



HARD TO LUV  
MYZELL & RYAN

K.C. MILLS

*myzell and ryan*

HARD TO LUV

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

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## *note to the readers:*

HELLO, beautiful people:

If you're returning, welcome back. If you're new... welcome to my crazy world.

Please be mindful that this is a **RE-RELEASE**, The series was originally **PUBLISHED** between **2015-2019** (All books of each series are combined to make one novel.)

These books are **URBAN/STREET-LIT** themed which include but are not limited to content that has: **EXPLICIT LANGUAGE - SEX -DRUG USE - DRUG DEALERS.**

These books were published at the inception of my career. July 2021, I celebrated my sixth year in the literary world, so there has been growth. I must note that if you prefer my newer more contemporary work, these stories may not meet your preference.

However, if you love a great hood romance which still highlights my signature style - alpha male who isn't afraid to show his heart - then dive right in. If you're open to falling in love with love, please proceed.

As always,

*Crafting Romance with an Edge!*

Sincerely,

K.C. Mills ♥

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## *prologue*

“YOU CAN’T HAVE THAT BABY.” *Cutty paused long enough to send death rays at his sister before he angrily began pacing again. “You will not have that goddamn baby. This changes everything, Tan. Every. Fucking. Thing!” he roared.*

*“Don’t you think I know that? But I don’t care, Carlton, I’m having this baby. Just let me tell him. You never know. He loves me. He will love this baby. And if he loves me, then he’ll take care of us. We can still have it all. I’m sure he’ll let you...”*

*“Let me what, Tan? Work for him? Be one of his goddamn errand boys? I’m not doing that shit. I want to be in charge. I want that shit to be mine. The fuck you thinking about? That’s why we did this in the first place. You think I invested all this time to be a goddamn errand boy? Hell no. You’re not having that goddamn baby. We have a job to do, and I can’t have you all emotional. If he knows about that baby, it will change everything. And what the hell do you think he will do when he finds out the only reason you opened your legs for him was because I told you to? Do you think he’ll still take care of you and that bastard child that you’re carrying? Huh, Tanessa?”*

*Cutty walked up on his sister and got right in her face. The hate in his eyes was so intense that she stepped back. The way he moved through his personalities was so crazy to her. He could be as calm as a summer breeze and then, in the blink of an eye, as violent as a tornado. That was part of the reason why she always just fell in line with his plans and ideas. She didn’t want to be on the receiving end of one of his violent*

*storms. Tan loved her brother and it was just the two of them, but some days she felt like her life would be much better if she just left and never looked back. This was one of those moments.*

*“He doesn’t have to know.”*

*Cutty laughed arrogantly and then glared at his sister. He loved her, but in his eyes, she could be so clueless sometimes. This plan had been set in motion for a long time. She wasted a year of his time getting close to the mark, learning his ways, and just when the time was approaching for him to follow through with his plan, she pulls this shit.*

*“Carlton,” she began slowly, with her eyes locked into his. She touched his arm and he yanked away.*

*“What I tell you about calling me that shit? That’s his name. I’m not that muthafucker, and I don’t want his goddamn name,” her brother growled when she referred to him as Carlton. It was their father’s name, one that they both hated, but Cutty more than anyone.*

*“I’m sorry, Cutty, just calm down. We don’t have to—”*

*“You’re not having that goddamn baby. That’s it.”*

*Cutty turned to walk off when Tan yelled out in desperation. “I have to. It’s too late for me to do anything about it.”*

*“The fuck you mean too late? Get rid of that shit.”*

*“I can’t, I waited too long. But what if I just stay away until I have it and then go back?”*

*She lied. Tan knew that she was barely even three months, but she wasn’t trying to kill her baby. She loved it already and just couldn’t do it.*

*“How the fuck do you think that’s going to work, Tan? You sound stupid. You can’t just disappear on that nigga and then show up again.”*

*Thinking quickly because she was desperate, she threw out an idea. “What if he thinks that someone took me? He has enemies, Cutty, a lot of them. We could make him believe that.*

*You can call him. Tell him that you have me. I know he'll believe you. Please, Cutty," she pleaded, hoping that he would agree.*

*The tears fell as she watched and waited. She needed him to agree. Cutty held an evil gaze with her for a few moments longer but didn't say a word. He simply walked away...*

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## A YEAR AND COUNTING...

“Yo, where the hell you at, Zell?”

MyZell looked over at the king-sized bed that he was sitting across from and glanced at the body balled up in the center of it. He still had no clue why he'd brought her there, but something about her just wouldn't allow him to leave her behind. He couldn't tell Trez that because it would require an explanation that he didn't currently have.

“I'm caught up right now,” was all he offered.

“Caught up? The hell you mean caught up, Zell? Did something go wrong? Nah, fuck that. I already know better, so what's the deal, bro?”

He chuckled to himself at his best friend Trez's reaction. MyZell was never caught up. He didn't know why that statement had even left his mouth. He was extremely good at his job, and there wasn't a chance in hell that he would get caught slipping. But admitting to Trez that after he had gone in to kill Graves and found a female balled up in the corner slightly beaten, possibly strung out, and then took her with him wasn't going to fly. Trez wouldn't have believed him anyway.

“Zell, the fuck, bruh? Did you hear me?”

“Yeah, I heard you, but let me hit you later. I need to handle something real quick.”

Pulling the phone from his ear, he could still hear Trez yelling, but MyZell ended the call anyway. *He'll be alright*, he

thought as placed his phone down on the table next to where he was sitting.

The sound of her mumbling prompted him to sit up, lean forward, and prop his forearms on his leg as he intertwined his fingers. He watched as she moved around in the bed, moaning a bit. Likely from pain or withdrawal. Possibly both. MyZell noticed that she was not only beaten, but high as a kite when he found her. Even through all of her bruises, disheveled hair, and tattered clothing, what little she wore, he could see how beautiful she was and that she didn't belong with Graves.

Now here he was watching intently to see if she would actually wake up this time. For the past three hours it had been the same thing. She would toss, turn, moan, and even cry out in her sleep for help, but then she would settle and fall back into a deep slumber.

It was odd for him to feel the need to stay there with her while all of this was going on, not because he wasn't a caring person, just simply because he didn't do people. However, something about this mystery girl intrigued him, and MyZell had to know her story. Even if it was just so that he could give her a few dollars and send her on her way, he had to at least hear her voice. Until that happened, he was staying put.

Being the man that he was, it was strange for him to be pulled in by someone who he wasn't close to. MyZell was torn between his usual desire to be alone and his new addiction for finding out who she was. He wasn't your normal guy. He was far from it. MyZell was a big name in Miami, but people knew very little about him. In fact, all they really knew was that he was not the type of man that you crossed without consequences. That was the way he liked things. He kept to himself because it was easier. He didn't trust easily because the one time he did, it had come with a very expensive lesson. A lesson that cost him the one person he loved most in life.

As Ryan sat up and adjusted her eyes, she looked around the hotel room in confusion. Her heart started racing when she didn't recognize her surroundings. The last thing she remembered was being sent out on her first job. Her first memory was being driven in the back of a Bentley to meet a

man named Graves. She had vague memories of being amazed by his million-dollar mansion, which was lavishly furnished, and the dinner they'd shared which was prepared by his personal chef.

After that, the details got fuzzy. She remembered feeling lightheaded and Graves all over her. Ryan didn't take drugs, so he had to have slipped her something. There were flashes of him ripping at her clothes and then putting his hands on her when she refused to have sex with him. That was all she could recall. And now she was in a hotel room that she didn't recognize.

Ryan pulled the covers back and realized that she was in a man's Nike t-shirt and nothing else. She began to touch her body and frantically look around. That was when her eyes landed on MyZell and she really started to panic. She gripped at the covers and pulled them back up over her body. Without even realizing it, she found herself scooting to the headboard of the bed that she was in.

"Relax, shorty. I'm not going to hurt you."

His deep voice flowed through the room, and for some reason, it relaxed her a bit, but she still didn't know this man. Her eyes moved across his golden skin which seemed to be covered in ink on every exposed part. He wore all black, including a ball cap that was pulled down low over his head, but still exposed nice tapered curls that spilled out the perimeter of it. There was a certain ruggedness to him which drew her in and made her feel safe, but he was still a stranger.

"Who... who are you?"

"How about we start with who you are and why you were with Graves? I've known him for a while, so I know you're not his girl."

"I don't know you, so why would I tell you that?" she stated defensively.

Her stranger was quite handsome. A little too sexy for the two of them to be sharing such an awkward moment, but

regardless of that, she didn't know him and wasn't about to disclose personal information to a stranger.

“And I don't know you either, shorty. Not to sound like an asshole, but my identity is far more important than yours. So, I need to know who you are before I start revealing shit to you.”

“Well, how about this? You don't have to tell me anything. If you just leave the room, I'll be on my way.”

“Where you gonna go? When I found you, you had no clothes, no money, you didn't have shit, shorty. You're wearing my shirt, so the least you can do is say thank you.”

“Thank you for what? Insulting me? I have somewhere to go. Regardless of what you think, I have my own place, and if you will please leave, I'll get out of your life and go there.”

MyZell chuckled. He didn't believe her. He leaned back in the chair that he was sitting in and peered at her with a smirk on his face. He was good at reading people and he knew that she was lying. Mostly because the details didn't add up. If she wasn't Graves's girl, then she was likely paid to be there. She didn't really look like she hung out on a corner, but she could have easily worked for one of the many agencies in Miami. There were plenty. He'd never used them because he didn't have to, but he knew about all of them because his drugs supplied them.

“Who do you work for and what are you on?” he asked, causing her to frown at him.

She was upset that he figured out the fact that she was working, but she was also annoyed that he assumed she was a junkie.

“I don't know what I'm on. I don't do drugs, at least not willingly. He gave me something, and I don't know what it was. It had to be in my drink or food.”

“Figures,” MyZell mumbled.

Graves was the type. He wasn't a man who respected boundaries which was why MyZell filled him full of lead hours ago.

“If you’re done judging me, I’d like to go home now.”

“Home, huh?”

Ryan watched him, trying to figure him out, but she couldn’t read him. He was incredibly calm, but something about him made her uneasy. She just couldn’t wrap her mind around what that was. She could tell from his clothes and jewelry that he had money, and he didn’t seem like the type who took orders from anyone, so that led her to believe that he was important. His demeanor had a certain arrogance to it.

“Yes, home.” She glanced at him and they faced off in a stare down until she looked away and he smiled.

“Aight, bet. Let’s go, I’ll take you where you need to go, but you have to tell me your name first.” MyZell stood and folded his arms across his chest.

Ryan watched the definition in his arms become more apparent before she caught herself staring and focused on his face.

“No, thank you. I’ll manage.”

“How, shorty? You don’t have a phone, no purse, no keys, how the hell you gonna manage? I’m not asking for your life story, just your name. You can’t give me that?”

