreek. Now."

"Fuck!" he damn near roared, holding me close as his dick throbbed inside of me. I continued to ride him, slower now, as my own orgasm began to build.

I hugged him tightly as my lips trembled. "Shit," I stretched, digging my nails into the back of his head. My movements grew sporadic, giving him a chance to roll me over, spread my legs, and pummel me with deep strokes that made it difficult for me to breathe...



Day 3

The men were together, and the women were together. We'd done a hell of a lot of shopping, to the point where we'd have to check our luggage this time around and had a great spa day before grabbing a bite to eat. Now, we were chilling back at Honey and Kahlil's suite talking and

reflecting. I couldn't believe how much fun I was having and how little my desire to return to work had been plaguing me. While I absolutely loved what I did, there was no mistaking the fact that I was using work to busy myself and avoid my pain, and I think that was why I was still suffering with the miscarriage and Michael's betrayal as much as I was. If I would have allowed myself to feel what I was feeling then, it wouldn't be as hard on me now.

I told myself thinking and dreaming about my angel was normal. A normality that would be with me for the rest of my life. But there was a part of me that believed healing would release some of the pain. I couldn't heal until my true feelings were revealed, and that was a truth I could no longer deny.

There was nothing I could do about that now, though. All I could do was better myself going forward. I'd been thinking about different forms of therapy for when we went back home. Talking to a therapist wasn't really my jazz, and she said something that changed my perspective a year ago. She reminded me that art, dance, reading, and basically anything that gave a person clarity and a higher vibration was therapy. Talking to a stranger might not have been the key to my healing, but something was. I just had to figure out what that something would be.

I loved cycling. I always felt freest mentally doing that, sewing, or crocheting. Lately, I hadn't been doing much of any of that because of my work schedule. When I got back home, I was considering going back to my twelve-hour, three-day shifts at work. Ideally, I'd want to use one of my free days to do absolutely nothing and spend the other three enjoying life solo, with my family and friends, and eventually with my man. While I had no idea who that man would be, I allowed myself to fantasize about it being Tyreek. As much fun as we were having, I was still a little nervous about thinking we would have a second shot at this.

It was on me—that I could accept. I wouldn't step back into that role for Tyreek until I was sure I could handle it. Before that came, I'd need to focus on myself and making the necessary changes to have a more balanced, happy life. In the

meantime, I would date, but I didn't see myself finding anyone who held me captive the way Tyreek did.

CHAPTER 11



Tyreek
Day 4

Janae went as long as she could before she needed to find a taco joint to indulge in. She ate fairly healthy, but her weakness was tacos and burgers, especially food truck tacos and Five Guys burgers. We broke away from the crew to find some tacos and ended up being pleasantly surprised by what we found at Taco El Gordo. It was about fifteen minutes from the hotel, which wasn't bad at all. After that, we went back to the strip and walked around with no real destination in mind. I didn't think either of us wanted something to drink because we'd been going at it for the last three days.

"What's one experience that changed your outlook on life?" she randomly asked me.

"My father's death," I answered, not having to give it much thought. "He lived very intentionally. With purpose. He raised us and loved my mother like he knew he wouldn't be here long. Before that, I was more reckless than people think I am now. Losing him forced me to take life and love more seriously. It also made me value my family and freedom more. What about you?"

I waited, expecting her to say the miscarriage, so it caught me completely off guard when she replied, "Losing you."

Our steps slowed down as I looked at her skeptically. "Hmm, is that right?"

She laughed like I figured she would. When we first met, we ended up watching an episode of *My Wife and Kids* where Calvin kept saying that, and it became an inside joke for us.

“That’s right. In a sense, you were a wake-up call. I’ve been on autopilot for years. Losing you made me realize that I haven’t been living; all I’ve been doing is existing. I want that to change when we get back home.”

“What does your ideal life look like?”

“Less work for sure, but I love what I do so much that I don’t want to stop until I retire years from now. So I’ll have to be with a husband who understands that and doesn’t want me to be the typical housewife that takes care of home and the kids. One who is okay with us splitting everything fifty-fifty.”

“But you do want that eventually? A husband and children?”

She didn’t reply right away, taking the time to consider my question.

“I do. I can’t lie, the thought of being pregnant and losing another baby does scare me. At first, I said I would never want to go through that again, but I don’t want to cheat myself like that, you know? I’ll never know the why behind losing my baby. I just... tell myself that they were too pure and perfect for this world and God wanted them back. But yes, I would like to get married and have at least two children. What about you?”

“Same. I wouldn’t mind having three or four kids, though. I always wanted a big family.”

“Is that something you want soon?”

“Yes,” I admitted quickly, and I saw the moment sadness entered her and covered her face. Her grip on my hand loosened but she didn’t let it go. “I’m making life adjustments to prepare for that. I’m not going to rush either, but yeah, I want that life soon.”

“I’m sure you’ll be a great husband and father, Tyreek.”

“You know you can find out, right?”

Janae looked over at me and smiled. “I thought this week was just about this week?”

“It is, I’m just letting you know.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Janae lifted my hand to her lips and kissed it. “I’m really enjoying spending time with you. Honestly, if we would have hung out like this while we were dating, I wouldn’t have been able to let you go.”

“Yeah, I think it would have been a bit more difficult to leave. I’ve always felt connected with you, though I wasn’t sure why. We have a lot in common, but we have differences that balance each other out. This week has been the first time I’ve seen you as more than just a beautiful woman that can be a potential life partner.”

“Agreed. We’ve been kicking it like true friends, which makes me feel safer with you, and the sex has been amazing. I can’t wait to get back to the suite so I can have you again.”

“You want to go back now?” I checked, stopping my stride.

Janae laughed as she wrapped her arms around me. “Not yet. I feel like if we go back now, I’ll fall asleep. This has been fun, but I haven’t been on go like this in a while.”

“Then rest, Nae. That’s a part of life that you need to embrace too. Regardless of what everyone else is doing tonight, if you want to cool it, cool it.”

“Okay, but I don’t want you to feel obligated to stay behind with me. I want you to still go out and enjoy yourself.”

“I will if I feel like it, but I’m on the same wave as you. Besides, I want to enjoy some more alone time with you just in case I don’t see you as much when we get back to Memphis.”

“I want to tell you that won’t be an issue, but I want to show you instead. You’ve heard a lot of my plans and excuses in the past and didn’t see me follow through. It’s important to me that you know you can trust what I say, Tyreek.”

Speechless, I lowered myself to her for a kiss.

“Yasssss!” At the sound of Honey’s voice, I pulled away. We’d been careful, avoiding public affection. We weren’t hiding what we were doing; we just didn’t want people asking about it or expecting this to continue when we got home.

“About damn time you two got it together,” Elite said.

“We’re just enjoying our vacation,” I clarified, hoping that would relieve some pressure from Janae. To my surprise, she grabbed my hand instead of pulling away and putting space between us.

“Mhm,” was all Honey said, cheesing as she looked from me to Janae.

“Let’s give them some privacy,” Kahlil granted, and I was grateful as hell for that.

“Fine, but I want details later,” Honey replied as he took her hand and gently pulled her in the opposite direction.

“Whew,” Janae released before we chuckled as they all walked away. “I just knew they were about to go in on us. Thank God for your brother.”

“Yeah, I got a feeling I’m going to have to pay for that later though. I’m sure he’s going to ask me fifty million questions just to talk about it with Honey.”

Janae laughed as we continued down the strip. “You got that right. She’s going to hound me for information first thing in the morning if she doesn’t have the energy to do so tonight.”

“What’s our story?”

“Hmm...” Her mouth twisted to the side as she tapped her chin with her pointer finger. “That we belong to each other for the next three days, but we’ll figure out the rest when it comes.”

With a bob of my head, I agreed. “That sounds like a plan to me.”

CHAPTER 12



Janae
The night had ended perfectly. We went back to the suite to nap before watching TV for a while, then we went to the mall and got outfits for dinner this evening. We went to Hugo's Cellar after getting recommendations about the ambiance having a romantic vibe. The dim lighting and dark, brick walls definitely gave that vibe... and the fact that I was given roses upon our arrival. We both had steak dinners, which we enjoyed every bite of, before having a few drinks.

I was trying to convince him that I would be okay if we did a hot air balloon ride or helicopter ride, but he was against it because he was worried I'd pass out again. No matter how much I told him I would be fine in an enclosed space, especially the helicopter, Tyreek was not going. I couldn't blame him because if the roles were reversed, I would be giving him a hard time too. The rest of the crew was out test driving luxury cars, and we told them we'd meet them for cocktails if we didn't come up with anything else to do.

"Let's make a deal," I suggested. "If I pass out, I'll do whatever you say. Just name it. If I don't pass out, we get to have a great time doing something neither of us has done before, and I'll give you the sloppiest head you've ever had when we get back to the suite."

"I love the sound of that. I win either way."

"What will I have to do if I pass out?"

"Let me take you out when we get back home."

Though I didn't reply right away, I smiled. "That sounds great to me, too. So do we have a deal?"

He hesitated, biting his cheek with a frown before sighing.

"Alright, we have a deal, but if you pass out..."

"I won't, babe!" I yelled excitedly, about to take a bite of my chocolate covered strawberry, but I stopped when he said...

"Let me feed you."

Tyreek showed no concern to us being in a full restaurant of onlookers when he stood and made his way over to me. Standing directly in front of me, Tyreek picked the strawberry up, gripped me by my jaw and neck, then tilted my head. My lips parted in anticipation, but I didn't open my mouth fully. I was too busy staring into his eyes.

"Open for me," he commanded before licking his lips.

I did, eyes fluttering in arousal as he placed the strawberry on my tongue. Instead of biting it immediately, I sucked it, then took the entire thing into my mouth. When I bit down, Tyreek removed the stem, groaning deep within his throat.

"You are so fucking sexy, you know that? I mean you're beautiful as hell, but you're so sexy, Nae."

Unable to resist, I stood, allowing him to wrap his arms around me. "I want you to take me to the bathroom and show me how sexy I am to you."

With no words, Tyreek put enough cash to cover our meals on the table before gently taking my hand and leading me to the bathroom for what I knew would be a quick, satisfying orgasm.

CHAPTER 13



T yreek
Day 7

Being honest, I didn't even know how in the hell we made it to the suite. I was so damn high it felt like the entire world had stopped around me. Shit was moving in slow motion, circular slow motion, and it didn't help that Janae was just as high as me.

"Y'all have fun," I heard Kahlil say, but by the time I turned to look back, the door was closed.

Janae giggled as we walked sideways through the suite.

"Yooo." She stretched the word out before laughing again. "I'm so fucking high. I'm *so* fucking high."

She had to have repeated that shit like five times, and all I could do was laugh and say, "Me too."

As we undressed, I laughed at the sight of her falling asleep while she stood. I wanted to eat her pussy but from the looks of it, she was about to fall asleep soon.

"Nae," I called, stumbling as I stepped out of my pants.

"Hmm?" she asked sweetly before giggling.

"Why did we get so damn high?"

"Because it's the last night here and we deserve it!" Janae yelled before clapping and randomly starting to sing.

I loved that about her. When she was high, all she wanted to do was eat, sing, and dance.

My crazy ass joined in on the song, and we stood there rocking each other and singing for I really don't know how long.

When we finally did stumble into bed, I made my way between her legs as I told her, "I'm about to eat your pussy."

"Okay," she agreed with a giggle, pushing my head down in the process.

Doing as I said I would, I moaned as I feasted on her. I didn't know how long I was down there, but her moans fueled me. By the time I lifted up, she'd drenched my beard and was shivering as she whimpered. At that point, she could barely keep her eyes open, but that didn't stop her from reaching between us and grabbing my dick.

"Fuck me," she requested in the sexiest voice I'd ever heard.

I put my tip at her opening, but when she yelped, I stopped going in. "What's wrong?"

"That's the wrong hole," she said before bursting into giggles, and I couldn't help but laugh too.

"Oh *shit*, Nae! My fault. Lemme pull out."

"No, stay," she whined, wrapping her arms around me.

"You sure?" I checked, slowly pressing further into her ass.

"Yes, baby. Fuck me there."

"Shit," I moaned, pulling myself out.

Her shit was so tight, and I didn't have any lube. I tried to spit on my shit, but my mouth was dry as hell from the weed, so I rubbed her pussy and fingered her, then wiped her essence on my dick before sliding back in. Once I was all the way inside, she wet me up in no time. I kept my strokes slow since this was a first for both of us, and we both were moaning so loud I knew our neighbors could hear us.

When I started to play with her pussy and clit, I thought I'd killed her. Her mouth hung open and her eyes were closed as she struggled to breathe. I always had to remind her ass to breathe so she could feel her orgasms even more.

“Breathe, Nae,” I coached, not wanting to stop... ever. “Breathe.”

She blinked before looking into my eyes, inhaling a deep breath. I'd seen women cum before, but watching Janae cum was like magic. Now was no different. As soon as I felt her ass pulsing against my dick and her pussy pulsing against my finger, my dick started throbbing too. I was glad I wasn't in her pussy because I was unable to stop myself from cumming. Once we both were done, I pulled out and laid on top of her, trying to regulate my breathing. I didn't know which one of us went to sleep first, but within seconds, I knew my ass was knocked the fuck out.

CHAPTER 14



Janae Valentine's Day

As “Let’s Get Married” played, Kahlil and his groomsmen walked down the aisle. The white and gold décor looked so regal. I loved that they’d chosen to have a white carpet that was covered with rose petals to match their white and gold gazebo. The setup fit them perfectly. They all looked so handsome in their olive-green suits and sunflower yellow accents, but I could not take my eyes off Tyreek. His ’fro was freshly shaped up and the line on the left side was longer, giving the cut its classic, sexy edge. The beard that had been covered with my cum several times in Vegas was just as curly and shiny as the hair on his head. And as always, a Cuban chain and cross necklace were around his neck.

I’d stepped out to get Honey a glass of champagne and was glad I did. This was my first time seeing him since we’d all gotten back last night, and I missed him already. We didn’t talk much at all yesterday on the way back home. The finality of our time in Vegas wore on both of us. I tried to downplay the magic of our time together and say things wouldn’t be so beautiful if we were back home. Between my weird hours at the hospital and him teaching by day and checking in at his club by night, I tried to tell myself the magic would dissolve when we returned home. That bullshit didn’t last long. Tyreek never hesitated to make me a priority. He worked with my schedule in the past—I was the one who fucked that up by adding even more to my plate.

I dropped my head quickly so my feet would move. If I didn't, I'd stand there staring at Tyreek. When I returned to what had been converted to Honey's bridal suite, I couldn't help but get teary eyed. She looked absolutely beautiful in a white mermaid gown. Kahlil was going to *die* when he saw her.

"Here you go, Honey. You are such a beautiful bride."

"Thank you, best friend. You are such a beautiful maid of honor. Thank you for taking off and spending the past week and today with us."

"Are you kidding? There's literally nowhere else I would be."

She pulled me in for a hug, then I handed her what would be her third glass of champagne for the day. I didn't think it was her nerves; I think she was genuinely happy and enjoying the hell out of herself before she married the man of her dreams.

There was a soft knock on the door before we heard Harmony say, "You ready, Honey? It's time."

"Ah!" she squealed. "I'm *so* ready."

"Then let's get you married," her mother, Heather, said.

I think we all were surprised when she invited her father to the wedding. He'd been trying to have a better relationship with them all since the divorce. It was crazy because he was so ready to get divorced and be with Shirley and whoever the hell else wasn't the woman he'd vowed the rest of his life to, but just weeks after that, Jacob realized the horrible mistake he'd made. Heather wasn't giving his ass the time of day, and I was so happy about that for her.

As we all filed out of the room, my heart began to race. I was so happy for my girl! And it was so cute that they were getting married in the library. Her mother went out and let them know we were behind the door. The traditional wedding march began to play. I said a quick prayer for her and Kahlil as I lifted her train, then Harmony opened the door for us to head out.

The moment Kahlil's eyes landed on her, they watered. Not long after, his tears were falling. As he wiped them, Tyreek patted his shoulder and spoke words in his ear that I was sure only Kahlil could hear, before he wiped tears of his own. I loved the bond they shared—all of them actually. Whatever one of them felt or experienced, they all seemed to.

I was so emotional it was hard for me to focus on what the pastor was even saying. I was crying and trying to give Honey tissues while she cried, and it was all just an emotional mess. By the time they were to exchange their vows, we'd gotten ourselves together. She squeezed my hand and pulled in a deep breath before returning her hands to Kahlil's.

"Words are very important to me," he started. "And I always have something to say, but in this moment, Honey, you've rendered me speechless." My lip poked out as I fought back tears. Honey's head hung as her shoulders shuddered. I squeezed them, reminding her that it was okay for her to feel every ounce of emotion that she was feeling. They'd earned this. "I made promises to God the moment I realized you were going to be my wife, but now, I make those same vows to you. I promise to love you, protect you, and provide for you. I promise to honor you, remain faithful, and a man of integrity. I'll never do anything to disrespect you or make you feel devalued. I vow to spend the rest of my days showing you with my actions just how much I love you."

"Kahlil," she whimpered, pulling him into a hug. She said something in his ear that made him smile as he held her close. His eyes closed as he swallowed back tears, listening to whatever his bride was saying. It wouldn't surprise me if she was saying her vows in his ear, because Honey had always been protective of their union. It was that sacred to her. When I watched Kahlil swipe a tear away, I knew that was *exactly* what she was doing.

When they released each other, Kahlil told the pastor, "Let's go ahead and wrap this up," making everyone laugh.

The pastor did, quickly pronouncing them husband and wife.

As they kissed, and I do mean straight up slobbered each other down, we all cheered. I felt eyes on me, and when I looked to the right, Tyreek was looking at me. He'd started at my heels, so by the time he made it to my eyes and realized I was looking at him too, he smiled. Our attention briefly shifted to the bride and groom as Kahlil lifted Honey into the air and carried her down the aisle. As soon as they were gone, Tyreek was making his way over to me.

I rocked from my heels to my toes as my heart began to race, praying he wouldn't sense my nervousness.

"You look stunning, Nae," Tyreek complimented, taking my hand into his and giving it a kiss.

All of Honey's bridesmaids and myself were dressed in sunflower yellow silk gowns, and I loved the way the material felt against my skin and accentuated my figure.

"Thank you. I found it difficult to keep my eyes off you."

He licked his lips and stepped closer with a soft smile. "I've missed you." He opened his arms, but instead of wrapping them around me, he pulled them behind his back.

"I've missed you too."

"Missing someone doesn't mean you have to be with them, though, right?"

My head nodded as I pulled in a deep breath. I wanted to say no. That he was wrong. That we needed to be together. But I was going to stand behind what I said in Vegas. Before I made my way back into Tyreek's life fully, I was going to put forth the work within myself. I needed to work through a few issues and get my work schedule lighter first. Until then, it was best if we kept it friendly.

"Right," I agreed, ignoring the desire to add to that by biting down on my bottom lip.

"I want you to know that I really enjoyed spending the week with you, and I'm here for whatever. Always."

I couldn't respond. All I could do was nod and wrap my arms around him. The second his arms wrapped around me, I

melted in his embrace. With closed eyes, I muttered, “Thank you, Reek. Words can’t express how much I needed what we shared. Thank you.”

Tyreek cupped my cheeks and looked into my eyes, giving me a deep, paralyzing kiss before my nerves got the better of me and I quickly walked away.

CHAPTER 15



T yreek

I couldn't stop the scowl that twisted my face as I pulled up in front of my brother's home and noticed the blacked-out car sitting directly across from it. Kahlil and Honey were gone on their honeymoon, and I offered to stop by their place every other day to grab their mail and any packages that were delivered. Their neighborhood was safe, and they had cameras up, so they weren't worried about anyone stealing or trying to break in, but because they were going to be gone for two weeks, they didn't want boxes and mail piling up.

My mom, Janae, and I had a schedule for Kayla mapped out. Mom would keep her throughout the day while I was at work, and I would have her throughout the evenings. To my surprise, Janae was going to have her on the weekends. I didn't really know how I felt about that. On one hand, I was pleased because it meant she was off work, but I was irritated by that too. When we were dating, I could never get her to take off on the weekend.

What had changed that now?

Eyes planted on the blacked-out car, I watched as they sped off. It was clear they were watching the house, and I wasn't sure why until I noticed the sticker that was on the back of the car. It was a decal that a lot of the boys Ahmad hired drove around with. I guess you could say it was their signature, which was dumb as hell. They felt like they were a little gang running around stealing and shit without taking into consideration that every time those cars and their hoodies were

connected to a crime it was adding up, and they were going to be charged with every count when they were finally caught. That was another reason I was glad I was done with Ahmad. The younger generation that he was bringing in had less to lose and weren't as smart and careful as generations before them.

I hadn't considered that Ahmad would try something with Kahlil. Once Kahlil got out of the game, I made it clear that any favors he owed or debts he had were to be taken care of by me. I didn't think Ahmad was planning to go after Kahlil personally; I believed he was going to try and use my brother to get to me. If he wanted to go after Kahlil, he would have done so long before now. This had to be because I was retired.

Once I'd grabbed their mail and packages, I hopped back in my Bentley and took off, grateful I gave my driver the day off today. One of my guilty pleasures was to have a personal driver. I believed luxury was the ability to get things you wanted or things that made your life easier and better. For me, a big luxury was no longer having to drive myself around. Memphis drivers couldn't drive for shit, and I would always end up having road rage or anxiety by the time I made it to my destination, so when I could afford to, I put four men on my payroll as my personal drivers so they'd have time to live their own lives while ensuring I would always have a driver when I needed one. After every vacation, though, I enjoyed driving myself around.

If I wasn't already cutting it close with time, I would have pulled up on Ahmad to speak to him face to face. Because I didn't want to be late, I decided to call him instead. It took four rings before he was answering with, "Tyreek."

"I'm only going to say this once," I prefaced, keeping my voice calm as I cruised down the street. "Whatever you're thinking about doing concerning my brother, cancel that shit. I made it clear to you that this was between me and you. Man to man. If you're *that* upset about my choice to leave, you take that up with me, but you keep Kahlil and his family out of it."

The sound he released was something between a scoff and chuckle before he released a hard breath. "What exactly do

you think you're going to do if I don't, Tyreek?"

"Don't forget who the fuck I am. That's why you're so upset about me leaving. Do you *really* want to find out?"

"If it comes down to that, son, I guess I will."

"Ahmad." My eyes closed briefly before I prepared to warn him for what would be the last time. "If you come after my family, I will destroy you."

"You'll have to. That's the only way you'll be able to survive."

"Is this what it's come to?"

"That's up to you. You can come back to me, and all of this will go away."

I smiled before running my tongue over my cheek. "Even if I did return to the business, I'd never work for you again. You've shown me your character for the last time, and this is something I can't ignore."

"You mean like you ignored my daughter? She loved you and you discarded of her like she was trash."

"Is that what this is really about? You're upset because I called things off with Piper?"

"You're damn right I'm upset!" he yelled unexpectedly. When Piper and I ended, Ahmad didn't show any concern or emotion at all. I thought it was because it was his fault, so he stayed out of it. "She ain't been right since. I trusted you with my daughter and you broke her heart."

My lips pinched together before my mouth hung open slightly in disbelief. The kind of disbelief that made my mind go completely blank because I couldn't believe what the hell I had just heard.

"You got some fucking nerve, Ahmad." I chuckled, gripping the steering wheel tighter. "If anyone shouldn't be trusted with your daughter, it's you. Piper and I would be together today if it wasn't for you. *You're* the reason I called things off with her. So if you want to be upset about your daughter's heart being broken, that's on you. Now keep your

men away from my brother, or Piper will be placing you on her mantle and wearing that black dress.”

Not bothering to wait for him to respond, I disconnected the call and accelerated my speed. Times like this made me hate going legit. For just a day I wanted to step back into my old ways to handle a problem before it truly became one, but I wouldn't. I couldn't. I said I was out of that lifestyle, and I wouldn't let Ahmad bring me back in. But if he didn't keep his men away, I'd handle him with no hesitation and have to ask God for forgiveness later. No one would hurt my brother in any way, and I hoped Ahmad didn't have to learn that the hard way.

CHAPTER 16



Piper

There wasn't much love in my heart toward men, and my father had a lot to do with that. The good thing was, I was finally becoming aware of my daddy issues and how they showed themselves in my relationships. The bad thing was, knowing about those issues didn't stop me from seeking my father's approval in any way I could—which was why I was heading up to the penthouse suite Thurston was staying in now. The biracial bad boy had no idea that my father had preyed on him and chosen him for me specifically to steal from him.

Men like Thurston lived a life they weren't really about. Not fully black or white, Thurston straddled the line, using his white mother and her family for money and his black father for power in the streets and status. My job for the night was to take all of his belongings—his phone, wallet, jewelry, and RSA ID for his Wells Fargo account. I was supposed to transfer everything out of his account into the dummy account my father had created. We'd met because Thurston had used me for personal shopping, so the bank account was already attached to his, thankfully. The job itself wasn't anything new. My father put me on men at least six times a month to steal from them. What made this job different, though, was the timing and the person.

Thurston was getting ready to leave Memphis for a six-week trip, and if I didn't strike tonight, my father would never let me hear the end of it. Thurston never went anywhere

without security or a few friends who were with him for his money. Tonight was no different. Three of his friends were in the penthouse suite with him, making this job the trickiest I'd ever had before. Typically, if I hit a lick with other people around, it was on a drugged nigga at a party with loud music and multiple distractions. I didn't know how in the hell I was going to pull this off tonight.

My father and best friend, Nathan, were waiting for me outside in the parking lot. I was supposed to keep my phone on so they could hear everything that was going down for my safety, and for that reason, I was hoping I wouldn't have to put Thurston to bed with my pussy. That was probably something that my father would never forget, and I'd never be able to look him in the eyes again.

My relationship with my father had always been strained. He'd never wanted a daughter and found it difficult to connect with me. Working for him was the only way I was able to spend quality time with him and receive his pride and approval. I absolutely hated what I did for him, especially after one of the schemes ended my relationship with Tyreek, but it was what it was. I was willing to do just about anything to gain my father's love. He was all I had since my mom died a month before my thirteenth birthday.

Once I made it to the door, I inhaled a deep breath and made sure my father had his phone on mute so no noise would come out of mine. It wouldn't seem suspect to Thurston for me to have my phone in my hand because I did it all the time. I would, however, have to make sure I kept it upside down so he wouldn't see there was a call in progress. I knocked on the door and took a step back, inhaling another deep breath.

I was so tired of doing this shit, but I had to do what I had to do. My father's drug organization gave him wealth, but his greed kept him unsatisfied. Besides, I loved the lifestyle that the money provided me. So even though I hated what I had to do, I loved the rewards that came with it.

Jesse opened the door, and I made sure to greet him by name so they would hear. I'd told them a little bit about all of Thurston's friends since I didn't know who he was going to

have around. Jesse was probably the most 'bout it out of the crew. If he felt like anything suspicious was going on, he'd be the first to do something about it.

“Wassup, Piper? You good?”

Nodding, I stepped inside. “I am. How about you?”

“I’m good. Say... When are you going to let me take you out sometime?”

I chuckled as Jesse allowed the door to close. “You ask that like I’m not here for your friend.”

Jesse sucked his teeth. “What you with a lame ass nigga like that for anyway?”

“Is it so hard to believe that I actually like him?”

“Yeah,” he replied effortlessly, grabbing my wrist gently before I could head to the bedroom. Jesse turned me in his direction, forcing me to give him my full attention. “I know your rep. If you plan on setting him up, let me in on it. I’ll make sure you get out safe for twenty-five percent.”

I was so stunned it took me quite some time to respond. For a few seconds, I just stared at him, trying to gauge his seriousness. True enough, depending on what part of town you were from and what circles you rolled in, there was a chance you’d heard about me and how it was nothing for me to take from one man before being on to the next. Most times the men I dealt with remained silent and took their L... Only the ones who didn’t have it to lose and were living beyond their means typically spread word about what I did. So far, I’d never been arrested, and I prayed it stayed that way.

When I realized Jesse was serious, I couldn’t help but laugh. I laughed so hard I leaned over and grabbed his arm for support. Once my laugh died down, I wiped my eyes, ignoring the anger in his.

“Jesse, leave me alone. Even if I was up to something, which I’m not, I work alone.”

“Yeah, aight,” was all he said before walking away.

For a moment, I considered taking him up on his offer, but I didn't know if Jesse had put him up to that or not. Realistically, having an inside man would have made this easier for me. I still didn't know how I was going to get in and out with all of Thurston's things. The thought of putting him to sleep was one I considered, but that would have taken too much time. At this point, my quickest and easiest option was to wait until Thurston was out of the room and snatch everything then leave and hope I could make it downstairs before he noticed and sent his friends after me.

I knocked on the door softly and waited for Thurston to tell me to come in. When he did, I forced a smile at the sight of him. He was at the king-sized bed, pulling a few things out of his luggage. Thurston was shirtless and had dark blue, baggy jeans sagging just enough to see his black boxers. He was attractive... a pretty boy. Not really my type, but he was nice to look at with his light skin, closely cropped fade, and hazel eyes.

"Hey, sexy," he greeted.

"Hey. Are you ready for your trip?"

"Fa sho. Six weeks going from one Caribbean Island to the next? I can't wait."

"I bet," I grumbled, making my way over to him to give him a hug and a kiss.

"You sure you don't want to join me?" he checked, keeping his arms around my waist.

"I'd love to, but I have to do some work for my dad."

"Well, if you want me to fly you out at some point so you can meet me, just let me know. I'd love to have your beautiful ass next to me on the beach."

My smile was genuine as Thurston released me. When I would become plagued by guilt, I would tell myself these men didn't mean more to me than my father, and that would lessen the shame. I was hoping that would be the case with Thurston. Truthfully, his biggest mistake was using his money to buy love and friendship... women. We had one thing in common,

trying to earn something from people that should have been freely given.

“You have a long flight ahead of you in the morning. Why don’t I help you relax?” I offered, deciding getting him in the bathroom would be the best distraction.

“What did you have in mind?”

“I’ll draw you a bath, order us some food, then put you to bed with this pussy. How does that sound?”

Thurston smirked before squeezing my ass. “That sounds perfect.”

“Great.”

After giving him another quick kiss, I headed to the bathroom that was attached to the bedroom. Inside the bathroom, I shot my father a quick text letting him know I was about to start. He told me to keep the call going just to be safe, and I agreed. I cut the water on, and once it was warm enough, I called Thurston to come inside. It didn’t take me long to undress him, then he got inside. He asked me to join him, and I told him I would after I ordered room service.