“No but thank you for the offer. I would like to use the phone here if you don’t mind.”

Her eyes moved around the room again as she tried to figure out who she would call. Lydia came to mind, but she didn’t know if that was a good idea. Her first job and she ends up in a hotel room damn near naked with a man who was not her client. She had no idea what had happened to Graves or how she’d even ended up there. The problem was that Lydia was the only person she could call.

She had only been in Miami for two months and, to preserve what little money she got away with when she’d left New York, Ryan had been living out of her car. Unfortunately, it had gotten impounded, so she took the job with Lydia, assuming that she could just go on a few dates to make enough money to get her car out. Everything important to her was in

it. All of her belongings and her personal records. She couldn't even get a job because her social security card was in her car. Besides, she didn't have an address.

After a month of being in Miami, she hadn't been able to find a job. Ryan toughed it out for another month before Lydia approached her and asked if she wanted to work for her agency. Just companionship to very wealthy men was how she explained it. Ryan knew exactly what that meant, so she told her no at first, but accepted Lydia's business card and gave in once her car got impounded. Now, here she was.

"Look, we can play this game all night, but you and I both know that you don't have anybody to call. You don't have anywhere to go, and you damn sure don't have an apartment."

MyZell wasn't one hundred percent sure, but he had a strong feeling about it, so he decided to try his luck. As irritating as she was, there was something about her that stopped him from throwing up deuces and walking out the hotel room, that he'd spent way too much money for, and not giving a fuck what happened to her after that.

"You don't—"

"Where you live, shorty?"

"Over on NW Twentieth Street."

"Oh yeah? That's a pretty bad area, shorty. You don't look like you belong over there. I know it very well. What apartments?"

"That's none of your business."

He smirked because he'd caught her in a lie. She just tossed out the name of a street. He could tell from her northern accent that she wasn't from Miami.

"Yo, let's go. You can stay at my place tonight. I'll have my sister bring you some clothes, and then, tomorrow, you can go to your apartment."

"I don't know you."

"True, but I'm the best offer you have right now."

“I could just stay here. You paid for this room, right?”

“Yeah, but then what?”

“If you’re being so considerate, why can’t your sister bring me clothes here?”

“Cause that’s not what I’m offering. So you either go with me or stay here in my goddamn t-shirt and figure shit out on your own. You ain’t got shit that I want, so you’re safe. What I can offer you is clothes, whatever you want to eat, and a place to lay your head tonight.”

Ryan frowned at him saying that she didn’t have anything he wanted. She might not be at her best right now, but she damn sure had a lot to offer. Her hands immediately moved to her jet-black, silky hair that was all over her head, which made MyZell smile.

“You look like shit, but that’s not why I said you don’t have anything I want. You’re clearly beautiful. I can see that even in your current state, but what I meant by that was that you’re not in the position to deal with a man like me right now. No offense, but I’m not like that nigga Lydia set you up with. Graves is a grimy nigga who don’t give two fucks about who he lays down with.”

Ryan’s eyes traced his body again as he towered over the bed that she was still in. As much as she hated to admit it, he was right. But it still didn’t take from the fact that he insulted her.

“Shorty, it’s been a long day, and I’m hungry. You going with me or not?”

Not feeling like she had much of a choice, Ryan sighed and climbed out of bed. She looked down at her body and the shirt that she wore stopped mid-thigh.

“I can’t go out there like this.”

“You’re with me, nobody will say anything to you. Let’s go.”

MyZell didn’t know why but knowing that she accepted his offer had him instantly happy. He knew that because of



who he was, he could have made one phone call and had an entire wardrobe at the room within the hour, but he wanted her to go with him. He had to know more about her and he wasn't going to be satisfied until he did.

Lifting his phone from the table where he placed it, he then moved to the door. Ryan followed and he placed his hand on the knob to open it, but then stopped.

“What?”

“You didn't tell me your name.”

Moving one of her hands up the opposite arm, Ryan fidgeted and then looked into his eyes. She noticed how endearing his eyes were, which drew her in, but for some reason there was sadness in them.

That sadness relaxed her, so she gave in. “Ryan.”

MyZell chuckled. “Word, that's a dude's name. But it works, I like it.”

“Can we go now?” was all she said.

“Yeah, let's roll.”

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ONCE MYZELL and Ryan had reached his condo out in Coral Gables, he got her situated in the kitchen and slipped off to call his sister. After reaching his bedroom, he closed the door and dialed Myah, praying that she wasn't busy. Either way, he didn't really care. Although she was the oldest by two years, he funded her lifestyle. True enough, she created her own salary at the nail bar that he'd purchased for her a few years ago, but it in no way supported the lifestyle that she was accustomed to.

Her eight thousand square foot house on the beach, the Autobiography Range Rover that she drove, or the very expansive wardrobe that she pranced around in. That was all due to funding from her brother. Her nail bar was more like a hobby and a way to fill her days with something other than hanging out with her trifling leeches that she called friends clubbing and shopping.

Not that MyZell minded. His sister was his world and she could have every penny he made if that was what she wanted. He loved her just that much, especially since for as long as he could remember, it had just been the two of them. Raised by their grandmother until the day she passed because their parents didn't have an understanding of what parenting really meant, MyZell had come to the realization that she was the only family he had. Well, besides his homeboy Trez, so if Myah asked, she received without a second thought.

“Yo, where you at?”

Glancing at his watch, he realized it was just after ten on a Friday night. He knew the answer before she even answered.

“About to hit up Story with Lonnie and Rita. What’s up?”

“Tell them leeching, no good hoes to meet you there. I need a favor.”

“Why you always gotta call them out like that, Zell? They didn’t do shit to you.”

Annoyed that she was defending them, he pinched the bridge of his nose and moved on.

“Man, fuck them hoes. But I need you do me a solid.”

“Aight, I can swing by there tomorrow. What you need?”

“Nah, not tomorrow. Now.”

“Zell, really? I’m like walking out the door right now to go pick up Rita.”

“Man, what I say? Tell them to call a fucking Uber or some shit like that. I need you to do me a favor.”

“Fine, what is it?”

“Head to the store and pick up a few things for me.”

“I know you’re not asking me to be your fucking errand girl, MyZell. The fuck I look like?”

“Yo, watch your damn mouth when you’re talking to me. That shit ain’t pretty, Myah, and you sound like a fucking dude.”

Myah sighed and got it together. Even though she was older, she knew that her brother didn’t play. If he checked her, she had better accept it and get in line.

“What do you need?”

“I don’t really know, just girl shit. What would you need if you got stuck somewhere and didn’t have anything, like clothes and everything? Just figure that out, buy it, and bring it to me.”

“Wait, you got some hoe at your house and she don’t have shit? Who you fucking with, Zell? And why the hell she at your house? I know you know better than that.”

“Yo, Myah, one more time, aight? I’m not fucking playing with you about your goddamn mouth. I’m at my condo, just do what I asked, please, and then you can meet your hoe ass friends at the club but hurry up.”

“It’s after ten, where the hell am I supposed to get that kind of stuff, Zell?”

“Shit, I don’t know. Find a Target or something. It don’t have to be expensive.”

“So, not only do you have some random female at your spot, but she low class? You need to do better.”

“She ain’t low class.” Zell smiled and then shook his head. He really didn’t know what Ryan was because he didn’t know anything about her, but he had a feeling that she wasn’t. “At least I don’t think she is. Just hurry up and make sure you get everything.”

MyZell hung up and then looked around his room. He was totally off his game and doing something totally out of character. Why he’d even brought her to his home, even if it was just one of his hideaways, was still a mystery. That wasn’t really his thing. He did things a certain way and only dealt with a certain type of woman. MyZell was a very private man and, because of things that happened in his past, he was very cautious about who he allowed to get close to him. But for some reason, Ryan had managed to throw him off.

After a quick stop in the bathroom, with no rhythm or reason to what he was doing or what was about to happen next, he left his room to go join her. The condo they were in had an open floor plan, so the second he bent the corner to enter the living room, he could see her profile as she sat at the table in his kitchen leaning over the plastic container that held her food. She held a fork in her hand and she moved it around, giving the appearance that she was picking over her food. Her long, jet-black hair which had been covering her face was now tucked behind her ear, exposing the bruise on her cheek. Seeing it pissed him off. If he hadn’t already killed Graves, he would have surely taken his life just for that reason alone. No man should ever put their hands on a woman.

Feeling uncomfortable just standing there watching her, he made his way across the room until he was standing in the entrance that led to the kitchen. He leaned against the frame and Ryan looked up at him.

Even though she had been with him for the past hours, she still felt uncomfortable about her appearance and one hand moved through her hair before it tugged at his t-shirt, which she was still wearing. She had nothing up under it, so she pressed her knees together, making sure that her feet were flat on the floor.

“So you wanna tell me your real story or you gonna keep lying to me?” he asked.

“I don’t have a story and I thought you were going to have your sister bring me clothes.” Ryan began pushing the food around in her container again as she looked down at it.

“You don’t like it?”

“I do, I’m just not really hungry,” she stated dryly.

She didn’t know anything about this man and was in his home, damn near naked. That right there was enough to kill her appetite. Something about him felt off, but kind at the same time. She knew that he was someone important, but not in a way that she really needed to get involved in, but right now she was stuck. All she wanted was a bath, a good night’s sleep in a halfway decent bed, and then she could go back to figuring out the rest of her life.

With no expression, he moved toward her.

Ryan tensed up, not knowing what to expect, and she held her breath until his hand reached into the container in front of her and lifted one of the jumbo shrimp that she kept moving around.

Regardless of her situation, Ryan was particular about stuff like that, so she balled up her face and slid the container away from her.

“You can eat it.”

She looked up into his handsome and felt butterflies in her stomach, which almost overpowered the annoyance she felt from him putting his hand in her food.

“Why? My hands are clean,” he said with a smirk.

“I don’t know that.”

“Exactly, which is why I’m telling you they are. I just washed them after I used the bathroom.”

“Still, I’m not hungry, so it doesn’t matter.”

Wiping his hands on his jeans, he then grasped her chin lightly and lifted it to examine her face.

“Graves do that to you?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Just asking. I don’t know shit about you, and you won’t tell me anything.”

“I’m not a junkie and I’m not a prostitute.”

Ryan didn’t know why it mattered, but she felt like he was judging her. Even with him judging her, she wasn’t going to tell him who she was. But she was definitely going to tell him who she wasn’t.

“You got paid to go spend time with him, right?” He stood over her, which felt intimidating. She didn’t bother looking up, but she knew that he had his eyes on her.

“Not to have sex with him. I don’t do that.”

“Who you work for?”

“You wouldn’t know her, so it doesn’t matter.” Ryan could tell that Graves was the type of man who paid for companionship from a woman.

“I know everyone and it does matter to me anyway.”

“Lydia.”

MyZell chuckled and then looked her right in the eye. “She sent you there for sex.”