The moment I made it back into the bedroom, I decided to start with what was most important—the transfer. I already knew his phone password, so it didn’t take me long to unlock it, sign into his Wells Fargo account, and initiate the transfer. I had to be careful, though, because if he checked his account before the money was pulled, I would be fucking screwed. After transferring the maximum that I could send, twenty-five thousand dollars, I deleted the text and email confirmation that came through before moving on to his wallet for his credit cards and cash. I decided to let his jewelry stay because if he came out and noticed it was gone, he would know something was up.

I shot Thurston a quick text letting him know a family emergency came up, so that when he got out the bath, he wouldn’t be alarmed by my disappearance.

“I’m heading out,” I said into the phone before dropping Thurston’s things into my bag.

Avoiding Romeo and Kerri's eyes, I gave Jesse a wink and told him, "I need to leave real quick. I texted Thurston but if he gets out the shower looking for me, tell him I'll be back in about two hours."

"Aight, bet."

I held my breath as I passed them all, not releasing it until I was outside and briskly walking down the hallway. "I'm on my way down," I said.

"What all did you get?" my father replied.

"I did the transfer and got his cards and cash. I left the jewelry and his phone."

He sighed. "I told you to get everything, Piper."

"I know but that would have been too suspicious. Thurston probably won't go into his wallet until tomorrow when he has to get his license out for the flight, and if his phone was missing, that would immediately make me look suspect."

"She's right," Nathan said, and I was glad. My father may not have wanted to listen to me, but he would listen to Nathan.

As I stepped onto the elevator, I heard, "Aye!" being yelled down the hall.

Jerking my head, I looked and found Thurston standing at the door with a towel wrapped around his waist.

"Shit," I grumbled, repeatedly pushing the button to get down to the lobby of the hotel.

"What's going on?" my father asked.

"Thurston is coming down the hall and he obviously knows what I did."

"What?" Nathan yelled. "How!"

"I don't know. I guess he got out the shower for something; I don't know. I put everything back."

The elevator door opened but before I could find relief in getting away, his arm was reaching through and keeping it open.

“Thurston...” I called softly.

“Shut the fuck up, bitch!” he roared, snatching me off the elevator and shoving me into Jesse’s arms. “I can’t believe you really stole from me.”

“We’re on our way up,” my father said before disconnecting the call.

“What are you talking about? I didn’t...”

“Don’t lie,” Jesse said, dragging me back to the suite. “I told him about you, and he didn’t believe you were about that life still, so he’s been putting a camera in the room whenever you’re around. I saw everything you did, Piper.” With his mouth to my ear, he added, “You should’ve cut me in,” so quietly I was sure Thurston didn’t hear him. When I looked at him, Jesse was smiling as he winked.

“You motherfucker!” I yelled, constantly trying to jerk myself away from him unsuccessfully.

I knew I wasn’t going to die at their hands, but I didn’t know what kind of damage they’d be able to do before my father and best friend came. Trying to buy myself some time, I decided to try and shift the blame.

“Did he tell you that he wanted in, Thurston? He told me if I was going to take anything from you, to give him twenty-five percent and he’d make sure I got out with no issues.”

Thurston looked from me to Jessie. “Well, maybe you should have taken him up on that offer.”

Jesse laughed, and I didn’t know why, but that irritated me even more. What little guilt I had quickly dissolved.

“You’re that desperate for friendship that you’ll let a shiesty ass person like that stay in your life? I just told you this man was going to steal from you and you’re joking about it?”

Jesse all but tossed me into the suite and slammed the door as Thurston made his way in front of me.

“Jesse was probably just playing with your ass, and even if he wasn’t, at least he didn’t actually go through with stealing from me like you did. I can’t believe you, Piper. I defended

you every time someone told me you weren't to be trusted, and *this* is how you do me?"

"I didn't ask you for that, so I don't know what you want me to say."

His mouth dropped before he chuckled and shook his head. "Wow, so you really don't give a damn, do you?" With a shrug, I avoided his eyes. "Fuck it. Do whatever y'all want to her. I don't give a damn either."

As soon as the words left his mouth, Jesse was gripping my arm and putting me against the wall as Romeo and Kerri walked over to me. There wasn't any fear in my heart because I knew my people were on their way. With that in mind, I chuckled as Jesse pressed his body into mine and brushed his nose against my neck.

"Since you like to take shit, I'ma see how you feel when I take this pussy."

"You can try, but I can promise you, it will be the last thing you fucking do."

Not taking my threat seriously, Jesse turned me around and tossed me over his shoulder, carrying me to the bedroom that was on the opposite side of the living room.

"You're just going to let these niggas try and rape me, Thurston?" I yelled, squirming against Jesse. "That's how you feel?"

Ignoring me, he stared in my eyes for a few seconds before slamming the door.

"Wow." I laughed. "Y'all really have no idea what's about to happen, do you?"

"I know exactly what's about to happen," Jesse replied, tossing me onto the bed. "I bet you wish you agreed to my terms now, huh?"

Crossing my arms over my chest, I watched as he closed and locked the door. "This is your last chance to do the right thing, Jesse. Let me go. If you do, I'll give you everything I took from him, and no one will have to get hurt."

“Nah.” His head shook as he walked over to me, unbuttoning his jeans in the process. “I’m going to have both—you *and* what you took from him—and it ain’t shit you can do about that.”

Jesse pulled me down to the edge of the bed. When he reached for my knees, I kicked him in his mouth. He groaned and gripped it, giving me a few seconds to roll out of bed and try to get to the door. Jesse recovered quickly, gripping my ankle and tossing me onto my back. His hand lifted to hit me, but before it could connect with my face, the sound of the front door being kicked down caused him to release me.

With the distraction, I pushed him as hard as I could into the dresser then raced toward the door. Gunshots began to ring out, and my father had put bullets into both Kerri and Romeo before they could even stand from their seats.

“Shit,” I heard Jesse say, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“How many more?” Nathan asked.

“Two. One in each room.”

“Weapons?” my father confirmed.

“Jesse has a gun, but he usually keeps it in his bag.” I motioned toward the black bag by the couch, unfazed by the sight of the two limp bodies I passed walking over to my people.

“Get her downstairs,” my father told Nathan. “I’ll take care of these two.”

“Got’chu,” Nathan agreed, grabbing my bag and handing it to me.

By the time we’d made it to the elevator, more shots were sounding off. All I could do was shake my head. I was so numb to this shit and that scared me. There was once a time where I valued human life. The more I worked for my father, the less I cared about anyone’s life—including my own.

“You good?” Nathan checked, keeping his head low. I didn’t think they were expecting to have to come in. They never had to come in. They’d risked it all to save me without

masks. While I appreciated that, I hated that it had to come down to that. “Piper,” he called, taking me by the arm and turning me to face him. “Are you good?”

With a nod, I twisted my mouth to the side as my eyes watered. “I’m getting tired of this shit,” I whispered before sniffing. “He’s never going to let me stop.”

“He can’t make you do anything you don’t want to do. When you make up in your mind that that’s it, that’s it. All you have to do is say the word.”

My eyes rolled as I wiped them. The elevator dinged and we stepped on it. I started to wait for my father, but he was probably cleaning everyone out. Besides, there was no doubt in my mind that the police had been called at this point.

“If it’s that easy to leave, why haven’t you?”

Nathan chuckled, eyeing me as he pressed R instead of L. Knowing him, he figured leaving from the stairwell on the roof would draw less attention to us. Plus, when the police arrived, they’d see us going in but not coming out. That worked in their favor, but it wouldn’t matter for me either way. Unfortunately, I was plastered all over Thurston’s social media because he couldn’t do anything without documenting his day. Once the police looked at his social media and saw me on it, it wouldn’t take long to put two and two together. At this point, I couldn’t try and think about a defense—that was what my father had attorneys for. At this point, I was just... tired.

“I’m not leaving you with him, Piper, you know that.”

I took his hand into mine, finding solace in his words. While I might not have felt like my father loved me unconditionally, I knew Nathan did. He wasn’t just my best friend; he was my soul mate. A part of me wished we could have been lovers too. He knew about my past and toxic relationship with my father. How he used me and rented me out to the highest bidders. Nathan still loved me though—flaws and all. He loved me with the kind of love I wished Tyreek had for me. If he did, maybe Tyreek wouldn’t have called our wedding off.

“You don’t have to stick around just because of me. I’m sure you’re tired of this shit too.”

“I am.” He paused, looking down at me until I looked up at him. “But I’m not leaving without you.”

Lifting his hand, I kissed it three times, then wiped it. “I love you more than anything else in this world under my father, Nathan. More than anything.”

The elevator dinged and opened, letting us out on the roof. Before we stepped off, Nathan said, “I know, and I love you too.”

CHAPTER 17



Janae
Two Weeks Later

I was so happy my girl was back in town, and by the glow on her face, she thoroughly enjoyed her honeymoon. We embraced before heading into Seasons 52 for lunch. Harmony would meet us soon, but she was running a little late.

Not long after we were seated and had given the waiter our drink orders, I was asking, “So, how was it? I’m sure it was great just by the look on your face.”

Honey chuckled. “Girl, it was everything! Kayla might have a little brother or sister on the way.”

“Aw hell. Are you ready to be pregnant so soon after giving birth?”

Kayla would be four months this month and my head was swiveling just at the thought of thinking about having babies so soon after each other. But... that was kind of a good idea, too. To go ahead and get them all out the way and make sure they could grow up with each other in the process.

“No but also yes.” She gave me the cutest giggle as she lifted her arm onto the table, knocking her water over in the process. Honey was probably the clumsiest person I knew, but she was so stinking cute no one really cared. So used to making small messes that she had to clean up, Honey casually wiped the water up as she continued. “I’m ready to get our babies out the way so I can be done with being pregnant. Having to go months without truly enjoying my life. Don’t get

me wrong, I enjoyed being pregnant, but sharing my body with another human isn't..."

She stopped speaking abruptly and stared at me.

"What, Honey?"

"Janae..." Her voice was low as her shoulders sagged. "I'm so sorry, Nae. I wasn't thinking..."

"What are you..." When I realized what she was worried about, I smiled and shook my head. "Girl, it's fine. I'm good."

"Are you sure? I'm sitting here complaining about wanting to get my pregnancies out the way when you..."

"It's fine, sis, I swear. I'm good. I'm happy for you, no matter what happened with me. They are completely dependent of each other, and that won't ever change. Don't ever feel like you can't talk to me about babies and motherhood just because I had a miscarriage."

Honey swallowed hard, giving me a soft nod as she pushed her curls out of her face. "Well, yes, that's it. I just want to get our kids here so I can get my body back right and enjoy myself."

"So how many are you all planning to have?"

"Three or four. Now that we have Kayla, I know for sure I want her to grow up how I did with at least two more siblings, but I want them closer in age. I love being the oldest sister, but I admire how close my sisters are because they are closer in age."

"I feel you. Me and Tyreek actually talked about this. He wants his kids to have more siblings since he only had one. I feel the same way, but I also wouldn't mind just having two. My parents were able to juggle me and Jason, effortlessly, seemed like. I wouldn't change anything about my childhood at all."

"What's up with you and Tyreek anyway?"

As our waiter set our drinks down and asked if Honey wanted a refill for her water, I considered how much I wanted to share with my best friend. My time alone with Tyreek was

sacred. At the moment, those memories were all I had. I prayed God kept him for me while I got myself together, but I honestly didn't know. Men like Tyreek were single intentionally, but it was no secret he was ready for the next phase of his life. If he was truly letting me go, he'd start dating soon, and there would be no telling how quickly he'd get engaged and married after that.

Once we were alone again, I told her, "Nothing's up. We agreed that we would enjoy each other and that's it. I haven't seen him since the wedding. While y'all were gone, I got Kayla from Adrian so there was no contact with Tyreek."

"Is that how you want things to be though?"

I shrugged before taking a sip of my cocktail. "It's how it has to be for now. I'm focused on myself, and I vowed not to bring Tyreek back into my bullshit until I was ready for what he wanted."

"But you do want him?" she clarified, and at that point, I couldn't hide it anymore.

"I do," I admitted, just above a whisper. "A lot. But—" Honey squealing and dancing in her seat cut me off and made me laugh. "Honey..."

"We're going to be sisters-in-law after all," she almost sang.

"Don't get your hopes up now. I don't know how long it's going to take me to do the work. He might be in a relationship by the time I'm ready for one."

"Do the work?" she repeated, face twisted up as if she smelled something awful. "What the hell kind of work you have to do that would *take* that damn long, Nae?"

I placed my hands on my hips as my chin jutted out, but that only made her laugh, which made me laugh. She was not taking my plight seriously. Like at all.

"The inner work, girl!" I whisper-yelled. "I need to heal before being with a man like Tyreek."

“I agree, but you don’t have to be fully healed. *Love* heals. I think there’s a certain level you have to be on, one he can meet you at, but if you wait to heal fully from what you’ve gone through, there’s no telling how long that would take. If you heal fully at all. Grief is tricky in that way. You might think you’re good one day and be in shambles the next.”

“That’s true,” I agreed softly. “I think... I’m kind of nervous about being with a man like Tyreek too. He’s so...”

“Safe,” Honey supplied with a knowing smile. “I was the same way with Kahlil.”

“So how did you rest in how different he was from other men? How did you not sabotage it?”

“I almost did.” She giggled and leaned forward in her seat. “I almost pushed him away. He was so perfect I was unintentionally waiting for something bad to happen, so when I had what I thought was a way out, I took it. That didn’t last long. Kahlil has flaws just like every other man, but he’s willing to do whatever he can to love me the way I need to be loved, and that’s more than enough for me. I just... had to make up in my mind that I was worthy of that and the rest was easy.”

“How will I know when I’m ready?”

“When you can’t push him away anymore.” Her smile was sweet and voice low, forcing me to pay close attention to every word she said. “You’re going to be with him, and it’ll probably be at the most random time. He’s going to say or do something that makes you look at him like... damn. This is *my* man. Mine. And in that moment, you’re going to commit within yourself to put forth the effort to do whatever it takes to keep him. Then he’s going to show you all it takes is to let him love you. Watch.”

I didn’t know what else to say. Really, there was nothing else to say. We talked for a few minutes more before Harmony arrived, walking in with the same damn glow Honey had. It was good seeing Saint get the love he deserved, and from the looks of it, he was giving it right back to Harmony. When she came through and got his rights back from Tristan, I was

surprised his ass didn't propose to her right then and there. It was coming, though, I was sure of that, and I'd be just as happy for them as I was for Honey and Kahlil.

CHAPTER 18



Piper

Nathan was standing there, casually torturing someone as if it was nothing. The large blocks of ice he was placing on the man's bare skin were smoking they were so cold. They stuck to his skin instantly, pulling it away the moment Nathan yanked. If I was squeamish, the sight of patches of blood would have turned my stomach, but unfortunately, I was used to it. With an irritated breath, I checked the time on my Rolex.

Nathan had asked me to meet him for lunch, but he was running late. Apparently one of my father's men had stolen some money, and he wanted Nathan to make him suffer until he confessed where it was, then Nathan was supposed to kill him. By the looks of it, Nathan wasn't going to be done any time soon, so I was about to ask him if he just wanted me to bring him something to eat.

As I walked over to him, I took in his appearance. Over the years, Nathan had become quite handsome. I couldn't lie, he was a little skinny, funny-looking boy when my father first brought him on. Nathan's parents had put him out for his disobedience, so he was homeless at sixteen. That didn't last long, though. My father caught him stealing out of a store one day and ended up buying him dinner. After hearing his story, my father made him a deal—he'd put him up at a hotel and take care of his necessities if he stayed in school and stopped stealing. That worked for two years, but after that, my father told Nathan he had to fend for himself.

At that point, Nathan had gotten attached to my father and asked for work. My father put him on as a corner boy but eventually Nathan became team muscle. It was ironic that my father didn't want Nathan stealing but he forced me to. Nathan and I were like two peas in a pod the moment we met after I graduated high school. For quite some time, my father kept me away from the business, but when I became legal, he didn't care as much. Eventually, he let me prove my worth when I consistently asked to be with him or Nathan, and the rest, as they say, was history. He noticed how men gravitated toward me because of my beauty and used that to his advantage.

I felt like Nathan was tired of the game, especially after what happened with me and Thurston, but he was so loyal, I didn't see him leaving until I did. He always stood on what he said, and the moment he said that to me two weeks ago, I knew we were locked in for life. Our bond was one beyond comparison. No one in my life accepted me the way he did, and I could only hope Nathan felt that same loyalty from me.

“Wassup?” he greeted, lowering himself to place a kiss on my cheek as he normally did.

“How much longer are you going to be? I'm hungry.”

“Hard to say. He ain't talking.”

“Do you want me to bring you something to eat back?”

“Nah, I got an idea that shouldn't make this take too much longer.”

Nathan shot me a wink before heading over to the corner and rifling through his bag. The warehouse we were in had cream-colored walls and flooring. Nothing was in it beyond weapons and tools for bondage. Every person that was brought here for punishment left lighter—either because parts of them were missing or because they'd exposed secrets or truths.

Nathan walked back over to the man holding a container of salt, and that made me clench. If he was going to pour that on his wounds, he was about to start screaming like crazy. Covering my ears, I watched as Nathan opened the salt and began to pour it from one bleeding patch to another.

Eventually, I turned away, hoping he would tell Nathan what he wanted to hear soon.

“Alright!” he shouted. “Alright!”

I turned back as Nathan lowered the salt and handed it to Carlton, my father’s right-hand man.

“Where’s the fuckin’ money?” Nathan asked calmly.

“It’s... It’s in my baby girl’s locker at school. She’s sick and I’ve been keeping it there until I could find a better place.”

“What school?” Carlton asked.

Nathan made his way over to me, pulling me toward the door by my hand.

“You’re not going to stick around?”

“Nah. Carlton can take it from here. My job is done.”

I chuckled as we headed out. “You do this shit so casually. It’s truly who you are now, huh?”

“Unfortunately. Tyreek left, so I have no choice but to do this kind of shit now.”

Tyreek.

God.

I missed that man.

There wasn’t a day that went by that I didn’t think about how differently my life would have been if I would have chosen him over my father.

When Tyreek and I started dating, that was the first time I lived a somewhat normal life. We were together so often I didn’t have time to do jobs for my father. Tyreek made me promise not to do any more schemes while we were together, and I did. I told my father that part of my life was over. Since I was in a committed relationship, I couldn’t be dating men and having sex with them just to steal from them. My father agreed and was genuinely happy for me... then... he got word that a billionaire was coming into town and my retirement was over.

He *begged* me to do the job. At first, I declined and tried to keep my promise to Tyreek. Then, my father insinuated I was choosing Tyreek over him. He made me feel so guilty I did the job, and as soon as Tyreek found out that I'd cheated on him just to steal for my father, he called off the wedding and broke up with me. For a while, I resented and hated my father for that so damn much. I'd lost the man my heart desired most... outside of my father. To make up for it, my father started being nicer and spending more time with me outside of making me work, but that didn't last long. Eventually, the love and affection and nurturing stopped, and he went back to his old ways—only smiling and appearing happy with me when I was bringing him money.

“How's Daddy handling Tyreek's absence?”

“He's not handling it well at all, to be honest. It's his pride more than anything. He has that old school mentality that makes it difficult for him to let anyone walk away or not do as he says.”

I nodded, remaining silent. I'd been between the two of them once before and it ended with me losing Tyreek, I didn't want to be in that position again—not even in conversation.

“Wassup with you, though?” Nathan asked as we headed outside, but before I could reply, several police cars were racing toward the entrance.

“The fuck!” I yelled, looking from one to the other as they all jumped from their cars and headed toward us.

“You got your piece?” he checked, lifting his hands.

“It's in the car,” I replied, doing the same.

“Good. You know the code. Don't say shit.”

I nodded as they yelled for us to get down on our knees. I didn't have to think it through too much—this was about Thurston. All I could do was breathe deeply and try to stay calm as they damn near shoved my face against the concrete. My eyes locked with Nathan's, and he gave me a soft smile before promising, “I got you. Don't say a thing.”

CHAPTER 19



T yreek

Upon realizing I had a missed call from my mom, I decided to call her before my next parent came in. It wasn't an official parent-teacher conference night, but I offered additional time slots for those that couldn't come when they were offered. A lot of parents respected my style of teaching, especially when I stopped sending homework home altogether. I noticed how well my kids were doing during the days we utilized the computer room for them to get caught up on work. We talked, and a lot of them confessed to not having the time, energy, or help to get their work done.

Realistically, it made sense. Kids were in school several hours out of the day then expected to go home and do even more work. As adults, we tried to limit work after we clocked out, so why weren't kids given the same grace? When I stopped sending homework home, eighty percent of my students saw an increase in their grades. I was trying to get more teachers to follow my lead so they could have more overall success, but that was easier said than done.

I called Mom back, and she answered with, "Hey, baby. Where are you?"

"Still at the school. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, your brother is coming over for dinner. I wanted to see if you could join us."

"I can but I'll be late. I'm waiting for my last parent of the evening to stop by."

“Okay, baby. I guess I’ll see you when you get here.”

“Do you need me to bring anything?”

“Some of that Taylor Port wine. I have one bottle but that’ll be gone by the time you get here.”

“Yes, ma’am. I got you.”

“Alright, baby.”

I disconnected the call and smiled to myself. My mama wouldn’t drink any hard liquor, but she’d finish a bottle or two of wine by herself and be just as tipsy as those around her. She had always been a spiritual woman, but after my father died, she drew even closer to God. I think that was the only thing that kept her sane. She was crazy about my father, and they were so close. My father loved her fiercely. He was the reason Kahlil and I handled women the way we did. Our mother may have taught us how to be gentlemen, but our father was the example we needed on how to truly treat women by how he treated our mother.

He treated her softly, delicately, but he didn’t handle her like she was weak. They submitted to each other. There was never a time where my mother questioned my father’s priority or integrity, and we needed that example. It was so easy to get caught up in other things and forget about what mattered most, but I learned under God nothing was more important than my future wife and kids.

At the sound of heels clacking against tile, I lifted my head and looked toward the door. I was expecting Pierre’s mother. Pierre was probably my most difficult student. So far, I hadn’t been able to get through to him. I spoke with the rest of his teachers and found out he was doing even worse in their classes. From my research, none of his teachers had met either of his parents before, so I was surprised when his mother agreed to stop by and see me. I needed to get an understanding of what was going on at home that was causing the disconnect here at school. The more I knew about Pierre’s background, the easier it would be for me to help him.

The man who came earlier basically had wasted my damn time. In so many words, he told me what happened with his son while he was at school was our problem not his. I pretty much wrote him off and decided if there was going to be any change with Chris that it would have to come through me.

Heading toward my door, my steps halted at the sight of the woman. There was no way she was Pierre's mother unless she'd had him really young. It was the woman I'd had dinner with the night Janae and I called things off. Lord knows I wanted to take her sexy ass home, but I'd never been a cheater and wouldn't allow Janae's inconsistency to change that.

My dinner companion looked just as beautiful now as she did then. Her hair was pulled up into a thick bun, but a few pieces were curly and hanging, dangling on her shoulders. Her face was made, and like that night, bright red lipstick set it off. Her nails were painted red too, and I had to admit, it looked sexy on her.

"Hey," she greeted with a warm smile, extending her hand for me to shake.

"Hey... Latrina?"

Her head shook softly. "That's my older sister. She couldn't get off work, so she asked me to come in her place, if that's okay."

"Yeah, sure. Thank you for coming." After releasing her hand, I motioned for her to have a seat at the larger chair in front of my desk. "It's great to see you again. Will I have a name to put with your beautiful face this time around?"

She gave me a soft chuckle as she nodded. "It's Lena. And you're Mr. Roberts?"

"Tyreek," I corrected, taking my seat.

"It's good to see you again, Tyreek. Are you still attached?"

Attached.

I liked that she used that word. A lot of people were in relationships, but they weren't committed and attached;

meanwhile, there were people like me who were technically single yet still unavailable because their hearts were clinging to someone else.

“I am not,” I admitted sadly. While I wished things would have been established enough in Vegas between me and Janae to have made more progress when we got home, it seemed she truly wanted to let what happened in Vegas stay in Vegas. I had no choice but to accept that while I prayed she was doing well.

“Maybe we can have dinner again then, and I’ll be your dessert.”

My dick began to harden instantly, but truthfully, I was still sprung off Janae’s pussy. I wasn’t like most men who felt pride being able to jump from one woman to the next. Pussy was pussy to me, no matter who it came from. I didn’t place a woman’s value on that; I placed her value on her character, heart, and integrity. For that reason, Janae still had me wrapped around her finger, but I knew I had to let her go.

“Maybe, for now, we need to discuss your nephew before you get me too distracted.”

Lena smiled as she sat back in her seat and crossed her legs. “What is there to discuss?”

“His failing grades. Is there something going on at home that would limit his ability to focus or desire to excel?”

“Aside from the fact that his father was killed last year and his mother is working three part-time jobs to take care of him and his four siblings?”

“Wow.” I sat back in my seat, completely thrown off by her admittance. “I didn’t know his family had all of that going on.”

“Yeah. They’re going through a lot. Latrina is doing the best she can, and I help out when and how I can, but it’s a lot. Pierre is kind of like the second parent, so he doesn’t really have time for schoolwork at home. Plus, he’s just... angry and depressed. He doesn’t get a lot of time with my sister because she works, and when she is home, she has to divide her

attention between all her kids and his dad is gone. Doesn't really matter what I try and do for him or anyone else, he wants his mom and dad, so he's struggling right now."

"What can I do?"

Her eyes watered and she looked away. "Give him grace. Be kind. Don't give him a hard time. He's carrying a hard load, you know?"

"Of course, but still... he has to get his grades up or he's going to fail, Lena."

"He did mention liking not having homework for your class. Is that something you think you can talk to the rest of his teachers about? With all of his siblings and having to care for them until his mother gets home, he really doesn't have the time to do anything once he leaves school."

"I can't force them to follow my example, but I can, however, give him time to work on things for other classes while he's in mine if that will help. Also, there are after school and weekend programs that he can sign up for to get some time away if there's someone else that can watch his siblings."

"There are. My parents and I alternate between keeping them, but Latrina often just lets them stay home with Pierre."

"I'm not sure Pierre being parentified this young is good for him, but it's not my place to say. I'm sure he also needs some one-on-one time with adults in general, so he can remain in a child's place, not just his mother. Maybe I'll speak to his mom about taking him to a few games or something. See if that'll help."

Her head lowered briefly as she released a shaky breath. "I'm sure they both would love that, Tyreek." When Lena lifted her head, her eyes were free of tears. She licked the corner of her mouth and swallowed hard. "I need to get out of here. Do you need anything else from me?"

We both stood at the same time as I shook my head. "Actually, with Latrina working so much, is it okay if I get your information and put you down as a point of contact for Pierre?"

“I don’t mind at all.”

Unfortunately, anything personal that could have happened between us would yet again have to wait. As long as Pierre was in my care I wouldn’t speak to Lena outside of him, however, each time I saw her, she piqued my interest even more. I believed blocks were between us for a reason, though, even if I didn’t know what that reason was. Maybe I was being kept single for a specific woman, and maybe Lena and I just wouldn’t be good for each other. Either way, it was good to see the beauty again. And who knows, maybe the third time will be the charm.

CHAPTER 20



Piper

My bond was posted as soon as I received one and my uncle bailed me out. I was sure that was because my father was laying low since there was a warrant out for his arrest as well, and my suspicion was confirmed when I was taken to one of his hideaway homes in Saulsbury, Tennessee, which was only about an hour or so away from where he lived.

The whole ride there, I couldn't help but replay getting arrested repeatedly in my head. That was a first, and I was sure it was because the hotel had security cameras that had caught us going up to Thurston's suite. It kind of pissed me off knowing Nathan and I were the ones who got picked up first when this was my father's plan and he was the one who let off the shots, but that was usually how things worked.

When we finally arrived, I rushed through the front door of the old, longhouse in search of my father. I found him in the back room, pacing as he smoked a cigarette. At the sight of me, he motioned his head toward the pack that was on the dresser in case I wanted one, and of course, I did. Smoking had been another nasty habit that I'd picked up trying to spend quality time with him, and now, I couldn't stop.

"Did you say anything?" were the first words out of his mouth.

"Of course not."

He waited until I leaned against the dresser and took a few puffs of my cigarette before speaking again. "My connect at

the D.A.'s office told me they have the video of us going in the hotel and getting off on his floor, but they don't have a visual of who did the shooting. I took their phones, so the footage of you stealing has been deleted. I need you to do me a solid in return."

Baring my teeth, I released a heavy sigh as I stared at him in disbelief.

"Haven't I done *enough* for you? Me doing things for you is the reason we're in this position in the first place!"

"That was you earning your keep, just like anyone else."

I scoffed and shook my head, unsure why I was having such a hard time believing the words that were coming out of his mouth. "You act like I asked to be born. I didn't choose to be here, so I shouldn't have had to do any of this shit just to earn my keep. Do you hear yourself right now?"

Ignoring my statement and question, he scratched his head and sat on the side of the bed. "We need to get on the same page, Piper. I have a plan that can get us both out of this."

"And what about Nathan?"

"He'll have to do some time regardless. With the story I've come up with, it'll only be manslaughter and he won't be looking at life."

"Life?" I stretched, pushing myself off the dresser. Now, I was the one pacing. "He shouldn't be in there anyway, Daddy. You're the reason any of this happened, and you're the one who killed them!"

"Yeah, to protect *your* ass!" he roared, charging over to me. "Now either you can repay me for that and do what the fuck I say, or you can be looking at life or the death penalty for four counts of murder right along with his ass. Either way, I'll flee the country tonight before I go down for this shit."

My posture was hunched as I covered my face with my hands. Weaving my hands through my hair, I avoided his eyes, unable to look at him.

I weighed my options briefly. It wouldn't hurt to at least hear his plan out.

“What's the move?”

“You'll tell them that you and Thurston were dating and that you'd stopped by to see him before he left the country. Nathan and I were waiting for you in the car, which is the truth. Say that one of his friends were stealing from him while he was in the shower and when you called him out on it, he tried to accuse you. You'll say that you called me because you were scared and that's why me and Nathan came up. Say that they were trying to rape and beat you and Nathan shot them all to protect you. Depending on how believable you are, it might be excusable or justifiable homicide or manslaughter at the most. Maybe he won't get any time or maybe he won't get more than ten or twenty years. Regardless, without this story, he's looking at life and the death penalty, and you will be too.”

“And what about you?” I asked, anger intensifying the more I listened to the selfish bastard speak. “You just... get off scot-free? Like you weren't the one who killed them all?”

“Yes,” he replied nonchalantly. “If you do this for me, I'll give anything on this earth you desire.”

I scoffed. “There's nothing you can offer me to make me betray my best friend, Daddy. I can't choose you over another man I love. I did that with Tyreek and...”