Before she could respond, his doorbell sounded and he left her there. She sat up straight, trying her best to listen, especially when she heard a female voice.

“Let me in, Zell.”

“Nah, just hand me the stuff. I thought you were in a hurry anyway.”

Ryan was now really curious about who his visitor was, so she stood and moved closer so that she could try and see. Unfortunately, from where she was standing, the door blocked her view.

“Zell, you’re acting real shady right now. Move.”

Myah pushed past her brother and Ryan ducked out of the way, trying to make sure they didn’t see her being nosy. She laid eyes on who could easily be his twin and assumed that it was his sister. Ryan thought she was beautiful. Her hair was cut in a short, asymmetrical style with one side of her head shaved. She was a few inches shorter than MyZell, with a shapely figure. Thick, but in all the right places. She was a few shades darker than he was but the two owned the same face.

“How the fuck am I being shady? Didn’t you say you had somewhere to be?” MyZell glared at his sister, annoyed by her persistence.

“I do, but you made me come here, so I want to at least see who this hoe is.”

“Man, give me what you brought and take your ass on. I don’t have time to fuck with you right now.”

“Fine, but don’t call me when you get caught up in some shit you can’t handle.” Myah pulled a leather Coach backpack off her shoulder and shoved it into her brother’s chest. He grabbed it and looked down.

“What’s this?”

“You said bring everything. She then held up a Target bag. “I brought clothes from my house, which you will replace. I wasn’t about to be all up in Target trying to find clothes, but I got everything else, and return my bag.”



MyZell smiled and then kissed his sister on the cheek.  
“Thanks, My.”

“Don’t thank me, pay me.”

She held her hand out, waiting for her brother to hand over cash that she knew he had.

“Why I gotta pay you to do me a favor, Myah?”

“Because it was inconvenient.”

“Man, your ass. I swear.” He reached into his pocket and handed over all the cash he had on him.

She grinned and then lifted her weight on her toes to peck her brother on the cheek.

“Thanks, baby. We’ll talk about this tomorrow.”

“Nah, we won’t. Be safe out there tonight, Myah, don’t let them hoes get you caught up. You know what, never mind. I’ll send somebody out there. I don’t trust they stupid asses.”

“Zell, no. Your people don’t let me fucking breathe without being all up in my personal space. I’m trying to chill.”

MyZell chuckled at how quickly she changed her tune.  
“I’ll tell them to stay back unless some shit pops off, but they’ll be there.”

“Fine. But I’m telling you, if they get in my way, I’m laying they asses out.”

“Man, you ain’t gon’ do shit but behave. Now get out before I change my mind and make you go home.”

“I’m twenty-eight years old, you can’t...”

MyZell gave her a look that shut her up quick. “Fine but promise me you’ll tell them not to be all up in my personal space.

“I got you.”

Throwing her arms around her brother’s neck, Myah smiled, knowing that he was only trying to keep her safe. His lifestyle had created a lot of enemies, so like it or not, she had to play by his rules.

Ducking around the corner, Ryan thought she had gone unnoticed as she hurried back to the chair that she was in, but the second MyZell entered the kitchen again, he let her know that she was busted.

“You’re nosy, shorty, but that was my sister, Myah.” He placed the leather Coach bag on the table along with the Target bag that his sister had given him. “I told her to get what you needed, so you should be good. She has clothes and shit in there, probably some expensive shit, but you should have everything. Come on, you can use the guest room.”

Ryan felt weird at the fact that he spoke so robotically. Adding the fact that his expression was unreadable, she couldn’t tell if he was upset that she had been spying on him, so just lifted the bags and followed him.

She took note of her surroundings and one thing was evident. He was either insanely neat or he didn’t spend a lot of time at home. The place was nicely decorated, but simple. The furniture was expensive, but it all blended together so that you knew it was there, but nothing really jumped out at you. There wasn’t a homey feel to the place.

“My room is right there,” MyZell instructed as the two of them passed the master suite.

Not really sure why he had pointed that out, Ryan nodded. She kept her eyes on his muscular back as she moved behind him, admiring how there was a natural flow to how he moved. She thought it was sexy, not over the top like he was even trying to do it, but it was just turned her on. She shook the thought from her head as he stopped abruptly and she ran into him, due to the fact that she was lost in her thoughts. He didn’t even acknowledge it. Instead, he simply pointed to the door.

“I’ll be in my room if you need anything,” was the last thing he said and then left her standing there.

Embarrassed that she had run into him because she hadn’t been paying attention, Ryan hurried into the room, shut the door, and then pressed her back against it before her head fell back.

“I can’t believe that this is my life,” she mumbled, looking around the sparsely decorated room.

There was a dresser with a mirror on one wall, a queen-sized bed with simple navy sheets, no comforter, and an armoire in the corner. She noticed two doors, one of which she assumed was a bathroom and the other a closet.

It was simple but compared to sleeping in her car and then the shelter she had spent two days in, it was like being gifted a night in a luxury suite. She was thankful and not in any position to complain. She wouldn’t have anyway.

Running her fingers through her hair before she moved to the bed, she plopped down and began digging through the items in the leather backpack that MyZell had given her. She found two pairs of leggings and a matching t-shirt from Victoria Secret, along with two pair of boy cut panties, a sports bra, socks, and a pair of slides. Ryan was grateful that she would be able to wash the previous events away from her body, so she didn’t care what it was.

After she was done inspecting what was in the bag, she dumped out the contents of the Target bag and found everything she needed to shower. There was every hygiene product that you could think of amongst other things. She loaded everything in her arms and then made her way to the bathroom. After looking around, she located a linen closet where she found a towel and washcloths. Turning the water on as hot as it would go, she pulled the t-shirt that she was wearing over her head and stepped inside.

It had been an extremely long day and all she wanted to do was climb into bed and dream about what her life used to be and not what it had become.

## *three*

THE NEXT MORNING Ryan woke up from the best night's sleep that she had experienced in months, but the feeling quickly dissipated after she tried to move. Her body ached and her face was sore. Feeling like she had been hit by a moving vehicle, she cringed from the pain as she slowly moved her body to the edge of the bed that she was in.

Looking around the bedroom, she sighed, knowing that she would be leaving soon and back out on the streets, with no money, and no way of getting her car back. She definitely couldn't go back to Lydia and explain why the job that she'd sent her on had gone terribly wrong. Ryan herself had no idea. She vaguely remembered details, but whatever Graves had given her had totally screwed up her memory. She had no idea what had happened to the clothes that Lydia had provided her with or the cell phone that she had given her to stay in touch. There was no way she was going anywhere near her, which also meant that she couldn't go back to the only place she knew in Miami because Lydia and her people would surely come looking for her there.

She was stuck and also had to figure out what she was going to tell MyZell. She had a feeling that he wasn't going to just drive her to some random place and leave her. She had lied to him, pretending to have her own place. She wondered if he knew that she was lying. For some reason, she figured he did, but either way, she was sticking to it. She didn't know him, and from what she could tell, he didn't seem like the type of man that she needed to know. He was caught up in

something, likely the same something that had landed her in Miami without a dime to her name.

Ryan had fallen in love with the wrong man. He was good to her until he found something better and that was when things had gotten bad. She understood her position, but what she didn't know was why he'd refused to let her go. If he wanted someone new, then she would gladly walk away. In fact, she tired, and in return, he tried to take her life. Not knowing what else to do, she stayed, until she could hide enough money to run. She hopped in the car with only enough money for gas and food and drove south. She wanted to be as far away from him as she could, so she kept driving until she ended up in Miami. It had taken her three days, but when she made it, she finally felt free. The problem was that she really wasn't. She knew Polo would never let her go. His obsession with her was deadly.

She had been foolish enough to believe that he would love her forever, but what she realized was that he only loved himself and his money. She was an accessory to him. He bought her expensive things and paraded her around town, but it was all a show. Polo loved women; women that he didn't hide from her. It broke her heart every time she found out about a new one, but when he moved in his pregnant girlfriend, she had enough.

Not only was she pregnant, but the two had a three-year-old son, a son that Ryan hadn't known existed. That meant that he'd gotten Avarie pregnant right after they met. Ryan thought things were good with them back then, but apparently they weren't if he was sleeping with other women.

Ryan had cried for days and then made up her mind to leave. She was stronger than that and wasn't about to let a man break her. Even if she didn't really believe that, she was going to make it be true, now here she was two months later with nothing, and still trying to figure out what was next. She debated getting a real job because she feared that Polo would find her, which was why she had yet to do so, but money had run out and she had to do something.

She was alone, with no family to speak of, and no clue what her next move would be.

After climbing out of bed, she slowly made her way to the bathroom. Turning on the light, she then positioned herself in front of the mirror that hung on the wall above the sink and examined her face. It was better than it had been the night before because the swelling had gone down, but there was a bruise just under her right eye and her entire left cheek had turned colors. Lightly touching her face, she flinched and then pulled her hair up on top of her head. She twisted it into a tight bun, since she didn't have anything to secure it with, and then proceeded to wash her face first and then brush her teeth.

Once she was done, she used the bathroom and then washed her hands before she left. Running her hands down the fitted t-shirt and leggings that she was in, she moved to the door and pulled it open before sticking her head out. Not sure why she did that, she shook her head and stepped out of the room that she had been in and decided to go find MyZell. She seriously considered just leaving but had noticed an alarm when they had gotten there the night before and didn't want it to go off and further embarrass her.

She moved slowly down the hall and stopped when she got to his room. The door was cracked, so she peeked inside, where she found him stretched out on the bed. He was on top of the covers with one arm folded across his chest and the other covering his face. She couldn't help but admire his body, since he was only in a pair of boxer briefs. Ryan's vision moved up his legs and her eyes bucked when she reached the swell at his waist. She felt her body tingle at the thought of what it really looked like. She kept going to his abs, which looked professionally cared for, and then to his chest and arms.

She couldn't help but think that he appeared to be a work of art, as sexy as he was, but then she started to feel uncomfortable that she was standing there staring at him. She turned to leave, but his voice caught her off guard. She hadn't understood what he said, so she spoke up softly.

“Excuse me?”

He spoke again, but it was a name, so she assumed that he was talking in his sleep and quickly left, not wanting him to catch her in his room. Pulling the door closed back to its original state, she then made her way to the living room and sat on the sofa, not knowing what else to do but wait. That was until her stomach growled. It was that moment that she realized that she hadn't eaten her food from the night before. Reality kicked in and Ryan was officially starving. She didn't want to go pillaging through his things, but he brought her there, so she assumed that he wouldn't mind if she helped herself to something. She hoped. Either way, she had to eat. If there was food, she'd make enough for him to maybe distract him from the fact that she'd made herself at home in his place.

MyZell was awakened by the sound of his phone buzzing on the nightstand next to his head and then noises in his kitchen. Grabbing the gun from under his pillow, he instantly sat up, trying to wrap his mind around who the fuck was in his condo. Then he remembered that he'd brought Ryan there last night.