“That's it.” A slow smile spread to the corners of his lips. “Nathan is going down for this regardless. I refuse to sacrifice myself for him. However, if you lie and say he did the shooting to protect you instead of me, you can help him get less time, if he has to serve any at all. In exchange, I'll get you Tyreek—permanently.”

I needed to know. My curiosity had definitely been piqued. A second chance with Tyreek was all I'd been wanting since he called things off, not that I blamed him. If I could have gone back in time, I would have chosen him, us, normality, a future that didn't include me doing whatever it took to secure a father's love that should have been freely given.

“How can you do that?”

“I’ve been trying to give Tyreek time to come back to me on his own, but now, I’m starting to see that I will have to force him. I have something on him that he won’t want to get out. If you agree to do this for me, I’ll use it to get him to marry you instead of using it to work for me. Does that prove to you how dedicated I am to make sure we both get something good out of this?”

It was clear he was determined to make Nathan pay for this, whether I helped him or not. At the most, I could reject the offer and he would flee. Even if I tried to get Nathan out on my own, without my father, the police would need someone to bring to justice, and it was going to be me or Nathan. At least this way, I could help Nathan get the smallest amount of time possible, if any, and get what I’d been wanting for what felt like forever—Tyreek.

My head hung and chin lowered to my chest as my hands went limp.

“Fine,” I agreed softly as my voice cracked. “I’ll... I’ll do it.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, tears escaped my eyes. Nathan had been there for me since we met. I trusted him with myself far more than my father, and this was how I was going to repay him for his loyalty? The more I thought about it, the worse I felt. Making my way out of the room, I ignored my father as he said, “You won’t regret this, Piper, I promise.”

My eyes rolled as tears continued to pour from them. This was the final straw. At this point, what hope I had to gain my father’s love and respect was gone. I didn’t care about how he felt about me, and I didn’t care to have him in my life at all. I felt forced into doing this one last thing for him, and the only good thing that came from it was getting a second chance with Tyreek. My father was about to cost me Nathan, and that was unforgivable. After this, I wanted nothing more to do with him.

CHAPTER 21



Janae
It said a lot that one of Tyreek's students had given him for their emergency contact instead of their parents. I saw him rushing down the hall the moment he arrived, but I wanted to give him time and space to check on David first. Once he came out of his room to take a phone call, I decided to make my presence known. We hadn't spoken to each other since the wedding a month ago, and I'd been thinking about him a lot. In a way, he was motivation for me to take my healing seriously.

Every day, I was using journaling with prompts to really deal with how I was feeling. I felt like I'd finally forgiven myself for the miscarriage and started the process of forgiving Michael. There was no use in me being upset with him for being who he was. Quite simply, I just had to make up in my mind that I didn't care for that version of him. Not having to be tied to him for life was a blessing. Shifting my perspective had been working wonders for me.

Instead of focusing on what I'd lost, I was choosing to focus on what I had and would soon gain. Instead of being hurt over the way Michael treated me, I was grateful to have seen that side of him before we got married and had children. His biggest flaw was his selfishness, and that helped me to see how important it was to me to be with someone who was selfless and committed to partnership. Instead of harboring hate and resentment in my heart toward God for the loss of my baby, I thanked Him for giving them to me... even if for a

brief moment. Whether I gave birth or not, I was still a mother, and that was the highest honor I'd receive in my life.

I told myself, I had an angel in heaven who would be there waiting for me when this life was over, and I still had time to try again while here on earth. No matter how many babies I gave birth to in the future, my angel baby would always be my number one.

Aside from inner work and connecting with my feelings, I'd been taking time off from work and getting back into my hobbies and passions and visiting a smash house weekly to release lingering anger. I'd also been spending more time with family and friends. The only person that I hadn't been with was Tyreek, and that was driving me crazy.

As I made my way over to him, I held my breath. I wasn't sure how he would respond to seeing me or if he even wanted to talk to me for that matter. Maybe he'd already started seeing someone. Or maybe he was tired of my shit. It was easy to say you'd wait for someone, or you understood why they were the way they were, but lonely nights were a motherfucker. I wouldn't blame him if he'd met and started seeing someone to entertain him. As if he felt someone nearing, Tyreek looked up, brows furrowed. At the sight of me, he relaxed and smiled.

He looked good as hell, even dressed down in a cream sweatshirt with matching sweatpants. Like always, chains were hanging from his neck. This time they were silver. And he had on cream and white Pumas.

"Hey," I greeted, resisting the urge to hug him.

"Hey, Nae. It didn't cross my mind that you'd be here tonight. How are you?"

"I'm good. How are you?"

"Good."

Silence lingered between us for a few moments before I said, "So David really trusts you, huh? That's sweet and sexy."

Tyreek blushed. "I'm honored that he wanted me here, but I still had to call his parents. He's worried about getting in

trouble because he was riding a motorcycle that they had already told him not to ride.”

“Ohhh.” I stretched, smiling. “That makes sense.”

Rubbing my ring finger, I avoided his eyes. I didn’t want to leave, but I also didn’t know what to say.

“Well... I should probably head out. His parents are going to be pulling up soon and I told them I’d meet them out front.”

“Yeah, sure, okay. It was good to see you, Tyreek.”

His expression softened as he looked me over from head to toe. “You too, Janae. You too.”

As I watched him walk away, I battled within myself. I wanted to ask him out. *Was I ready?* Fuck it. Even if I wasn’t, I was tired of putting off my desires, and at that moment, I desired nothing more than I desired Tyreek.

“Reek!” I called out, quickly closing the space between us when he turned around to look at me.

“Yeah?” he replied sweetly, taking my hand into his.

“Um... I was wondering if... Would you like to go out maybe? And catch up?”

His head jerked before he released a bark of laughter.

“Are you asking me out on a date, beautiful?”

“Only if you’re going to say yes.”

He didn’t reply right away, and my heart dropped. I’d read somewhere that four seconds of silence felt like rejection to the brain. Before I could feel my heart breaking, Tyreek licked his lips and used my hand to pull me closer.

“I’ll say yes if this means you’re ready to let me pursue you. Seriously, Nae.”

“I’m ready.”

“Then yes.”

A fluttery feeling swirled around in my belly.

“Yes?” I repeated, unable to hide my surprise.

Tyreek chuckled softly with a bob of his head. “Yes, but leave the planning to me, aight? If this is going to be our first real date, I want it to be all that you deserve.”

There he was, putting me first and catering to me when I was trying to do the same for him.

“Okay. I’m working Monday through Wednesday now, so other than that, my schedule’s pretty free.”

Tyreek grinned before biting down on his bottom lip. “When did this happen?”

“When I realized I was letting life pass me by holding on to the past. That week with you in Vegas motivated me in ways you’ll never know, but I’m hoping you’ll be able to experience the results.”

I didn’t want to admit it, but in ways, I felt broken after the miscarriage. Like I’d failed at something I was supposed to be able to do. Honey’s words about feeling worthy had settled within my spirit as truth. Once I forgave myself, I started to believe again that I was worthy of love, peace, and happiness.

“Oh, I will. No doubt about that. I’ll call you later this evening and we can finalize the details of our date.”

“Okay.”

He placed a kiss to the center of my forehead, getting a giggle out of me when it led to him kissing my ear and neck as he held me close. Unable to resist, I wrapped my arms around him and told him how much I missed him, not caring about the fact that I was still on the clock. We didn’t pull away until his phone was vibrating, and he told me it was David’s parents. I released him and watched him walk down the hall—tall, slow, strong. I loved his back. How wide and sculpted it was. I loved everything about that man. From the way he looked to the way he thought, acted, and carried himself. He was mine.

Mine.

I covered my mouth as if a secret had slipped out when realization finally settled within me.

This must have been the moment Honey was referring to because as I watched him walk away, there was no doubt in my mind that I didn't want anything to happen to cause Tyreek to walk out of my life again.

CHAPTER 22



Tyreek
I was nervous.

Tonight meant a lot.

I didn't take Janae asking me out lightly—at all.

She agreed to going out with me the following night, and I could admit a part of me expected something to come up that made her cancel on me.

So far, that wasn't going to be the case.

My drivers alerted me of when we were less than five minutes from the destination, so when Sonny told me that, I checked my phone to see if she'd called or texted to back out and she hadn't. In fact, she'd texted me and told me she couldn't wait to see me.

I'd realized space was the magnet needed to bring me my woman. As difficult as it was to stay away from Janae, it was obviously for the best. The longer I stayed around placating her while she chose to stay in her pain and past versus the gift of our present the longer it was going to take her to heal and realize what she had going for her life. What she had in me. I missed her ass every day this past month, but knowing that we were finally going to have a genuine chance at a healthy relationship made the time apart worth it.

I didn't plan to take things too quickly, though. Even with us dating, I wouldn't rush a title or anything else for that matter. The last thing I wanted to do was overwhelm Janae.

She'd been hurt, rejected, and abandoned by someone she loved and trusted, and I couldn't downplay that. I asked God before heading to her what she needed from me to ensure He would equip me to provide that, and I felt in my spirit that she needed not just love but security and belonging. If I could provide her with those things, Janae would know for herself that she was safe with me.

When we pulled up to her home, I got out of the Bentley with her flowers and gift basket in hand, then headed toward her front door. After knocking, I took a step back and waited for her to let me in. It only took a few seconds before she was opening the door. As I suspected, she wasn't ready, but Janae was worth the wait. Her hair was in those little curl things with the silver clips, but her beautiful face was covered with makeup already.

“Sorry, I'll be ready in like three minutes.”

I chuckled, stepping inside. “It's fine, beautiful. We're making good timing. Our reservation isn't for another forty-five minutes.”

Her eyes went up toward the ceiling as she released a huge breath of relief.

“Great.” Janae gasped when she looked down and finally noticed what I was holding. “Is that for me?”

“It is.” I handed her the red roses and sunflowers, which was hard to get during this season, but I'd gotten lucky because one of my home girls from high school had a floral shop and greenhouse, so she could grow just about anything all year round.

“My favorite,” she cooed, accepting the bouquet. That wasn't hard to figure out, because she had a spine tattoo of roses and sunflowers that I found sexy as fuck every time I looked at it, especially when I was giving her my dick from the back. That spine tattoo kept me distracted from how damn good her pussy felt. “Thank you, Tyreek.”

Janae lifted the flowers to her nose, giving them a good whiff as she smiled. “And what's this?” she asked, taking the

tissue paper off the top of the gift basket. She clutched her chest and released another gasp before smiling widely. “OMG, this is the most thoughtful gift anyone has given me!”

Janae made her way into my arms, hugging me tightly. Had I known all it would take to make her this happy was some yarn for her quilts, I would have been given her some. “Thank you so much, baby! I can’t *wait* to create with these.”

“You’re welcome, beautiful. I’m glad something so simple could make you so happy.”

Her laugh was soft as she released me. “The simple, sentimental things always matter most. You gave me something I love, of course that means a lot to me.”

I figured that would be the case, but I planned to spoil her with the finer things in life too. It was good to know that she appreciated the small things as well, though.

“Get comfortable. All I have to do is slip into my dress and heels. Would you like me to match you? You look so handsome by the way. I love the way this shirt is fitting you.” Her hand slipped down my chest, and my dick started to brick up instantly. I was dressed simply in a black V-neck shirt with a matching blazer and slacks with loafers. If she wanted to match my fly and dress in all black, I was cool with that.

“Thank you, and that sounds good to me. I love you in black, but you look good in anything really.”

She gave me a smile and wink before saying, “I’ll keep that in mind,” as she scurried away.

Janae put the flowers in water then headed to her bedroom with the gift basket. While I waited for her, I listened to the old school playlist that she had going in the background. We liked a lot of the same artists and music. Her favorite singers were Sade, Gladys Knight, and Anita Baker. Mine were Al Green, Maxwell, and Kem. There was a night we were supposed to go out months ago but she worked late. When she got off, she came over with her Bluetooth speaker and we just listened to music all night and talked before we fell asleep.

When she returned, she looked absolutely stunning in a black crop top with leather leggings and heels. A blazer was tossed over her shoulders in case she needed it as the sun continued to set. She smelled just as good as she looked—floral and fruity somehow.

“You are so breathtaking,” I complimented, unable to stop myself from wrapping my arms around her. “And you always smell so fucking *good*.”

I had a thing about a woman’s scent and the softness of her skin. If a woman smelled good and had soft skin, I was liable to lay up with her all day.

She giggled as she wrapped her arms around me. “You can thank Honey for that. I’ve been obsessed with this Valentino perfume she gave me.”

“I definitely will. Send me a picture of it. I’ll make sure you never run out.”

“Will do,” she agreed before dropping her head bashfully. When she lifted it up, I had to keep myself from kissing her nude lipstick off.

“Are you ready to fall in love tonight?”

Her hands slipped down my chest as she released a shaky breath. “I am.”

I loved the confidence in her answer. It made me smile. We headed out, hand in hand, and I was nervous as fuck. A lot was riding on tonight, and I hoped it was the start of Janae getting whatever she needed from me to know that with me her heart would always be safe.

CHAPTER 23



Janae
I wasn't sure how to explain how I felt with Tyreek this evening other than amazing. We'd gone to Flight for dinner and drinks. While we waited for the check, he told me we were going dancing after this. I appreciated him keeping how we ended the night open because I was spontaneous and liked to try new things. Because of that, I wasn't sure how I'd want to end our evening together. Dinner had been amazing—from the food and ambiance to the company.

Our conversations shifted frequently, going from lighthearted and flirty to silly then serious. There wasn't anything that was off the table, and I loved that about us. I loved that we had a friendship that wasn't strained by time and distance. I loved that it wasn't just about sex between us, though the sex was amazing. We had a true bond, one that I could honestly say was new and refreshing.

As he stared at me, I giggled quietly before looking around the room. Men would just stare at you like it was nothing, and that always made my goofy ass laugh.

“What?” I asked quietly.

“I'm here with the prettiest woman in the room. I can't help *but* look at you.”

I loved this flirtatious side of Tyreek. Yes, I was confident, but what woman didn't love being flirted with and boosted up by her man? Especially one that was as fine and as good of a catch as Tyreek.

“You trying to get some pussy tonight? Is that what this is about?”

The sexy chuckle he gave me as he sat up in his seat made me smile. “Not at all. Pussy is a bonus. I’m saying how I feel.” Now, I was the one staring at him with a crooked smile. “What’s got those beautiful eyes sparkling like that?”

“You. Being here with you.” I released a heavy breath. “Being here with you and not being consumed by my past. I feel free, and I love being this version of myself with you.”

Tyreek reached his arm across the table. When I placed my hand inside of his, he gave it a sweet, tender kiss, then used it to tug me over so that I was seated in his lap. This reminded me of Vegas and that he had no problem with public displays of affection. After finding myself enraptured by the feel of his lips on mine, I pulled away and rested my forehead on his.

“I really, really missed that,” he confessed before kissing me again.

“So did I.” My hand lowered to his dick. “I missed this too.”

He groaned and tightened his grip around me. “He missed you. When we get back to my place, I intend to show you just how much.”

I smiled, leaning forward to give him another kiss. We’d discussed our love languages when we first met, so I knew he loved quality time and physical touch while I preferred service and physical touch. I think I didn’t care for quality time because I didn’t have it to give in the past, but after spending an entire week with him, I’d been craving time with him.

Our waitress returned with our check and Tyreek paid, then we were headed out. I loved that he had a driver because it allowed us to talk and focus on each other. Car rides always provided the best conversations. We were seated in the back of the Bentley, hand in hand, staring out into the night sky as we cruised down the interstate.

“What can I give you tonight that will confirm to you that giving us a chance is worth it?” he checked.

“I appreciate that, but I already asked God to let you use a password if we’re meant to be. I know we will have fun regardless, but I asked Him to have you say a specific thing if marriage is in our future.”

“If I say it, I don’t want you to tell me.”

“Why not?”

“I want that to remain something that stays sacred between you and Him. I talked to Him about us too before I came to get you, so we’re on the same page.”

Our eyes locked, mouths mirrored the same smile. Words couldn’t express how happy I was to get out of my own way and let this man show me love.

About fifteen minutes later, we were pulling up to the dance studio I mentioned wanting to go to. They offered all kinds of dance classes and that was something I had on my bucket list. I could already two step, line dance, and do basic moves and twerk, but I loved watching people do professional styles of dance and wanted to learn those as well. It wasn’t something I’d prioritize doing for myself, and I was glad he’d listened and decided to do it for us.

“You listen,” I teased as his driver opened the door for us.

“I do. You know what else I do?”

“What?” I asked as we walked to the front door.

“Fear God too much to take you through the pain you’ve gone through with other men. I respect Him too much too.” I stopped, forcing him to do the same. We turned to face each other as my eyes watered and my heart skipped a beat. “And I love Him too much and appreciate Him too much to not take advantage of the gift that is you.” His hand cupped my cheek. “You are...” Tyreek’s head shook as he looked my face over intently. “The Rose of Sharon.”

My eyes closed as my breathing hitched.

“Why did you call me that?” I almost whispered as my heart drummed against my chest.

“Because that’s what you are,” he replied, voice low and laced with a smile. “You’re rare and one of a kind. The apex of women. Of love. You’re beautiful and you smell amazing, like a rose. Like the Rose of Sharon, you’re free and access to you is limited, increasing your value. You’ve bloomed in circumstances that would destroy the average woman’s heart. Those roses are the chief of roses, singular in quantity and beauty. There is none like you, Nae. And last, roses are useful. They have healing, loving qualities for all who use their petals or oil. That’s how I feel about you.”

Tyreek stopped the tears that were falling down my cheeks.

He’d used my password, which was extremely random and hard to use in conversation—Rose of Sharon. And he didn’t just use it, he used it to compare it to me.

Everyone who knew me knew I loved roses and sunflowers because of their beauty, but I had a special affinity for hibiscus flowers, or the Rose of Sharon. My grandmother’s name was Sharon and when she died, I started looking up what her name meant. I aspired to be all of the good that was within her. So I asked God to have Tyreek mention hibiscus or the Rose of Sharon if he was my husband, and he did.

“Why are you crying?” he asked, lowering his hand to the back of my neck as I opened my eyes.

“You told me not to tell you if you used it.”

He gave me a knowing smile. “I just did?”

Nodding, I wiped my face. “Yeah, you did.”

“Are you... okay with that?”

All I could do was nod and blink back tears before laughing. “Yes,” I whispered. “I’m... more than okay with that.”

CHAPTER 24



T yreek

When Janae told me she wanted to get a private room at my club I was surprised. She'd only been once with the crew because women weren't allowed unless they were providing entertainment two nights out of the week in a private room. Our night had been going perfectly, from dinner and dancing to the conversations we were having. I didn't think anything would make the night better, but when I saw her body twirling around the pole, I was glad to be wrong.

Removing my blazer, I walked over to her after tossing it onto the sofa.

"If you're going to work that pole, you need to remove these clothes."

She gave me a sexy smile before biting down on her bottom lip. My eyes were trained on her as she began to remove her clothing slowly and seductively. Instead of taking everything off, Janae kept her black, lace bra and panty set on. I couldn't help but stare at those damn waist beads. They were white, pink, purple, and clear in color. Some were directly on her waist while others hung just above her belly button and right at her hips.

She had a medium sized frame. Average sized ass and breasts, but she had a small waist, and those beads added to her sex appeal along with her spine tattoo. I hadn't gotten comfortable enough with her body to where seeing her naked

or almost naked didn't make my dick hard, and honestly, I wondered if that would ever be the case.

“No more private dances for you, Mister Teacher. You're going to be a gentleman outside of these walls unless the dance is coming from me.”

I chuckled, nodding my agreement. She had nothing to worry about. I had no plans of getting private dances now or in the future. I wouldn't deny that I loved women's bodies and beauty, but I'd never been a cheater and I was more than satisfied with her.

“Yes, ma'am. Now give daddy a dance.”

Her smile returned as she began to work the pole, and I had to admit I was surprised by how good at it she was. After she was done, she shared the fact that she'd taken a pole fitness class. Straddling my lap, Janae cupped my cheeks and said, “Thank you for such a wonderful evening. I've enjoyed every second of it.”

“It's not over yet,” I told her, reaching behind us to grab a blunt and bottle of tequila for her and whisky for me. I had to have her pussy at least once before we left, and as warm as her center was on top of me, it felt safe to say Janae felt the same way.



I didn't think anything could irritate me this morning. Janae and I had an amazing evening together followed by a night of love making, and I was able to wake up to her beautiful body in my bed. As happy as I was, that changed after I looked at my phone and saw several missed calls from Ahmad. Something told me that they weren't to be ignored, but I was in no rush to call him back. At the least, I wanted to get Janae back home in case whatever he said soured my mood.

By the time she was waking up, I had already worked out, showered, and gotten dressed. I gave her time to handle her hygiene before I started on breakfast. There was no desire

within me to wait for her to do it for us. That wasn't the role I expected her to have with me. Even though she didn't mind cooking, I knew she liked to be served, so I didn't have a problem cooking for her.

"Mm, something smells good," she complimented, walking into the kitchen in nothing but my shirt.

"Good morning, beautiful."

"Good morning, handsome. What're you cooking?"

"Bacon, pancakes, eggs, and I've got some fruit."

"Sounds yummy. Do you need me to do anything?"

"Just sit your pretty self at the island and wait for me to serve you."

Janae giggled as she did what I said. "I can definitely do that."

"How'd you sleep?" I asked, pouring us both a glass of apple juice.

"Great. You?"

"Same." I shot her a wink that had her blushing as she pulled her hair behind her ears. "What do you have planned for the day?"

"I'll probably stop by my mom's place and spend the afternoon with her before hanging out with the guys this evening if you have plans."

"I don't have anything planned but my mom did want me to come over, so I might go hang out with them."

"Is it too soon to ask you to engage with my mother as my woman? I know we don't have a title yet but you're mine. And you've already met her but... not as mine. Just as Honey's friend."

"I don't think it's too soon. I was kind of wondering if you wanted to come to my parents' place with me anyway, so that works out perfectly."

“Cool, so I guess we’ll make a day of it. We can stop by my mom’s place then go see your parents.”

“Sounds good.”

My phone began to vibrate again, and I didn’t have to look to know it was Ahmad. When I did look and see that it was him, I sighed heavily as I picked it up.

“Excuse me,” I said, leaving the kitchen as I accepted the call. “Yeah?” I answered.

“We need to meet. ASAP.”

“I’m busy. Can we discuss whatever this is about over the phone?”

“No, this is something you’ll want to discuss face to face. It’s extremely imperative that I talk to you as soon as possible.”

I slid my hand down my face. “Fine, when can you meet?”

“Now. I’m outside.”

Disconnecting the call, I cursed under my breath. For Ahmad to be randomly showing up, something had to be seriously wrong. Seriously wrong with Piper. My days of being a henchman was something I had no intentions of telling Janae about. That part of my life was over, so I didn’t think there would ever be a need for her to know, and I wanted to keep it that way. I could only hope she didn’t judge me or look at me any differently.

“Are you okay?” she asked as I made it back into the kitchen, eyeing my entire frame with concern.

“Yeah. An old business associate of mine is outside. He needs to talk.”

“Oh. I can leave.”

“That’s not necessary. If you could just keep an eye on the food...”

“Of course.”

I went back into my room to throw on some shoes and a hoodie before heading outside. At the sight of Ahmad leaned against his car I couldn't stop my jaw from clenching.

"Make this quick," I demanded, crossing my arms as I closed the space between us.

"I need you to marry my daughter. The sooner the better. Preferably before next Wednesday."

My nerves felt raw as adrenaline filled me.

"You have got to be out your motherfucking mind, man. There's no way in *hell* I'm marrying Piper. What the fuck is *wrong* with you, Ahmad?"

"I figured you would say that." He pulled out his phone and busied himself in it before telling me, "Check your messages."

I did, and my entire world stopped at the sight of the pictures he'd sent me. They were pictures of the last favor Kahlil had done. A favor that left two men that had betrayed Ahmad dead. Not only were there pictures of Kahlil shooting them, but there was also a picture of the gun he'd used to do so. Taking lives had never been something me and my brother was proud of, but we did what we had to do back in the day. One would never think journey books could lead to so much greed and bloodshed, but that was exactly the case.

"You were supposed to get rid of this shit. Why do you still have it?"

"I knew he wanted to go legit, so I kept this as insurance in case I needed him to come back. I don't need him to, but I know you care enough about your brother to do whatever it takes to make sure these pictures and that gun aren't sent to the police. Either you commit your life to my daughter, or your brother is going to spend the rest of his life in prison."

Nostrils flaring, I gritted my teeth as my pulse raced.

"The only thing that's stopping me from snapping your neck right now is the fact that my neighbor is walking down the street with his dog."

Ahmad smiled, tilting his head. “You wouldn’t want to do that anyway. Two of my guards are in the car. Besides, I’ve already sent this to one of my attorney’s and they have the gun. Should anything happen to me, all of this goes to the police.”

I looked at my front door absently, wishing I could see Janae through it. She had just started to open up to the idea of us. I couldn’t hurt her with this. I couldn’t intentionally hurt her at all.

“What is the reason for this? You could have used this to make me work for you again but you’re using it to get me back with your daughter? Why?”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “I need Piper’s help with something, and you are the only thing I could offer her in exchange.”

Piper and I had a good thing going five years ago. It was comfort more than it was love, but I did love her, that I could admit. She was beautiful, the sex was amazing, and she was about that life. Piper was the first woman I’d ever been with that didn’t make me feel like I had to change or hide pieces of myself. She accepted me as I was and was down to ride. I believe that was why I didn’t want to tell Janae about my past, too. I didn’t want what I used to do and how I used to hurt people to make her no longer want to be with me.

When I asked Piper to marry me, it was more so out of necessity than love. I felt like there wouldn’t be a woman that was a better fit for me than her, plus, I was working for her father, so it just made sense. We had an agreement—she would cut the stealing out for her father, especially when it involved having sex with men. Piper agreed. Unfortunately, she reneged on that promise, and I felt like that was my way out. Back then, I didn’t know if or when I’d want to get married again, but the moment I met Janae I knew she was the one. The one that would give love and marriage and faithfulness value to me again. So far, she had, and I didn’t want agreeing to Ahmad to change that.

But what other choice did I have?

If I had to choose between being with Janae or my brother's freedom, I would have to choose him. Not just him but my niece. His wife. He'd finally gotten his happily ever after; I couldn't let Ahmad fuck this up.

"I need some time to think about this," I decided, though I already knew what I would do. I just needed to figure out how to do it without breaking Janae's heart in the process.

"You have until tomorrow morning. Then, you'll need to immediately get a marriage license, because I know you're going to choose your brother's freedom." He pushed himself off the car. "Listen, I don't give a fuck if you're faithful to my daughter or not. Do whatever the hell you want to do while you're married to her. Just marry her so she can keep me out of jail."

"You're such a piece of shit." I laughed because I couldn't think of anything better to describe him, but that was literally what he was... how I felt toward him. Like he was a literal piece of shit. Something that caused my face to scrunch up in disgust. Something that didn't even deserve to be on the bottom of my fucking shoe. Something that literally made me sick to my stomach. "Piper deserved so much better than you, and I hope she gets that soon enough."

With a shrug, Ahmad opened his car door. "My father was a piece of shit too. What makes her any better than me?"

I wanted to tell him that he was supposed to be what made her better... that he was supposed to give her better... give her what he never had... but I didn't feel like wasting my breath. Instead, I turned and headed back into my home. Janae was pulling the bacon out of the skillet and my heart dropped at the thought of us being over—again.

I'd just told her last night that she was safe with me. How was I supposed to go against that? I couldn't. Not right now at least. Right now, we were going to eat breakfast together and spend time with our families. That was the least I could give her before I pulled our future away.

CHAPTER 25



Janae
When Tyreek asked me to meet him over Honey and Kahlil's house, I didn't know what to expect. We had an amazing past two days, but when we said goodbye to each other last night, I could tell something was off with him. I figured he would talk to me about it when he was ready, so I didn't press him about it. Now, I wondered if that was what this was about.

"Hey," I spoke to Honey after she let me inside.

"Hey."

"Do you know what this is about?"

"No, you don't?"

My head shook as I followed her into the dining room. The brothers were already seated. I spoke to Kahlil as Tyreek stood and gave me a lingering hug.

"Are you okay?" I asked as he pulled my seat back.

"No, not really."

"What's wrong?"

Tyreek motioned for me to sit down, so I did.

"I don't really know how to say this," Tyreek started, avoiding my eyes.

"Just say it."

He released a nervous chuckle and squeezed the back of his neck.

“I used to be a henchman.” He paused, giving me time to process his confession.

The only henchmen I knew were those that I saw in movies, and Tyreek didn’t give that vibe. I shouldn’t have been surprised, though, because all of the men in the crew were into something illegal at one point or another. I was aware of the journey books and their family’s history, but this piece of information was new to me.

“What does that mean?” I asked quietly, needing more details.

“It means I had several clients in the past that utilized my services for anything they didn’t want to do. Basically, if they needed something illegal done, I was the one they called.”

“Okay. You said used to, so you’re done now?”

He nodded. “Yes, I am.”

“Then what is this about?” Honey asked.

“One of my old clients...” Tyreek looked at Kahli. “Our old clients has something on Kahlil, and in order to keep that to himself, he’s asked me to marry his daughter. His daughter and I used to date. We were engaged, but she cheated, and I couldn’t respect her lifestyle.” Tyreek looked at me and took my hand into his. “That was five years ago, and I have no feelings or love for her at all. But the only chance I have of saving my brother is by going along with what he’s asked of me.”

My mouth went slack, and my heart pounded. Head tilted. Eyes blinked and mind went blank in confusion.

“What does he have?” Kahlil asked while I tried to wrap my mind around what Tyreek had just said.

“Pictures of you doing that last favor. And the gun.”

“Shit,” Kahlil cursed under his breath, covering his face. “How?”

“Apparently, he had you followed, and Westley didn’t discard of the gun like he was supposed to. Ahmad said he was keeping it for insurance in case he needed you to come back.”

“Then why is he using it against you?”

Tyreek shrugged. “I’m not sure. Something is up with Piper that’s risking his freedom. She must have some dirt on him that she’s keeping hidden in exchange for me.”

Tyreek looked at the side of my face. “I told you that I would never intentionally hurt you, and under normal circumstances, I would never choose another woman over you. But if I have to sign a marriage license to keep my brother out of prison for the rest of his life...”

“Yeah... no.” My hands lifted as I smiled, though there was nothing funny about this. Taking deep breaths, I tried to remain calm as anger filled me. I stood. “I get it. Do whatever you have to do for your brother.”

“I can’t let you do this, Tyreek,” Kahlil said as I started to leave the dining room with Honey behind me. “I knew what I was risking when I pulled the trigger. I’m not about to let you ruin your life trying to protect me.”