Sitting up and grabbing his phone, he placed his gun where it had been before answering.

“What's up, Trez?”

“Yo, I'm glad to know you're alive, Zell.”

After rubbing his eyes and then stretching, MyZell chuckled. “Why the hell wouldn't I be?”

“Shit, you tell me. If I'm not mistaken, you left to go tie up some disrespectful loose ends, and when I called you to see how shit went, you said you had to handle something and you'd call me back. I guess you really were caught up.”

“Something like that, but let me...”

“Hell no, tell me what's going on. You get me stressed out, Zell. This not like you, bruh.”

“I'm good and I'll meet you at my house in a few hours. We can talk then, but I need to go.”

He hadn't waited for a response, but Trez was used to that. Trez was his dude, but he didn't answer to anyone, not even



him. And he damn sure didn't explain my moves to anyone unless he chose to.

As soon as his feet hit the floor, Zell stretched and made his way to the bathroom. After taking a piss, he washed his hands, his face and then brushed his teeth. Leaning on the counter, he checked out his appearance. Zell's hair was cut into a curly Caesar, tapered on the sides. Turning his head from side to side he checked out my freshly trimmed beard. He had gone yesterday morning to get a fresh cut and shave, and it still looked brand new. Exhaling, he left his bathroom and went to find Ryan. She was about to tell him what was really going on with her life, whether she liked it or not. He'd hate to have to hold her hostage, but he'd damn sure do it until she broke down and told him her story. There was one there and he wasn't going to be satisfied until I found out what it was.

“What are you doing?”

Startled by MyZell's deep baritone voice because her back was to him when he entered the kitchen, she dropped the spoon that she had been using to prepare the eggs that were on the stove in front of her.

Her hand moved to her chest as she turned to the direction in which his voice had come from.

“You scared me.” She released a breath and then continued. “I was hungry, so I made breakfast. I hope that's not a problem.”

It was for him, not the act itself, but no one had done that for him in over a year. Not because they didn't want to, but simply because he wouldn't allow them to. That was his issue, though, so he just pointed to the stove.

“You're about to burn those eggs, shorty.”

Ryan turned frantically before bending down to get the spoon that she had just dropped. MyZell felt bad for her and stepped further into the kitchen. While she moved to the sink, he moved to the drawer beside the stove, removed a spatula,

and began tending to the eggs. After turning them a few times, he removed the pan and turned off the burner.

“Sorry, I really didn’t mean for you to have to do that.”

“It’s cool.” MyZell’s eyes moved around the kitchen, trying to figure out what would go with the eggs that she damn near burned. He had no idea what was in his kitchen because it had been a little over a week since he had last been there.

His eyes landed on the stack of pancakes that were piled on a plate to the left of the stove and he smirked. They had to be homemade. He didn’t do mix shit, so he knew that he didn’t have any in his condo.

He also noticed that his kitchen was clean, so that meant that she had been cleaning while she cooked. He appreciated that because he hated clutter.

“Sit down,” he said, while he moved to the cabinet and grabbed two plates.

“I can do that. I don’t mind.”

“Nah, you’re good. You cooked it. I can make your plate, sit down.”

He held the plates in one hand and moved to the one that held the pancakes and lifted it with the other. He walked over to Ryan and set them both on the table before he moved back to the stove and scraped the eggs onto the empty plate that he assumed she left there for them. Once he had everything else he needed, he joined Ryan and sat down across from her. He just stared at her for a minute before he began filling a plate for her.

Ryan watched as he loaded it up with food, and then extended his arm across the table and placed the plate down in front of her. Her eyes traced the art on his arm and she had to fight hard not to smile as she admired it.

“I’m really not that hungry,” she said softly after she realized how much food was on her plate.

“Bullshit. You didn’t eat last night, so I know you’re hungry, and that ain’t really nothing. You’re little as hell, but I

bet you can throw down. Just eat, shorty, no judgment.”

She frowned a bit at his bluntness. He wasn't exactly being rude, but there was no real emotion behind his words, so it felt awkward.

“What's that supposed to mean?” She looked right at him and waited. She loved his eyes, they drew her in every time she had nerve enough to focus on them.

“It means that you don't look like you're shy around a plate. That's a good thing. I hate women who be all shy and shit, trying to act like they don't be getting it in when no one's around. If you're hungry then eat.” MyZell spoke matter of factly, but he wore a smile while he did, so it eased the tension a little. She liked the fact that he was so open.

After he loaded his plate with the amount that was on hers, he got up and moved to the cabinet. She loved watching him move. It was sexy to her, and she fell right into a trance, but she quickly got it together when she remembered having the same feeling for Polo. That hadn't gotten her anything but a broken heart and four wasted years that she couldn't get back.

MyZell returned to the table with syrup and two bottles of orange juice. One that he placed in front of Ryan and the other he sat next to his plate.

He bowed his head, said a quick grace, and she did the same before he began digging into his food. After few minutes of silence, MyZell actually looked up from his plate, and for the first time he really looked at Ryan. She was beautiful. Her features were simple and natural, but the way they all blended together to create what he thought was a work of art had him really feeling her. Her diamond-shaped eyes sat below a set of neatly-groomed, shiny black eyebrows, and her cute button nose fit perfectly centered below them. She had a pair of thin lips that he couldn't help staring at as she slowly chewed her food. With her hair in a tight bun on top of her head, her oval shaped face was completely exposed, and he got heated again when he scanned the bruises on her face. They were fading, but noticeable.

“You ready to tell me who you really are?”

Swallowing hard, Ryan looked at him with a straight face. “No.”

With his eyes on her, he lifted a forkful of eggs and shoved it in his mouth. She admired how sexy he was, even the way he chewed his food. The way his jaw moved because of it.

“I know you don’t know who I am, but I will tell you this much. It’s not often that anyone tells me no without consequences.” His voice was calm, but his icy stare was deadly.

She shuddered a little just at the thought of the meaning behind his statement.

“You’re right, I don’t know you, so maybe it’s time for me to go.” She dropped her fork onto her plate and stood.

MyZell didn’t move, but he spoke. “Ryan, sit down.”

Again, his voice was calm. Ryan tucked her lip between her teeth and bit down on it while she looked down at him. His eyes were on his plate as he sliced through one of the pancakes with his fork.

“Yo, I’m not going to argue with you, that’s not something I do, so will you please just sit down?” This time he looked at her, and for some reason, she gave in and returned to the chair that she had been in.

“So do you plan on keeping me here until I tell you what you want to know?” she asked, half joking. The thought of him being at odds with her didn’t sit well.

Again, he looked up at her before he lowered the fork he was holding onto his plate and then leaned back. After folding his arms across his chest, which made her stomach flutter, he just stared at her.

“If I have to, but it’s not like you have anywhere else to go.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do.”

Before she could respond, he leaned back and slid his hand into his pocket to get his phone. With his eyes still on her, he stood and stepped away from the table to answer his sister's call.

"I'm busy, let me call you back."

"You promised that you would tell them to give me space. I could barely breathe last night, Zell. It was annoying as hell. I get that you want me to be safe, but I need to live too."

"Ay, did you hear me? I said I'm busy. Let me call you back."

"Zell," his sister whined, causing him to massage his temple and look down briefly before his eyes were on Ryan again.

She watched him intently, wondering if it was the woman whose name he had called out in his sleep. As soon as he finished his call, she was going to ask him. Maybe then he'd stop trying to play twenty questions and just let her be on her way.

"Look, it's all I know to do to make sure you're good, but I'll talk to them. Just not right now, aight? I have to go. Let me call you later, baby girl."

"Fine, but you better call me back or I'm coming over there. We still need to talk about who you got up in there. She still there, Zell?"

"Not now, I have to go."

He ended the call, knowing that he'd have to correct the situation before long or she would show up unannounced. That was just how she functioned. She was spoiled, and like him, didn't like hearing no.

Sliding his phone into the pocket of the sweatpants, he then started back to his seat, but stopped dead in his tracks at Ryan's next question.

"Was that Tan? She's your girl, right? I bet she wouldn't appreciate me being here," Ryan said confidently, hoping that

it would be her way out, but his reaction wasn't what she expected.

“What did you just say?”

He rushed her so quickly that she almost fell out the chair, and would have, if he hadn't gotten his hands on the shirt that she was wearing and yanked her toward him. He held her body close to his with fire in his eyes as he peered at her. Afraid of his reaction, she grabbed his hands and fumbled over her words.

“Tan? She must... she must be your girlfriend.”

“How do you know that name? Who the fuck are you, Ryan?” He was damn near growling at her while he held her in place.

“You said it. I heard you say—”

“No the fuck you didn't. Tell me how you know that name.”

“You did, you were asleep, but you called her name. I thought she was your girlfriend. I'm sorry. Will you please let me go?”

The fear in her eyes calmed him a little, but he didn't move. He could see that she was telling the truth, but hearing her say Tan's name had pissed him off, so it took him a minute to reset. When he did, he let her go and she stumbled back. Moving his hand down his face and then across his head he just stared at her.

Ryan didn't dare move because she didn't want him to react again. The entire situation scared her. He scared her even now that he was calmer; she knew that he was dangerous.

“I'm sorry,” he said and then stormed out the room.

Ryan stood there for what felt like forever before she sat down in the chair, trying to figure out what had just happened. Whoever Tan was, she meant something to him, that was evident. Why hearing her name had enraged him so much, she didn't understand, and didn't plan to stay around long enough to do so.

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AFTER LEAVING RYAN, MyZell went straight to his room, slamming the door after he entered it. Once he was alone, both arms were in the air and his palms came down flat on the curly mass that covered his head. With his arms bent at the elbow, he paced back and forth, looking down at the floor before he moved to the wall and sent his fist through it. Just that easily, he had lost it. Just the mention of Tanessa's name had him ready to take an innocent life.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he yelled before he started pacing again.

His pulse quickened and his heart was pounding in his chest. He really was about to lose it. His emotions were all over the place, just as strong as they were a year ago when she disappeared on him.

For some reason, he thought about Ryan, the look on her face when he held her close to him and his pulse began to slow down. He knew that he had to go apologize the right way, but that would require an explanation. One that he wasn't ready to give. He didn't know anything about her. He didn't know if he could trust her. Regardless of the fact that he felt like he could, he didn't know that for sure.

He sat at the foot of his bed with his head resting in his hands before he made up his mind to go check on Ryan. Hell for all he knew, she could have left. He hadn't heard his alarm go off, and she didn't have any way to leave, so he was sure that she was still there, but he wasn't certain.



Once he was had his head right, he moved to his bedroom door and pulled it open. His first stop was the living room, which was empty. Assuming that she had gone back to the guest room that she slept in last night, that was his next stop. Pausing outside the door for a minute, unsure of what he was going to say to her, he then knocked and waited.

Minutes passed and he got no answer, so he took a chance and pushed the door open.