“Are you crazy?” Tyreek replied. “That’s life, brother. Two counts of murder. Whatever Ahmad wants from me to keep you out, that’s what I’m going to give.”

Even knowing Tyreek and I weren’t going to be together, with the sacrifices he was making for his brother and his devotion, that only made me crave and respect him more. Still, my heart ached, literally ached, knowing that we were over before we could fully start.

“Janae,” Honey called softly, taking hold of my arm. She stepped in front of me with tears in her eyes. “I’m so sorry, sis. We’re going to figure out a way to fix this.”

“There’s already a way.” I smiled bitterly, trying to keep my tears from falling. “If Tyreek has to marry that man’s daughter to keep Kahlil out of prison, that’s the best thing for him to do.”

“But that’s not fair!” she yelled softly. “Reek shouldn’t have to marry her just to keep my husband out of jail.”

“He’s not just your husband.” I took her hands into mine. “He’s the father of your child, my Goddaughter, and she does not deserve to grow up with her father behind bars.”

“What about what you deserve?”

I didn’t reply right away as my tears finally started to fall. “It doesn’t matter. This is beyond my control.”

“Nae...”

“It’s fine, Honey, really.”

Wiping my face, I left quickly. I didn’t care about her seeing me cry, but I didn’t want Tyreek to. I didn’t want to make him feel worse. I was sure if there was a way out of this, he would have found it. Holding onto my anger and sadness would only compound his feelings. As soon as I made it to my car, I hit the steering wheel as I screamed.

“God!” I yelled, tears pouring rapidly. “You gave him the password! Why would You do that and get my hopes up if we weren’t meant to be?” My breath came out shaky as I wiped my face. “I don’t believe You’re going to take him from me, not like you took my baby. You gave me confirmation that Tyreek was *my* husband, and I have faith that You’re going to work this out. So I thank You in advance for whatever it is You’re about to do.”

Tyreek stepped outside, but I didn’t have the strength to talk to him right now. Not while he looked so sad and guilty. I cut my car on and quickly reversed. This wouldn’t be the end of us. I was confident about that. But dammit if this didn’t hurt...

CHAPTER 26



Piper

As happy as I wanted to be knowing Tyreek would be coming over, I was nervous, and I honestly felt a little bad. It was clear he no longer wanted to be with me, and I didn't want to force him to do anything he didn't want to do. Even if we were to get married, if it was by force, I wouldn't get the version of Tyreek that I'd fallen in love with years ago. He'd be bitter, angry, and closed off. Then, I'd find myself fighting for his love just like I'd been doing with my father.

He rang my doorbell again, and yet again, I couldn't force myself to get up. My father was so adamant about Tyreek agreeing to the marriage that he told me to be dressed and ready to go downtown to file our marriage license. At first, I was excited, but the longer I thought about it, the less I wanted to go through with this. I'd done enough to hurt Tyreek when all he wanted was a better life for me. This couldn't be how I repaid him.

After the third ring, I finally had the courage to get up and let him inside. When I opened the door and laid eyes on him, my guilt was even deeper. He wasn't happy. In fact, he looked quite weighed down and sad. I hated being the cause of that. Scratching my ear, I motioned for him to come inside with my hand.

"Tyreek," I called softly, but he lifted his hand to silence me.

"Just... Get dressed so we can get this shit over with."

“Can we talk first? Please?”

“What is there to talk about, Piper?”

My eyes sealed shut. It felt so good to hear him say my name after all these years, even if he was upset.

“You’re talking to me like this is my doing.”

He scoffed. “It is!”

“No, it isn’t, Tyreek. This was Daddy’s idea.”

“Even if it was, you agreed, or I wouldn’t fucking be here.”

I couldn’t deny that. Tremors shot through my body as my knees weakened in shame. I wanted to look away from him, but he deserved better than that.

“Can we just talk, Tyreek, please?”

Without waiting for him to agree, I walked down the entryway hall toward the sitting room. It was clear I was in no rush to leave because I was dressed in leggings and a sports bra. Instead of sitting next to me on the dark orange sofa, he sat in the recliner that was the furthest away. I couldn’t help but chuckle. It was clear Tyreek didn’t want to be here, and I couldn’t blame him.

“Your brother’s blessed to have someone who loves him so much that you’d marry someone you can’t stand to even be in the same room with.” He looked at me but remained silent. “The person that loves me that much is sitting in a jail cell... where my father *should* be.”

His frame relaxed, finally, and so did his eyes. “What the hell is going on, Piper?”

“It was a job gone wrong,” I confessed, and he rolled his eyes and shook his head in annoyance. “The guy found out quicker than we expected. Three of his friends were there. He basically gave me to them as punishment.”

My head dropped. I was finally starting to realize how lucky I was. If my father hadn’t come when he did, they could have very well raped and beat me—all fucking three of them.

As tough as I was, that was fucking with me. It was the reason I agreed to doing this when I started to have doubts. I felt like I owed him, but realistically, I didn't. *He* was the reason I was there, and he was also the reason an innocent man was in jail. If I had to, I'd take the charges myself before I allowed Nathan to do my father's time.

"Did they..."

"No." My head shook adamantly as I sniffled. "Before they could, Daddy and Nathan kicked the door in. Daddy shot all of them but he's letting Nathan take the charges. He made me agree to saying Nathan was the trigger man."

"And because you agreed, he's blackmailing me into marrying you?"

I nodded, clenching my jaw to avoid letting more tears fall. "Yes," I whispered. "I always told him that I blamed him for us breaking up, but the truth is, I chose to follow his lead blindly. I could have loved you and myself more and said no, but I didn't. All this time I've refused to take accountability for my actions and placed all the responsibility on him, but this is my fuck up, and I have to fix it."

He sat up in his seat. "What did you have in mind?"

"Telling the truth. I have to get Nathan out of prison and... I can't let him force you to marry me, Tyreek. I've hurt you once; I can't do it again."

"Do you really think your father's gonna go down that easily?"

I chuckled, shaking my head. "Not at all, but I have to do the right thing for once, even if I have to do the time myself."

"That might not be necessary. Now that I know the details, I might be able to help you out... but I need something from you in return."

"Name it."

"The pictures and gun your father has for my brother. I need that. If you can get it, I'll help you get Nathan out of prison."

Tyreek stood and walked over to me, extending his hand for me to shake. I looked at it for a few seconds before I stood and placed my hand inside of his. I didn't know what he had in mind, but at this point, I was willing to try just about anything...

CHAPTER 27



T yreek

I said I wouldn't reach out to Janae until I had good news, so as hard as it was to keep distance after we'd made such progress, I stayed away. Once I got the details from Piper about the situation, it all made sense. It shouldn't have surprised me that Ahmad was pulling out his ace to avoid having to go to jail. What *did* surprise me was Piper deciding not to go along with it. I guess people could change. I was proud of her. It seemed like she was finally growing up.

We'd told Ahmad that we had filed the marriage license just to buy some time. I had Hosea to reach out to the Black Mayhem Mafia for a favor. Rameek specifically. He wasn't the district attorney anymore, but he still had pull, plus he was a private investigator.

With his help, Piper and I were able to find out what other evidence the police had, which was nothing. It was going to be fairly easy to get them to drop the charges against Nathan once we had proof that it was Ahmad. Rameek was able to find out the guests that were staying on that floor that night and go talk to them.

A woman was afraid to come forward, but she admitted to hearing the whole thing and even looking out of her door. She said she saw Piper and Nathan leaving before more shots rang out, then an older man followed. We got her to give the police a statement and do a lineup, naming Ahmad as the shooter and their new suspect.

We told Piper that she didn't have to admit to stealing from Thurston, especially since she'd left all of his belongings at the suite, but she'd done so anyway. I admired her for finally taking accountability for her actions even if it meant going to prison. They decided not to charge her, though, which she was glad about, but who knew if that would remain the case.

They might not be charging her with theft, but there was no guarantee that they wouldn't try and charge her with facilitation. Without her involvement, Ahmad wouldn't have committed the murders. We would have to see how that played out, though. Right now, she was free. I was waiting for her to call or text me to let me know that Nathan had been released and that her father was picked up as well. He wasn't going to see it coming.

She'd finessed his attorney into giving her everything Ahmad had given him in exchange for her keeping him on her payroll when Ahmad went to prison. I thought after this Piper wouldn't want anything else to do with that street shit, but it was in her blood. She planned to run her father's organization with Nathan as soon as Ahmad was arrested. I wished her well but made it clear I was still retired and wanted nothing to do with it.

Sitting outside of Kahlil and Honey's home, I looked down at the gun and printed pictures of him doing something we swore we'd never do again. With this, I prayed that part of our lives was officially over. Piper assured me that she had the codes to her father's safes, safety deposit boxes, phones, and computers. She guaranteed me that if there were more copies, she'd find and delete them all. So far, her plan was to sweep the house when he was arrested, and I could only hope that was enough.

I must have thought her up because she called me, and I answered with, "Hey, you good?"

"Yes. I'm headed to go pick Nathan up now. Hopefully he gets in the car with me."

She chuckled, but I knew she was nervous. We talked about her relationship with Nathan and how he was the best

thing she had going. It was like second nature for Piper to choose her father over anyone, so for her to be doing this to help Nathan, he must have really meant a lot to her. Their friendship was strong when we were dating, but it must have gotten even stronger over the years. Or maybe it was truly Piper having a change of heart. Whatever it was, I was just glad she'd decided to do the right thing.

"I'm sure he will. Even with you temporarily choosing your father, you did right in the end. That's all that matters."

She sighed. "I'm just glad Rameek was able to use his resources to find that woman. If I would have tried to do this myself, they probably wouldn't have believed me."

"How easy do you think it's going to be to find your father?"

She didn't reply right away. "Honestly, I don't think we're going to find him at all, Tyreek."

Now that confused the hell out of me.

"What do you mean?"

"My father has men everywhere. There's no doubt in my mind that he knows what we're up to. He has people at 201 and detectives and police with MPD. The moment he finds out Nathan has been released, he's going to flee. I'm kind of okay with that, because I won't have to deal with him either way, but I promise you, you and Kahlil are safe."

"I appreciate that, but I need more than your promise, Piper. I need that proof to be gone."

"It will be. I already have deleted the digital copies. I'm going to go into his safes when he's gone. I've already hit a few of his safety deposit boxes. I got you. I promise. Besides, without the gun, any attorney can argue that those pictures are doctored. You have the gun, and that's the most important thing."

With a nod, I decided to go ahead and wrap up the call so I could tell Kahlil the news. As grateful as he was for what I'd chosen to do, he was also upset. He'd made it clear that if I went along with marrying Piper that he would turn himself in

—showing me the same devotion and loyalty that I’d shown him. Now, neither of us would have to do something that we would regret. I could only pray that this small hiccup was something that wouldn’t make it difficult for Janae to trust me and continue to feel safe with me.

“Aight, just keep me posted.”

“Will do, and thanks again.”

“Always. Thank you. And I’m really proud of you, Piper. I know how important having a close relationship with your father has been to you. I can’t imagine how difficult it was for you to choose to finally go against him.”

She chuckled as I opened the door. “Actually, it wasn’t difficult at all. I lost you because of him; I wasn’t going to lose Nathan too. Like I said, I’m learning to take accountability, but I have to give him his fair amount of blame too. My father has never handled me the way he should have, and I’m just finally glad to be free of that.”

“Well, good luck on your new start. I would say I’m here if you need me, but I’m out of that life, so…”

“Don’t worry.” She laughed quietly. “I have all that I need in Nathan. I’ve finally realized that. But thank you, Tyreek, for everything. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Piper.”

After disconnecting the call, I got out of the car and headed to the front door. I didn’t know where the wind was going to blow me while we tried to figure this out, so I’d given my drivers the week off. The less people that knew what we were up to, the better.

I knocked and looked around. I didn’t think Ahmad had anyone following me, but I always made sure I was aware of my surroundings. When Honey unlocked the door, she gave me a hug and kiss on the cheek before handing me my baby and running back upstairs. She said she was getting ready for a call with one of the authors she was coaching. Harmony had recommended her services now that her platform was bigger

and a lot of aspiring, new, and veteran authors had been booking Honey left and right.

Kayla wasted no time slobbering my cheek down trying to imitate her mother and it tickled me.

“Did you miss me, shuga buga?” I asked, walking further into the house. “I missed you. I’mma have to steal you for the weekend. Is that cool with you?”

As if Kayla knew what I was asking, she bobbed her head and rocked in my arms while I searched for her father. At the sound of my voice, he came out of the kitchen holding a chicken leg in one hand and a beer in the other, which would explain why Honey had Kayla.

“Hey, baby. I thought you were still sleep?”

“She probably just woke up. Honey handed her to me and ran back up the stairs.”

Kahlil chuckled as he set his beer down before giving me a handshake. “I fixed lunch and hoped we would be able to eat it before she woke up, but baby girl obviously had other plans.”

“What you cook?”

“Fried some chicken with fries and spinach. It’s more than enough in there if you want some.”

“Aight, bet. I came bearing gifts, but I left it in the car, and I’m glad I did.”

“What’s up?” Kahlil asked as we sat across from each other. Kayla busied herself with trying to pull my chain from around my neck.

“I got the piece and the pictures. You’re good.”

Kahlil released a vocal breath before biting his knuckle and releasing a soft laugh. His head shook as he struggled to find the right words.

“You said it so simply. Like you didn’t just save my life. Secure my freedom. Keep my family together.” He looked away briefly, drying his eyes of the tears that had formed. “Thank you, brother.”

“Always. That’s what we got each other for.”

“And you don’t have to marry Piper?”

“Nah, there was someone that she valued more than me, thankfully.”

“What about Ahmad? I know he can’t be too happy about this.”

“He doesn’t know yet, but I’m going to let her handle it. He’s either going to prison or fleeing the country. Either way, he’s not a threat to us.”

Kahlil nodded. “And Janae? You told her yet?”

“Nah. I wanted to tie up that last loose end with Piper before I did. I guess I’ll stop by her place after this and hope finding out the truth about me didn’t change anything for her.”

“I’m sure it didn’t. If she’s anything like Honey, which I’m sure she is because they are best friends, she’s going to accept you unconditionally and not punish you by denying you of her presence because of things you did in your past.”

All I could do was nod. “From your lips to God’s ears.”

CHAPTER 28



Piper

After I picked Nathan up, we rode in silence. I stopped him by his barber so he could get his hair cut and shaved, and damn if my pussy didn't get wet at the sight of my best friend. The ride to my place was silent too. As much as I wanted to talk, I gave him space with our silence. When we made it to my place, he showered and changed into a wife beater and some black sweats that he had at my place. We often took turns spending the night at each other's home, so I already had everything he needed here.

Nathan went over to my bar in the dining room then made his way into the living room and sat next to me. He handed me a glass, and after taking a sip, I learned that it was Hennessy. All of my main rooms were decorated in blue, and right now, that was working against me. I felt just as blue as my surroundings. I didn't know if he was about to tell me he wanted nothing to do with me or what. All I could do was anxiously wait for him to say something. *Anything.*

He was thick as hell—at least two hundred and twenty-five pounds. But he was tall, so it was proportioned nicely. I loved how muscular he was. That combined with the tattoos on his arms and chest were a sight to behold. Nathan's hair was cut into a box fade, and he had a little hair on his face that he'd gotten trimmed earlier. He didn't rock a full beard, but he always kept a small amount of hair on his face. Nathan had soft under turned brown eyes that didn't really match the

hardness of his persona, and I think that was my favorite part of him.

“Are you upset with me?” I asked, unable to take the silence anymore. I looked over at him, eyes lowering to his Adam’s apple as he gulped his liquor. “I missed you.”

“You lied on me, Piper. After everything we’ve been through, after everything I’ve done for you. You were about to send me up the road for life.”

My head hung in shame as my whole heart burned.

“But I fixed it, Nate. And I’m so sorry for even *considering* lying for him knowing what that would do to you. I guess I’d convinced myself that I could keep you out of jail and still keep my father, but I realized if I have to choose between the two of you... I choose you. I’m sorry I didn’t make that choice immediately, but I chose you, Nathan.”

“Why?”

I frowned, confused by his question.

“Why what?”

“Why did you choose me?” I didn’t reply right away, so he continued. “For as long as I’ve known you, all you’ve talked about is earning your father’s love. It didn’t matter how much I told you it didn’t work that way, you insisted on doing whatever you had to do to make him love you and be proud of you. Why did you finally go against him for me?”

I placed my glass on my customized blue coffee table and took his free hand into mine. “You’re gonna laugh at me but try to hold it in until I’m done.”

Already, Nathan smiled and nodded in agreement. “Okay.”

“I went for a walk up the trail trying to clear my mind. I was feeling low about everything which wasn’t making sense. When my father first told me his plan, I felt like I could make the most of it by being with Tyreek, but the closer it got to time for us to meet, the worse I felt. So when I got back home, I went on this random chat site. You know I don’t have friends like that and you’re the only person I really trust to discuss

personal matters with, but I couldn't talk to you because it concerned you. So I basically went into this relationship forum, used a fake name, and told them my dilemma."

He chuckled. "You did *what?*"

"That doesn't matter. What matters is, I asked them what to do if you had to choose between gaining your father's love and someone really close to you. One of them said if I haven't gotten my father's love after thirty years, I'll never get it, and the other one asked me something that changed my perspective. She asked me if my father was even capable of loving me. She told me to read that bible chapter where it describes love and to put his name in it. I think it's first Corinthians four through seven or some shit like that. Anyway, I put his name in, and none of that fit him." I paused and looked away. "Then I put your name in, and it did." His hand cupped my cheek, forcing me to look at him. "I couldn't deny in that moment that you loved me more than my father ever had, and instead of fighting for him to love me, I made up in my mind to be grateful for the love that I already have in you." I growled when I felt my eyes get watery, making him laugh again. "I chose you because I love you, Nathan, and I know that you love me too."

"Do you know that I'm in love with you?"

My heart dropped as I struggled to process his words. "You're in love with me?" I repeated. Nathan nodded as he set his glass on the coffee table. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't want to compete with him in your heart and life. I felt like you wouldn't be able to cling to any man the way you were supposed to because of him, so I settled for being your friend. But I've always been in love with you, Piper, that's why I've handled you the way I do."

"This is... all I've ever wanted," I confessed, warmth filling my body from happiness. "I always said if you were to love me in that way, life would be perfect. You know me, flaws and all, and you accept me as I am. But I just... never thought you saw me in that way."

“Well, I do. And I hope that you can completely free yourself of your father so you can see you the way I see you too.”

I couldn't stop myself from leaning forward and connecting my lips with his. Cupping his cheek, I melted against him as he spread my lips with his tongue and deepened our kiss. My phone vibrated and it startled me so much I jumped as I pulled myself away from him. The only reason I reached for it was because there was a chance it was my father. I looked, and sure enough, it was.

“It's him,” I muttered.

“Answer,” Nathan directed, sitting up in his seat.

I answered the call and put it on speakerphone.

“Daddy?”

“You didn't think I would find out what you were up to?”

“Where are you?”

“Do you think I trust you with that information? Not only are you a snitch, but you went against your blood, and you *never* do that.”

Nathan squeezed my shoulder, and the gesture grounded me. Reminded me of what was most important.

“If you want to call me a snitch for telling the truth and saving the only man that's truly loved me, that's fine, Daddy. And since when do you care about blood? You've treated me like that didn't mean shit to you all this time. *Now* you care?”

“Where did I go wrong with you?”

That got a chuckle out of me. “The better question would be where do you go right, because you've always done wrong by me, Daddy. Always.”

“If that's how you feel, you shouldn't care that you won't be seeing me again. Not any time soon at least. Because of your betrayal I had to leave the country. I will be back, though, and you'd better damn well believe both you and Nathan are going to pay for this.”

He disconnected the call, and I stared at the phone for seconds on end. Honestly, I wasn't sure what my father was capable of. I wouldn't expect the average father to go after his daughter, but this was Ahmad Grisham that we were talking about. He'd discarded of me while I was a child, not seeing my value until I was old enough for him to use and allow men to abuse. There was no telling what he'd do to me.

"Are you okay?" Nathan asked, pulling my attention back to him.

I forced a smile. "I have you, so I'm more than okay."

"You know that I'm not going to let him do anything to hurt you, right?"

Under different circumstances I would say yes, but I didn't know what my father was going to have in store, or when he planned to strike. For now, though, I wouldn't worry about that. He was gone indefinitely, and I was finally free of him. Free to live and love for myself and with my best friend. My best friend who was in love with me. That recollection had me smiling as I straddled him, and Nathan wasted no time squeezing my ass and letting his hands rest on my hips.

"I know, Nathan." Cupping his cheek, I added, "And I'm in love with you too."

He gave me the sexiest grin before reconnecting his lips with mine. This wasn't how I saw myself getting to love, but I was glad I'd finally gotten here, and I prayed my father stayed the hell away and allowed me to finally live the life I deserved.

EPILOGUE



Janae
It was my turn to host dinner for my family, which was a welcomed treat. With my work schedule in the past, I didn't have time to do more than show up and eat before I had to rush back out. I could admit, it felt great hosting parties and dinners again. That was something that I'd genuinely loved to do. My family and friends had always meant *so* much to me.

The joy that I got from cleaning and cooking and prepping before spending hours having an amazing time with my family was beyond compare. All we did was sit around, reminisce, and talk shit, and I loved every minute of it. We did a hell of a lot of drinking too. It was funny because my mom had gotten wine drunk and it made me think about Tyreek's mom. I couldn't wait to see them together, drinking and laughing, dancing and having a great time. Just the thought of that had a huge smile lifting the corners of my mouth as I carried another tray from the dining room to the kitchen. I was extremely relaxed and probably wouldn't clean and put the leftovers up until in the morning.

"You need me to do anything before I go, sis?" my brother, Jason, asked with a lazy smile.

He'd fallen asleep twice which hadn't surprised me. Once he got in the corner with his recliner and space heater, he was out for the count.

"I'm good. Just let me know when you've made it home."

“I’m probably going to a friend’s house, so I’ll let you know when I get there.”

“Mhm.” I eyed him skeptically as he grabbed a chip and covered it with my famous spinach artichoke dip. “What friend is this?”

“She won’t be around long, so you don’t need to meet her.”

My eyes rolled as I leaned against the counter. Jason was the oldest, but I was the one always checking in with him as far as relationships go. He was my protector, but Jason had always been a bit reckless with his own heart. I wasn’t exactly sure what made him become that way because we had a great example with our parents.

It wasn’t that he devalued or disrespected love or women, he just... couldn’t settle down for the life of him. I think it was hard for a woman to keep his interest, which to the average person, meant changing your type. To Jason, however, he was so consumed by the idea of fun and excitement that he didn’t really care about anything else. If he had a good time with a woman, he was temporarily okay, no matter what else they had in common or how her character was.

“Are you at least being careful with this woman, Jace? You’re going to fuck around and get one of them pregnant and realize she might be fun but not the woman you want to go half on a baby with.”

His eyes rolled toward the ceiling. “Don’t start mommying me, Nae.”

“I’m not trying to.” I couldn’t stop the pout that covered my face as he gave me a hug. “I just want the best for you.”

“When it’s my time to get it, I’ll have it. Until then, I’m having fun. But what’s up with you and Tyreek? Why didn’t he come through tonight?”

I hadn’t told anyone in my family about the last thing that created an issue between me and Tyreek. What was I supposed to say exactly? That he and his brother used to kill people and he’s being blackmailed into marrying someone else? Couldn’t

possibly say that, especially when I had faith that Tyreek and I would make our way back to each other. As far as I was concerned, this was a brief intermission, and things between us would return to normal... eventually.

I didn't realize I was rubbing my ring finger until Jason covered my hands with his and asked, "What happened?"

"Nothing I can really talk about, but it was beyond our control. He's... working on it though."

"Did he get someone pregnant?"

"What? God, no." I chuckled with a shake of my head as he crossed his arms.

Now, it was his turn to interrogate me.

"Did he cheat?"

"Jason, no. Nothing like that. I promise it's okay. Well, not okay, but something we're going to work out. I don't know when, but it'll work out. Don't worry about me, okay?"

My brother eyed me skeptically before giving me a slow bob of his head. "Alright. I'm here if you need me. How are you spending the rest of the night?"

"I thought about going somewhere to listen to some live music, but I'm beat. Think I'm gonna order me some tacos and crawl into bed."

He chuckled as we headed out of the kitchen. "You got all this food in here and your ass still want them damn tacos?"

I shrugged with a grin. "What? They are my favorite food. I could eat those tacos every day of my life and be satisfied."

His head shook as it often did when we started to talk about my love for tacos, specifically tacos from Tacos Nganas.

"As much as you love tacos, I'm surprised you haven't tried to go to Mexico."

"It's on my list, but I'm content with just going to Cali, you know? I think that's why I love TNG so much. They probably have the most authentic tasting tacos in Memphis."

“What about Elena’s?”

My head shook. “Nah. After having TNG, I can’t even get down with Elena’s like that. I love the fried fish taco there but that’s about it.”

We embraced at the door again as he told me, “Call me if you need me, sis. I love you.”

“I will, and I love you too. Please be safe tonight.”

Jason smiled with a shake of his head as he opened the door, and we both were surprised to see Tyreek on the other side of it. I hadn’t seen him since he told me about everything, so it was a bit of an understatement to say I was surprised and excited to see him.

The two men greeted each other, and Jason joked about how we were just talking about tacos, and that was what made me lower my eyes from Tyreek’s face to his hands. He had a large bag from Tacos Nganas, and I didn’t know why, but that made me get emotional. Maybe because it was yet another piece of proof of just how well he knew me, paid attention to me, and was after my heart.

I waited until Jason left to wave at Tyreek.

He smiled softly before asking, “Can I come in?”

“Are you married?” My eyes shifted to his ring finger.

“Are *you* married?”

“No?” I asked more than said.

“Then I’m not either. Can I come in?”

I gave him a small smirk as I nodded my head. He was so cute when he wanted to be. I started to call him out on that shit but decided against it. If Tyreek was insinuating I was the only woman he planned to marry, maybe that meant he was here to deliver some great news.

We walked toward the kitchen, getting comfortable in the bar stools behind the island.

“If I would’ve known you’d cooked, I wouldn’t have gotten these.”

“I actually was about to get some of these. I cooked hours ago for my family, so I’m hungry again.” As I tore into the bag, I added, “Thank you, baby.”

“Always.”

“Is everything okay?” I checked, opening the small containers of salsa to dip my chicken, shrimp, and steak tacos in.

“Everything’s great. Piper and I worked together to end this mess before it could begin. She’s content, her father isn’t an issue, and I don’t have to marry her to protect my brother.”

I nodded, avoiding his eyes. Though I was really happy to hear that, I knew if I looked at him, I’d get emotional. Faith or not, the situation still hurt. Not so much because Tyreek chose his brother over me, but because that was the first time in a long time that I’d opened myself up to a man.

“I’m sorry about not telling you about my past sooner,” he continued. “Maybe if I would have, you could have been more prepared for something like that to happen. I didn’t tell you because that’s a part of me that I want to leave behind, and I didn’t want to risk you leaving me or looking at me differently because of it.”

“It’s your right to share or keep whatever details you’d like, Tyreek. I wouldn’t have left you because of that though. It’s in the past.”

I looked over at him finally and tugged my bottom lip between my teeth.

“And I’m sorry about choosing my brother over you. Well, I’m not sorry, but I’m sorry about hurting you. If you were my wife, I would have chosen you with no hesitation but...”

“Tyreek,” I called, smiling softly as I covered his hand with mine. “I would have done the same thing. You’re right, it would have been different if we were married, but we weren’t, so I get it. Did it hurt? Yes. But I knew that was something beyond my control, and quite frankly, I’m tired of letting things I can’t control, control me.”

Tyreek stood and made his way between my legs. I wrapped my arms around his neck as he wrapped his around my waist.

“You seem at peace. Is it because you’ve released me from your heart?”

“Not at all. I trusted that things would work out. God gave me confirmation that you were my husband, not hers or anyone else’s, so I just... had to trust and be patient. You waited for me, so it was my turn to wait for you.”

His forehead rested on mine, causing me to smile and lean further into him.

“No more breaks, Nae. I want you to be mine.”

“Then I’m yours.” I couldn’t stop the goofy giggle that escaped me. “And you’re mine?”

“Always.” He lifted his forehead from mine, cupped my cheeks, and looked me dead in my eyes to say, “I love you, Janae, and I promise you, every part of you is safe with me.”

Swallowing back tears, I looked away briefly as my chin trembled. I wasn’t sure how Tyreek knew I needed to hear that, to know that, but I already felt that with him. Him saying it was only further confirmation. After Michael, I felt so alone and insecure. Not in the sense of lacking confidence, but in the sense of... lacking safety. The man that was supposed to be that for me had stripped me of it with his disrespect, rejection, and abandonment at a time when I needed him most. I wasn’t sure when, if ever, I’d feel secure with a man again, but I felt that way with Tyreek, and I only had God to thank for that.

“I love you too, Reek. Thank you.”

He laughed before giving me a soft kiss. “What are you thanking me for?”

I laughed too, because I honestly had no idea. “I don’t know. Just seemed like the right thing to say.”

His head shook as he chuckled and sat down next to me, opening the tacos that he’d apparently bought for himself.

“Well, if you’re thanking me for loving you... thank you for loving me too.”

“You’re welcome but um...” My fingers motioned between my tacos and the ones he’d scooted over in front of him. “What’re you doing with my tacos?”

His face twisted in confusion as he looked from his to mine. “Nah, I got these for me.”

“Then where’s the rest of mine?”

“Janae... I bought your ass three tacos. That ain’t enough?”

“Absolutely not! I need like five.”

“Fine.” He pushed them back over to me and stood. “You can have those, and I’ll eat some of what you cooked.”

“Awww, you’re giving me your food? We *really* go together now.”

Tyreek sucked his teeth before chuckling and placing a loud, sloppy kiss to my lips. “You’re lucky I love making you happy with your spoiled ass.”

“Mhm, thank you, baby.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

As I watched him head over to the counter by the stove to fix himself a plate, I knew exactly what I was thanking him for this time. I was thanking him for his grace, for his patience, for his love, and for his heart. Mine was so broken and bruised when he met me, and though Tyreek said he couldn’t heal me, God had done so with his love. I’d forever be grateful to him, no matter how long our relationship lasted. But something told me this was a forever kind of thing, and that had me smiling as I silently thanked God too.

The End for Tyreek & Janae 😊

Let me know in your review if you want more of Nathan and Piper (And Ahmad)

Also... Antonne is up next!

As always, if you enjoyed this, please leave a review on Amazon, mark it as read on Goodreads, and recommend it to a friend.

We hate errors, but they do happen, so if you found any, please send them directly to emailblove@gmail.com with MT ERRORS as the subject.