Ryan sat on the edge of the bed, and the second her eyes met with MyZell, her body tensed up. She was afraid of him and wanted nothing more than to get as far away from him as possible. He wanted nothing more than to take back what had just happened, but neither of them knew how to get what they wanted, so they stood there in a stare down until MyZell finally spoke up.

“What happened...” he began before his hand moved down his face. “I’m sorry about that, it’s just—”

“You don’t have to explain. I shouldn’t have been in your room and I shouldn’t have said her name. I just want to leave now, please. If you don’t want to take me, I can—”

“You can what?” MyZell was irritated because he really wanted to apologize, but he could look at her and tell that all she wanted was to get away from him. Being the person that he was, that wouldn’t have usually bothered him because he preferred to be alone, but for some reason, knowing that was what she wanted and the reason behind it irritated him.

“Can you just let me explain, please?” He moved his hands into the pockets of his sweats because he didn’t know what else to do with them.

“You don’t have to. It’s fine.”

“Ryan, please. I’m not the type of man who asks for anything, and I damn sure don’t beg anyone for anything, so will you just let me explain? After that, if you want to leave, I’ll take you wherever you want to go. No questions asked, I promise.”

Ryan searched his face, looking for a reason to believe him. Something in his eyes gave her just that, so she nodded, giving him permission to continue.

“Tan is my girlfriend... was my girlfriend. I haven’t seen or heard from her in a year.”

MyZell paused as his chest began to feel constricted. When it eased up a little, he continued.

“She just disappeared one day and I haven’t seen her since.”

Ryan could see the sadness in his eyes. That same sadness that she had noticed at the hotel, but this time it was a little more intense. Not sure why she opened her mouth to speak, but she did.

“What happened to her?”

MyZell removed one hand from his pocket and his fingers dug into his hair before he returned his hand back to his pocket.

Ryan could tell that he was uneasy and she instantly regretted asking.

“I don’t know. She might be alive, she might be dead. That’s the thing that really fucks with me. If I knew...”

MyZell stopped again with that same feeling in his chest, and when it eased up, he continued, just like before.

“I’m the kind of man that has a lot of enemies,” was all he said.

“So you think it was your fault? Not that you did anything to her, but people who wanted to hurt you did something to her?”

His eyes were on her for a few moments more and he wore no expression. The way he looked through her made Ryan feel uncomfortable, but she tried her best not to show it. Even after the forced smile that graced his face, she still wanted to run and not look back.

“Your turn?” he said, choosing to ignore her last question.

He knew what had happened to Tan was his fault. The call he'd received the night she disappeared had proved it, but he wasn't about to tell Ryan that. He had scared her enough for one day and didn't want to give her another reason to leave him. He didn't know why, but he wanted her to stay.

"What do you mean?" she asked as their eyes met again.

"You know part of who I am, but you're still a mystery."

Placing her hands on her legs and moving them down her thighs until they reached her knees to wipe her sweaty palms, she thought long and hard about what her next move would be. He told her that she could leave if she let him explain, and everything in her was telling her to hold him to that, but there was a small part of her that didn't want to.

"What do you want to know?" she asked softly, causing him to relax just a bit.

"Who are you hiding from?"

"What makes you think I'm hiding from someone?"

"I don't know, I just do, and I'm usually right about stuff like that."

She hated the way he just stared at her. He was comfortable doing it, but it was intimidating to her.

"I'm not hiding from anyone," she lied and hoped that he wouldn't be able to see through it.

MyZell, on the other hand, immediately did, but he wasn't going to push her.

"How about this? You can stay here for as long as you want. No strings attached if you promise me one thing."

"What?"

"Promise me that when you're ready, you'll tell me the truth."

"That is..."

"Ryan, please don't do that. I'm easy about most things, but when it comes to honesty, I don't compromise. I don't like

to be lied to. That one thing can cost you your life.” He hated to be so blunt because he knew that it likely wasn’t going to help his case, but he needed her to understand how serious he was about that one thing. As simple as it was, it meant everything to him.

“Are you going to stay here too?”

“Sometimes, but for the most part, you can have the place to yourself. I’ll leave you money for food and stuff, and I have two cars that I leave here. I’m not going to babysit you, but I trust that you’ll respect my shit.”

Ryan thought about it for a minute, and given her situation, she didn’t really have a better offer.

“I don’t need all that, being here is enough.”

MyZell smiled at how humble she was being. He appreciated that because most women would have accepted that and asked for more. Even being in the position that Ryan was in, they would have still expected more.

“It’s nothing, so just let me do that for you, aight?”

“No strings attached?” she asked with raised brows, which made MyZell chuckle.

He had been addicted to her looks and her presence from the first time he laid eyes on her, but now that she had cleaned up some and he had been around her a little more, he knew that he was in danger being that close to her. He liked the feeling that she gave him. It had been a long time since he felt anything for a woman other than the desire for them to satisfy his personal needs, so Ryan was definitely trouble for him.

Keeping that to himself, he offered a simple answer. “No strings, baby girl. I told you, you’re not in a position to deal with a man like me.”

His eyes moved across her body, scanning her full breasts and thick thighs before he focused on her face again.

Ryan noticed the way he looked at her but ignored it. She stood and extended a hand to him.

“Deal.”

Staring at her hand for a moment, MyZell laughed before he accepted it. “This is going to be interesting,” he said, just before he turned to leave, but her voice stopped him.

“Did you kill that man... Graves?”

MyZell stared at her for a minute before he answered. It was only one word that he delivered before he walked out of the bedroom, but the one word put them both in an awkward place.

“Yes.”

He had no idea what he was getting himself into or why he even trusted her enough to allow her to get that close to him, but he did. He just prayed that he didn't regret that decision.

\* \* \*

MyZell stood outside the room that Ryan occupied, dressed and ready to leave. He had to meet Trez at his house and also catch up with his sister. After he had the two of them squared away, he planned to pick up some food and then join Ryan back at his condo. He could have easily left her money and instructed her to order in, but he was hoping to spend some time with her. It had been a while since he had been around a female for more than sex, other than his sister. He had forgotten how much he missed that.

The idea alone made him think of Tan, but he quickly shook the thought, and let his knuckles play a melody on Ryan's door. He could see her stretched across the bed on her stomach with her arms folded and head turned away from the door until his knocking got her attention and then she sat up, pulling her body to a seated position in the center of the bed as she stared at him.

“It's your house, you don't have to ask permission to come in here.” For the first time, she actually smiled and MyZell had to control himself from smiling back.

“True, but it's your room for now, so I respect that.”

“Are you leaving?”

The thought of him actually doing so made Ryan feel sad. She wasn't sure why, considering they hadn't had the best beginning, but she didn't want to be alone. She had been alone since she arrived in Miami, and it felt good to have someone to talk to, even if he wasn't actually saying much.

"Yeah, but I should be back in a few hours. I'll get us something to eat before I come back, just text me what you want."

She frowned at him. "I can't do that. I don't have a phone. Anything is fine."

"My bad, I meant to give you this first. Here."

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out an iPhone, which he handed over to her. She instantly got faded off the smell of his cologne, which did something to her. Not only did he look amazing in his dark jeans, Jordans, and short-sleeved Henley, but he smelled just as good. He always did. Turning the phone in her hands, she looked at him with a curious stare.

"It's an extra one. I don't really use it, so you can have it while you're here. My number is in there, so if you need anything, just hit me up."

"I won't but thank you."

"Well, you have it if you do, and you're welcome."

Not knowing what else to say, MyZell decided to just leave, but her voice stopped him.

"I don't have an apartment," she blurted out.

Unsure why she told him that, she waited for him to respond, and he simply looked her over one last time.

"I already knew that but thank you for being honest. We'll talk when I get back."

Without waiting for her to respond, he was gone, and a few minutes later, Ryan heard the front door open and then close. She pulled the covers back and crawled into her bed, deciding to rest while he was gone. It had been a while since she felt safe enough to close her eyes and rest in peace, so she planned to take full advantage of it.

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“WELL, I’m glad your ass is still alive. What is up with you, Zell?” Both men had parked and exited their vehicles in MyZell’s driveway at damn near the same time.

MyZell’s Model X Tesla was parked in front of Trez’s. The make, year, and models matched, however the colors were drastically different with Trez’s being canary yellow while MyZell’s was matte gray.

With a smirk, MyZell shut his door and then glanced over his shoulder as his best friend followed him to this front door.

“You said that shit like it was possible for somebody to actually catch me slipping, Trez.”

Trez chuckled at MyZell’s statement. He knew it wasn’t possible, but his bizarre behavior had him questioning his actions. If Trez didn’t know anything to be true about his best friend, it was that he was a creature of habit. He did things a certain way and rarely ever deviated from that.

“Shit, I’m just saying, you ending calls and shit, telling me you got caught up. What am I supposed to think?”

MyZell entered his home first, followed by Trez. Once inside, Trez shut and locked the door, and followed Zell to his kitchen. Zell went right to his security system, having not been home in a little over a day since he’d chosen to stay at his condo with Ryan.

He pulled up the feed from the time that he was away and moved through it to see if anything seemed off. Once he was



satisfied, he reset it, and then moved to the refrigerator to grab beers for himself and Trez.

“So, what’s up, Zell? How that shit go with Graves? I already know you clipped that nigga ’cause word travels fast and the streets already buzzing, trying to figure out who did that shit.”

“It was straight. He was singing that ‘it wasn’t me’ shit, but you know I hate a man that can’t own up to his own shit.”

“How is he gon’ say it wasn’t him? We got that nigga on tape, rolling through our spots, threatening our people. You tell him that shit?”

“Nah, there was no point. He was gon’ die regardless, so I just handled it.”

“So where you stay last night?”

“Damn, we fucking or something?” Zell grinned at Trez before turning up his beer. He knew that it would strike a nerve with Trez because he was just looking out. That was how they moved. Aside from his sister, Myah, Trez was the only one who was allowed to clock his moves without consequences.

“Might be, so tell me where you were, nigga, so I can decide whether I’m gon’ drop your ass and move on or work this shit out,” Trez fired back with a smirk.

Zell burst out laughing and almost spit his beer out. “You’re dumb as hell for that shit.”

“Just as dumb as yo’ ass for asking me that shit.”

Zell nodded and looked down at the floor before his hand moved across his head. He debated confessing his activities after he handled Graves and decided to go ahead and fess up. If he didn’t, he knew that Myah would open her big ass mouth anyway. She was just as much Trez’s sister as she was his.

“I stayed at my condo last night.”

“So, you were getting your dick wet. What are being so secretive about that shit for?”

“I wasn’t, though.”

“So you stayed alone. That’s cool too, but you act like you hiding shit or something.”

Trez held up his beer to check the contents before he turned it up and finished it off, and then looked at Zell.

“I wasn’t alone.”

“Yo, are you high or something? You talking in circles, nigga. You just said you wasn’t getting your dick wet. What the fuck, Zell? I know Myah wasn’t with you ’cause she called me damn near in tears ’cause Tiny was all in her shit last night at Story.”

Zell chuckled. “What did you tell her?”

“I told her I’d handle it and then I called Tiny’s fat ass and told him good muthafuckin’ job, keep it up.” Trez grinned.

Zell shook his head. “She gon fuck you up ’bout that shit, Trez.”

“She gon’ get fucked up. She knows what’s up. Hot ass out there with them fuck ass niggas. She knows we don’t play that.”

“You right but check it. I met somebody last night. That’s who I was with.”

Trez searched his best friend’s face before placing his empty beer bottle on the counter beside him. It had been a year since Tan had disappeared, and although Zell claimed he was over it, they all knew better. She was the first woman who Zell ever let get that close to him and his boy had fallen hard. It was crazy as hell how attached he’d gotten, and how fast, but he was in love with Tan and she could do no wrong.

Even now, a year after she was gone, he had women that he dealt with, but nothing solid. Mostly just females he had sex with from time to time, so for him to actually say he met someone felt different. Even the way he’d said it came across differently.

Granted, Trez wasn’t really feeling Tan. Although he would never admit it to him, it was true. There was something

about her that he just didn't trust, but Zell loved her, and in his eyes, she was down for him. Nobody had better question that or say anything against her. So, after the first discussion they'd had about Tan, Trez left it alone. Zell was a grown ass man, and it wasn't his place to tell him who to love. All he could do was be there to have his back when shit didn't work and that was exactly what happened.

Zell had nearly lost his mind when Tan disappeared and that was in the literal sense. He wouldn't let go of the idea, and looked everywhere for her, but it was like she just vanished without a trace. They all just assumed she was dead and left it at that. Zell blamed himself, claimed that she was his weakness and his enemies knew that. The call he received the night she went missing had proved that. It was simple, nothing that could be traced, and all the caller said was, *never think you or the people you love are untouchable.*

That was it, nothing else, and then hung up. They never heard from Tan again and Zell hadn't been the same since. He'd finally started attempting to live his life, but he damn sure wasn't really moving on. A few females here and there, but nothing real. So to hear him say he met someone had Trez hopeful.

"Word, how that shit happen?" he asked coolly, not wanted to invest too much in it.

"She was with Graves last night."

"Graves, that nigga only fuck with working girls, Zell." With a curious stare, Trez waited.

Laughing to himself at how crazy that sounded, and not really sure why, other than having to admit that Trez was right, Zell spoke up. "She is, but I don't think that's who she really is. There's something about her."

"You feeling her like that?"

"Nah, nothing like that. I just want to know her story, that's all. It ain't nothing more than that."

Trez just stared at him for a bit more until Zell laughed. "Why are you looking at me like that for? It ain't nothing,

damn. Let's go burn one, though, before I head out.”

MyZell could feel the questions that Trez wasn't asking. He knew him just that well and he also knew that his behavior didn't match his normal patterns. So Trez having concerns was understood, even if he wasn't going to speak on it.

That was just the type of relationship that the two of them had. There was a certain understanding that was unspoken between the two of them. So, for now, Trez wouldn't ask and MyZell appreciated that. When the time was right, he would speak on his situation with Ryan if it was necessary. He just didn't feel like it was as of yet.

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AFTER BURNING A FEW WITH TREZ, MyZell decided that it was a good idea to pop up on his sister. If he didn't, she would surely pop up on him again, and he wasn't in the mood for that. Aside from the fact that he didn't want Ryan to have to deal with her, he didn't want interruptions when he returned to his condo later to see what was going on with her.

He had basically been gone most of the day and hadn't heard from her once. He half expected her to at least check in, although he wasn't sure why she would. She didn't know him, and just because he extended her the courtesy of staying at his home, she didn't owe him anything. Oddly enough, he found himself thinking about her most of the day.

He would randomly think about what she was doing. That made him uncomfortable because he had shut himself off from feeling anything for anyone other than Trez or his sister, but Ryan had somehow managed to sneak in that equation. Regardless of it were as simple as wondering what she was doing, it was a thought about her and that was a luxury that he wasn't about to afford himself.

"My, where you at, baby girl?" Zell used his key to enter his sister's home, yelling for her as he made his way through it.

Her Autobiography Range was parked in the driveway, so he knew that she was home, but the house was quiet, which was unusual. Myah was scary as shit, so if she was home alone, she made sure to have noise around her, the TV, the radio, it was always something.

When he reached the top of the stairs, and heard a man's voice, he reacted by placing his hand on his gun, chambering the first round, and moving slowly to her door. Instead of entering, he listened and got pissed when he realized what was going on. Firing a shot toward the ceiling, he heard a piercing scream come from his sister as he leaned against the wall just outside her door.

"Yo, you got about thirty seconds to get the fuck up out of this house or the next one goes in your head.

"MyZell, are you crazy, nigga? You don't just come up in my goddamn house shooting like you lost your mind," Myah yelled from her room.

She looked at her boyfriend, Halo, who was damn near about to piss himself at the thought of MyZell standing outside of the room he was in, while he was butt ass naked and fucking his sister.

"What the hell you doing? You don't have to go anywhere. This is my house." Myah sneered, getting annoyed that Halo was about to do what her brother said. She hated who he was sometimes because it complicated her life.

"Yo, My, don't make me shoot that nigga, 'cause I'm not paying to get your fucking house cleaned. That shit will be on you."

"Zell, go away. I hate you."

"I don't give a fuck, but you ain't gon' be up in here fucking that nigga while I'm here. In fact, he ain't gon' be here while I'm here. You know how I feel about that shit

"I'm grown, nigga. Get the fuck out of my house, Zell."

"You talking big shit, Myah, but you better watch your fucking mouth. The only reason why I ain't in there putting a hole in that nigga's head right now is 'cause the only dick I wanna see is my own. So you better get his ass dressed and moving real muthafucking fast.

"Myah, you know your brother crazy, baby. I'll just get up with you later. Ain't no pussy worth dying for, not even yours, baby." Halo hopped off the bed and grabbed his jeans.

Once he had them secured around his waist, he began collecting the rest of his things. After he stepped into his shoes, holding his shirt, phone and keys, he tried to kiss Myah.

“Nigga don’t try to kiss me. You running out my house scared like a little hoe.”

“What the fuck ever. I’ll call you later.”

Halo moved to the door and took a deep breath, knowing that he still had to get past MyZell. He didn’t know him personally, but he knew of him. It wouldn’t be anything for Zell to put a bullet in him just because he felt like it, so to be caught in his sister’s house could easily cost Halo his life.

Once he stepped out the door, MyZell pulled his body from the wall, gripping his gun in his right hand, clenching his fist.

“Yo, my bad. We cool, right?” Halo questioned backing away.

“Yeah, we’re cool. Get the fuck out.”

Zell took a step toward him and just stared him down, but Halo didn’t move. He felt like he didn’t have permission to, even though Zell had clearly told him to get out.

“Fuck you standing here for?” Zell yelled, causing Halo to jump a little.

“I’m... my bad. I’m gone.”

He was in the process of taking a step back when out of nowhere Zell swung on him with a left so powerful that it knocked him on his ass and his things went flying everywhere

“That’s for disrespecting me by fucking my sister. Now get the fuck out before I shoot your dumb ass.”

Zell turned to walk into his sister’s room without even so much as a second glance at Halo, who scurried to collect his things and then leave, grateful that he was alive to do so.

The second Zell entered his sister’s room, she glared at him and then went back to stripping her sheets off her bed.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You know what, just get out. Why are you even here?”

“I came to check on you, but I can leave.”

“Good, do that?”

“Yo, why you fuck with them pussy ass niggas, My? Halo’s hoe ass be in my face every time he sees me, begging and shit. I can’t respect a man that don’t want to work for shit.”

Zell leaned against her dresser, watching her strip her bed.

“Who else am I supposed to deal with, MyZell? Every man I meet is scared of you. They won’t fuck with me because of you.”

“You act like that’s a bad thing. That keeps your ass safe, Myah.”

“That keeps me alone. Don’t nobody want to be alone but your crazy ass, Zell. I want somebody to come home to every night, but you act like there’s something wrong with that.”

MyZell understood her stress, but he also understood that because of him, she had to be careful of who she allowed to get close to her. He hated that but he couldn’t do shit about it.

“There’s nothing wrong with that My, but these niggas you fucking with ain’t the ones. He didn’t even try to stand up to me. He just ran the fuck outta here. That ain’t what you need, baby girl.”

“What I need is some good dick from time to time. I guess that’s all I’ll ever get ’cause anything else is off the table because of you,” she tossed up, just to piss him off.

Clenching his jaw at the words, he pinched the bridge of his nose to try and calm himself.

“Yo, do you have to talk like that? It’s so unattractive, Myah, real shit.”

“I’m angry. You chose this life, but I have to live with the consequences,” Myah yelled, throwing her hands up.

She didn’t really mean any of what she was saying, she was just annoyed and having a moment. It was incredibly hard



to adjust sometimes because of how she had to live. The money was great, and she had anything she could imagine, but sometimes the one thing she really wanted just seemed impossible. She wanted to be in love, she just wanted to be happy.

That didn't exist in her world because MyZell didn't trust anybody, and to be honest, she didn't either. She had so many experiences in the past where men either wanted to get with her to try and join MyZell's team or to take him down. There was always an angle. She was beautiful and had a lot going for her, so it wasn't like she had issues in that department, but his life complicated people's intentions. Even those who truly wanted her got sidetracked by what being a part of her brother's world could offer them.

Placing his gun behind him on the dresser, Zell moved to his sister and she backed away with every step. She knew what was coming, and when he finally got his hands on her and pulled her against his chest, she broke down.

"It fucking sucks, Zell. I want kids and a family, but I feel like I'll never have that."

Closing her in his arms, he held his sister tight against his body and felt her pain. He battled with that same thing, but he understood that it was far more important to her than it was to him.

"You will have that, My, I promise, but I can't let it be with just anybody. Especially not some weak ass muthafucker like Halo. You're all I got and I'm not losing you over some fuck shit. I know it's not fair, and I know you don't get it sometimes, but I can't let you be with just anybody. You deserve better than that, and even though you're mad right now, you know that shit is true."

Exhaling slowly, she allowed herself to relax a little.

"I get it," she mumbled and then hugged him back.

"I'm sorry, My, I swear on everything I am, but you'll have that. I promise. It just has to be right. Be patient."

“Patient?” She laughed sarcastically and then pulled back to wipe the tears that somehow crept out.

“How much more patient do you expect me to be, Zell? You do know how old I am, right?”

“Man, chill, you’re young, Myah. That ain’t shit.”

“Yeah, well I won’t hold my breath.” She rolled her eyes and went back to stripping her bed.

MyZell just watched her, not really knowing what to say, so he decided to leave things like they were.

“I’m heading out. You need anything?”

Staring at her brother for a brief moment, she shook her head to tell him no.

“Can I get a hug or you still in your feelings?” MyZell said with a grin.

“Nigga, I just hugged you. You can get out now,” My teased.

She didn’t like being at odds with her brother and never let it last long. She couldn’t blame him for who he was. He did it for her. He hit the streets so that they had what they needed. Who would have known that he would become the man he was? She loved him and would never blame him for taking care of her, even if now, years later, it complicated her life.

“Yeah, right. Just remember that shit, okay? I’m out, though.”

He lifted his gun and dropped the clip to remove the bullet he had chambered earlier. Once he had it out, he placed it back on his body and headed to the door.

“What about the girl?”

“What girl?” he asked, knowing that she meant Ryan.

“You know who I mean. You gonna tell me about that?”

He chuckled and then moved through her door. “One day, just not right now,” he said as he made his way to the stairs.

He knew that would only last for so long, but for now it would have to be enough.

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## *seven*

RYAN WOKE up from what could possibly be described as the best sleep that she'd had in the past month. The bed that she slept in wasn't even that great, but for some reason, when her head sank into the pillow, she felt safe. Her body relaxed and she drifted off like her life wasn't spinning out of control.

Now that she was up again, reality set in as she looked around the room that she occupied. The plain walls and empty dresser were reminders that it didn't belong to her. If it were hers, there would have been color everywhere to match her personality. She was a happy, eclectic person. Even if her current state had stripped that away from her appearance, it was embedded in her soul.

She climbed out of bed and stretched her body, extending her arms above her head as high as they would go. She quickly regretted it once she felt the pain from her injuries. Her body was stiff and her face was still sore, but she was alive and grateful that those were her only injuries. She knew that Graves had intentions of raping her, but he never got his chance, which she owed to MyZell.

Graves had been caught off guard by an unexpected visitor. They'd argued and then she never saw Graves again. She wasn't sure what had happened because she kept floating in and out of consciousness, but MyZell had cleared that up for her. She'd distinctly remembered him gently gripping her face with his hand and asking if she was okay. The only other memory she had was him lifting her body from the corner that she had been forced into by Graves before MyZell arrived.

Now knowing that he actually had taken Graves's life, she was even more curious about the man who had saved her. That prompted her to go explore his home. She left her current living quarters and made her way down the hall to the master suite. The door was closed, so she stood outside of it for a minute, chewing the corner of her lip trying to decide whether or not to enter. When curiosity got the best of her, she reached for the doorknob and turned it slowly. She knew that she was alone, but she still paused to stick her head in before she actually entered.

She admired the expensive furniture. It was simple, but manly, with large dark wood dressers that lined the wall, and a four post bed that sat against another wall, extending to the center of the room. His bed was not made, but only one side was disturbed, with the covers folded back as if they had been staged that way.

She moved along the length of his dresser, gliding her hand across the edge, stopping at the center when she reached his first bottle of cologne. She lifted it, rolling it in her hands before she removed the top and held it close to her nose. She smiled, remembering the way it smelled on his body when he had been close to her.

Lifting items one by one, and then returning them to their original place, she smiled at how nice his things were, and then she smiled unintentionally when it reminded her of Polo. He also liked nice things and had plenty of them. Shaking the thought, she moved to his closet and pulled open one of the double doors.

It was a lot larger than she expected it to be and full of equally expensive things. After her time with Polo, she was used to that, and she herself had a closet full of expensive things that she'd left behind when she'd run a few months ago. That hadn't impressed her because it had come with a price. Ryan stepped inside, admiring how neatly placed everything was. Her first thought was that it had a woman's touch, the way that everything was so organized. The thought didn't last long because her heart jumped to her throat when she heard the alarm system sound and then the front door open.

“Shit,” she whispered before looking around.

There was no way she could explain to him why she was in his room because even the thought sounded unexplainable. Pending where he was in the house, there was no way she could escape his room without being noticed. There was an open floor plan and you could clearly see the hallway leading to the bedrooms from just about anywhere in the dwelling.

Accepting defeat and saying a quick prayer, she stepped out of his closet, closing the door behind her, and moved as fast as she could to his bedroom door. God definitely wasn't on her side because the second she stepped out, praying for a miracle, she ran right into him.

“Why were you in my room?”

MyZell took a step toward her, which caused her to take a step back until she was wedged between him and the wall just outside his bedroom door. She tried her best to come up with a reasonable excuse.

“I was...” The words got stuck in her throat because of the intimidating look that was displayed in his eyes as they glared at her.

“You were what?” MyZell growled.

He wasn't a trusting person, so to find her in his room, likely snooping through his shit, really didn't sit well with him. He hadn't known what he expected leaving her unattended in his home all day, but this wasn't it.

“Curious?” she said aggressively, pulling her back from the wall that he had forced her against.

She was scared as shit but had escaped too many situations to back down from any challenge. She was tired of men who felt the need to use intimidation to get what they wanted or to control her.

“I don't scare you?” Zell asked with his eye on hers.

“No.”

He knew that she was lying. The look on her face gave it away, but the fact that she'd stood up to him was impressive.

Not many people did that.

With a smirk, he stepped to the side to allow her a path to move.

“I brought dinner. I see you didn’t try to burn down my kitchen again, so you must be hungry.”

He entered his bedroom and yelled out to her as he entered his closet. “I’m about to change. Meet me in the kitchen.”

Ryan exhaled and placed her hand over her chest. *At least he didn’t kill me*, she thought before she relaxed a little and started toward the kitchen. She was indeed hungry, and, in fact, she was more like starving since she had slept the day away.

MyZell visually inspected his room and everything seemed to be in order. He still felt violated by the fact that she had been in there alone, but he let it go. After changing into basketball shorts and electing to go without a shirt, he then made his way to the kitchen. He found Ryan sitting at the table and she hadn’t touched the food, which for some reason made him smile.

“Why you just sitting there?”

She shrugged and then smiled awkwardly at him. “I wasn’t sure what was mine.”

“I told you to text me what you wanted and you didn’t, so I just got what I wanted. You like Thai food?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never had it.”

“Word? So I’m your first then.”

MyZell’s smile was infectious as he anxiously dug through the bags that held the food. Watching him made her smile.

“What is it?” Ryan looked down at the plastic container that he placed in front of her and then up at him. She was trying her best not to stare, but the fact that most of his body was exposed had her struggling.

“Basil fried rice with shrimp. It’s one of my favorites.”

He chuckled at the frown on her face. “Just try it, shorty. If you don’t like it, I’ll trade with you.”

“What do you have?” she asked after eyeing the plastic container he held in his hand.

“Pad Thai.”

She watched as his hand gripped the seat of the chair that was next to her before he got comfortable in it. She wondered why he chose to sit so close to her. Their knees were almost touching, which caused her to slide her feet back a bit in an effort make sure that didn’t happen.

“Stop looking like that and just try it.” Zell smirked as he leaned back in his chair and waited.

Ryan tried hard not to look at him. He was definitely a nice looking man, but he had made it clear that more than once that he wasn’t interested in her. She also knew that he really wouldn’t be if he knew more about her.

Exhaling, she removed the lid while he leaned forward enough to remove a plastic container from the bag that the food had been in, and then extended it to her.

He watched her as she used her fork to move the food around in the container.

“Damn, does it take all that? Just try it,” Zell said with a grin.

Lifting a forkful of the rice topped with one of the oversized shrimp, she forced it into her mouth and began to chew slowly.

Zell should have been more interested in her opinion on the taste, but his mind was stuck on the way her mouth moved. It was sexy to him. Something that simple was turning him on and he was trying not to let the feeling get the best of him

“Well?”

“It’s not terrible.”

“Man, you like it.”



Lifting the lid from the container in front of him, he smiled then reached into the bag again and got a fork of his own.

“It’s not terrible,” she stated again, with a slight smirk as she savored the food that was in her mouth. For some reason, she refused to admit that he was right.

“So you a fast food person or what?”

Balling up her hand into a fist, she then used it to block her mouth, mindful about exposing the food in it.

“Not really, I actually don’t like fast food at all. I love to cook.” She shrugged, filled her fork again and then shoved it into her mouth.

MyZell’s stare was focused on her lips. He got a sudden urge to kiss them as his mind wondered about how soft they would be.

Once he snapped out of it, he smiled and released a light chuckle. “You mean you love to burn shit down. Those eggs almost caused me a remodel in my kitchen, shorty.”

“That’s your fault. You had me distracted. I’m actually a great cook,” Ryan stated proudly because she was.

It was the one thing that her mother passed down to her, but only by chance. She had provided her with a few key recipes and lessons, but not because she was a good mother. In fact, it was quite the opposite. She made sure Ryan could fend for herself, so that she wouldn’t have to do it.

“So it’s my fault, huh?”

MyZell admired her beauty. The soft smile she wore had him fighting to contain the one that he was on the verge of returning. This wasn’t something that he was used to. It wasn’t often that he let his guard down with people, but here he was sharing a meal with a stranger and doing just that. Ryan was somehow managing to affect him without even trying. It made him uncomfortable, which was rare.

“Yes, actually it is.”

“So are you going to cook for me?” He paused and smiled. “Again, without almost burning something?” He wasn’t sure

why he entertained the idea, but the thought of her doing something so intimate for him had him intrigued.

Ryan smiled and swallowed hard before answering. She was also intrigued and intimidated by MyZell's presence. Not only was he attractive, but his demeanor was demanding and powerful. Even the simple things like requesting that she try food that she had no interest in gave her the feeling that she didn't really have a choice in the matter.

"I will if you want me to. Just don't sneak up on me again and I won't burn anything."

"Yeah, I do. As long as you don't poison me, then we're good."

With a slight eye roll and a smile, Ryan lifted a shrimp onto her fork and then shoved it in her mouth. The two finished their meals in a comfortable silence with only a few words between them. Once they were done, Ryan insisted on cleaning up. She was a guest, yet she felt like she had to earn her keep. She didn't have anything to offer except her services, so that would have to do. Ryan wasn't the type to accept handouts, she never had been, but her current situation had changed that. When she was done, she made her way back to her sleeping quarters, not really knowing what else to do. This wasn't her home and she didn't want to intrude on MyZell's personal space. She was just grateful that he was allowing her to stay, so her goal was to stay out of his way.

## *eight*

“AY, you don’t have to stay in here all the time. I’m not holding you hostage or anything, shorty.”

Ryan smiled when MyZell’s deep voice filled the room. She looked up just in time to catch a glimpse of him pulling a shirt over his exposed chest. Her teeth sank into her lip as she admired his body. It wasn’t anything over the top, but nicely defined and filled with colorful art. It wasn’t the type of physique that looked as if he spent every day in the gym, but he had a natural athletic build.

“I’m fine. I appreciate you letting me stay. I don’t want to intrude on your personal space.”

MyZell’s checked her out and smiled before he responded. “Come talk to me.”

With raised brows, Ryan focused on him. She wasn’t prepared to have a conversation about her life, and she had a feeling that was what he wanted to discuss. “I think I’m just going to call it a night if that’s okay. I’m really tired.”

“Meet me in the living room. You haven’t done shit all day but sleep, so I know you’re not tired. It’s only ten o’clock, Ryan.”

Without waiting for an answer, he was gone. Ryan looked around as if she somehow could find an excuse to stay tucked away in the empty room that she was occupying, but MyZell was growing impatient, so he yelled for her.

Sensing the urgency in his tone, Ryan sighed and climbed off the bed. Once she was on her feet, she adjusted her shirt

around her waist and then made her way to the living room. MyZell was sitting on his sofa with one foot on the floor and the other stretched across the sofa. He pointed to the opposite end, signaling for her to be seated there, which she did. Tucking her feet under her butt, she positioned herself in the corner.

“So what’s up, Ryan? Tell me your story.” MyZell moved his hand under his shirt, onto his stomach, and Ryan’s eyes moved with his motion.

“What happened to when I’m ready?” she questioned.

MyZell chuckled and then looked intently at her. He had known it was a lie when he’d told her that, but he hadn’t planned on her calling him on it.

“I guess you can say I’m impatient, but I also want to know who you are. I mean, I don’t really fuck with people too much, and yet, I not only let you know where I lay my head, but you’re up in here with me. It’s only right that I know your story, shorty.”

He hoped that was enough to get her talking. He wasn’t really concerned about his safety. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be there. He just wanted to know more about her. He had a feeling that she was hiding something and he needed to know what that was.

“I can leave,” she stated boldly.

“We on that shit again? And go where?”

Chewing the corner of her lip, she stood and considered her options. She could stand her ground and deny him what he was asking, but he was right, where would she go? Would it be so terrible if he knew who she really was?

“I fell in love with the wrong man, end of story.”

“That’s vague as shit, Ryan.” The seriousness in his expression conflicted with the way he’d said her name. She heard the empathy and her stomach fluttered from the way it sounded.

“The details don’t really matter.”

“They do to me. So tell me. Why was he the wrong man?”

“Because I loved him more than he loved me. I loved him so much that I gave him four years of my life that I can’t get back, and he loved me so much that he cheated more times than I can remember, he broke a few bones, and then had a kid with a woman that I never knew about. I’d say that classifies him as the wrong man.”

Ryan felt exposed as MyZell just stared at her without saying anything. When he did speak, it caught her off guard and she jumped a little.

“He know where you are?”

“What?” she asked, a little confused.

MyZell sat up now with both feet on the floor and his body positioned on the edge of the sofa while his arms rested on his legs with his hands folded together.

“I’m an intelligent man. I’m extremely observant because I have to be. It’s an asset. I’m also really good at reading people. You’re hiding from something or someone. Based on what you just told me, I’d say someone. I don’t really give a fuck about that, but if you’re hiding, then I can’t keep you safe. Well not if I don’t know what you’re hiding from. So I’ll ask you again, does he know where you are?” He kept his eye on her, which again, made her feel insecure, while safe at the same time.

Shaking her head to tell him no, she then waited.

“Aight, cool. Get some rest. We’re going out tomorrow.”

MyZell stood and left the room without saying anything else. Ryan made a mental note about how he did that a lot, it was almost like leaving the punctuation off of a sentence. He did it in a way that made his word final.

After she got her thoughts together, she stood and made her way to the hallway that led to the rooms, but something forced her to stop at his door. It was closed but slightly cracked, so she lifted her hand to knock, but waited, rethinking her decision before she finally let her fist touch the door.

The door opened quicker than she expected and it startled her a bit.

“Yeah?” MyZell waited. Curious about why she was at his door.

“You don’t know me, so why would you say that?”

“Say what?” he asked in confusion while replaying their conversation in his head, attempting to figure out what she meant.

“That you couldn’t keep me safe if you didn’t know what I was hiding from.”

“Who else is going to do it, Ryan?” he stated matter-of-factly. “Get some rest, I’ll see you in the morning.”

She responded with a simple nod before walking away. There was no argument to be had, at least not now.

Once MyZell was stripped down out of his clothes and was in his bed, his mind was all over the place. His first thoughts were of Ryan. He barely knew her, but for some reason, his finger was itching to pull the trigger on whoever this guy was that she was hiding from. He could sense that she was a good person, just a little misguided, so to hear that another man had mistreated her had him anxious to make it right. The more he thought about it, the angrier he became, and before long, he found himself laughing into his dark, empty room.

Why was he so concerned about a woman that he barely knew? Why did he feel the need to fix whatever was broken in her life and did that mean that he was somehow disloyal to Tan? *Tan!* Just that quickly all of his thoughts changed. He hated thinking about her because he missed her so much. She had come into his life and forced him to love her without even really trying.

When he’d met Tan, MyZell was so heavy in the streets that his only concern was pussy and money. No one woman could offer him either of those things, so he never considered one worthy of all of his time, or more importantly, his heart. That had changed when he’d met Tan. One chance encounter with her and everything about him changed.

To this day, he still hadn't understood how she'd managed to force her way into his life and break him down. Quite frankly, he never even remembered her trying. It was like she wanted nothing to do with him and that was one of the things that had intrigued him the most.

MyZell was used to women throwing themselves at him. They wanted the hype that came with him, and the amazing dick that so many of them whispered about. But with Tan, she wasn't impressed. It took him months just to get her to go on a date with him, but after that, it was like their entire relationship was a blur.

They both fell hard and fast. Before long, she was living with him and he spent whatever time he wasn't in the streets with her. She was everything to him. If perfect existed, Tan was that perfect. Things with them had happened fast, which was one of the reasons why Myah and Trez had an issue with it. They kept warning him to take it slow, give it time, but MyZell wasn't trying to hear either one of them. He loved Tan, and she loved him, that was all that mattered. And Myah and Trez would just have to deal with it.

When he felt his chest getting tight, he closed his eyes and tried to settle his mind. A lot of time had passed, but it still hurt to think about her. He tried to concentrate on something else, and somehow his mind went back to Ryan. Visions of her lips became his focus. The entire time they had been together tonight, he'd wanted to kiss her and it was hard to control the urge.

She was a mystery to him and that excited him. Not to mention that she was just naturally beautiful. He couldn't even imagine her face plastered in makeup because there wasn't a need for it. Her soft features were sexy enough. Just thinking about her had his body reacting and he suddenly had an urge to release some tension. The problem was, he knew for certain that he wasn't about to have sex with Ryan.

After debating it for a while, he gave in and made a call. Sex was a must right now. With the memories of Tan, and the lust that was building from thinking about Ryan, he needed to feel something, someone.

“Ay, come see me.”

“Well, hello to you too,” Halle’s sexy voice flowed through the phone.

“I’m not calling to be cordial, Halle, I wanna fuck. So come see me or I can really call someone else.”

“I’m on my way.”

Zell hung up the phone with a smirk before his hand moved to his throbbing manhood. He knew that Halle wouldn’t object. She understood her role. Her man couldn’t handle her body the way that he could, so she was always willing.

Thirty minutes later, MyZell was at the front door, staring down at Halle. She was beautiful, sexy, and her pussy was amazing. She served her purpose for him, although she wanted more from their situation than just sex. That was something that he wasn’t willing to offer, so she settled for what she could get.

“I had to lie him,” she said after she entered and MyZell shut and relocked the door.

“You know I don’t give a fuck about that. I didn’t beg you to come. I told you I could have called someone else.”

Offering a slight pout, Halle’s hand touched the side of his face before moving down it to his neck. He grabbed her wrist and held it firmly against his chest.

“I don’t need all that. Let’s go.”

Feeling defeated, Halle obeyed and followed him to his room. When they reached his room and he paused and looked down the hall, she watched, trying to figure out what that was all about. She knew that he had a sister but had never met her. He made sure of that. In fact, the only person that she had ever met that was close to him was Trez and that was only because he was with MyZell the night they met at the club a few months ago.

The night they’d met, she had been so excited to get close to him that when he asked her to give him head in his VIP



section, she agreed. She had never really been that type of female, but he was MyZell Abrams. Everyone knew about him, and even though he was no longer in the game, or so it appeared, he still owned a certain amount of respect that was sexy and alluring. She serviced him and then climbed on his lap and let him fuck her right there in front of his team. They watched as she grinded her hips on his lap and gave him what she thought was the best sex he'd ever experienced.

After that, she hoped to be more than just a quick fuck, but she fell right into that role. He called when he wanted to have sex with her and that was it. She was simply hanging on in the hopes that one day she would be more.

In the meantime, she stayed put in her relationship with her man, Drex, who oddly enough she'd found out was one of MyZell's enemies. Drex hated Zell because of who he was and who Drex understood that he would never be. Even now that MyZell wasn't really in the game anymore, people still respected him like he was, which meant that Drex would never take over the city like he wanted to. MyZell and Trez had things locked down and that was understood.

"What was that about? Is someone here?" Halle asked, curious about his behavior.

That was another thing she hated about her situation. He was so closed off and she didn't know anything about him. In the beginning, the mystery was sexy, but now it just annoyed her because she wanted to get close to him and he wouldn't let her.

"No," was all he said before instructed her to undress.

He sat on the foot of his bed and watched until she was naked, then he summoned her to him.

Placing her body between his legs, she leaned in enough to kiss his neck while she moved her hands down his chest. When she reached his lap, she began to caress his hardening member through the navy fleece joggers that he wore.

MyZell kept his eyes on hers the entire time, but for some reason he kept thinking about Ryan. Here he was with Halle in

front of him, naked and ready to fuck, but his mind was on Ryan.

When her hands dipped into the waistband of his sweats, and she had her hands on his member, he looked down at her and nodded to it. Her soft lips took in the head, causing his head to go back while his hands gripped her hair.

“Fuck, Halle.”

She smiled when he said her name and it caused her to go harder. She took as much of him in as she could, letting her mouth move up and down his shaft, using her tongue along the base for extra pressure.

“Damn, baby girl, you’re fucking amazing with this shit.”

MyZell could feel his nut rising just that quickly. This was one of the reasons why Halle was his first call. She was a pro with her head game. It was like she knew just the right amount of everything.

His hand tightened around her hair as he forced her down further, guiding her motion. Seconds later, he delivered a load which she accepted like a pro.

She stepped back, knowing that it was her turn. Well, not for head, because he never delivered, but he did bless her with the best dick she’d ever had. MyZell stepped down off his bed, removed his loosely laced Nikes, and then walked over to his dresser. Opening the top drawer, he retrieved a condom and then ripped it open, making his way back to Halle who watched him. Her eyes were on his pelvic area where his dick was still exposed, which he was currently stroking.

After covering it with a condom, he then turned her away from him, forcing her to bend at the waist so that her hands were on the bed. Not bothering to remove his pants, he just moved them down a little more before he positioned his head at her opening and eased in.

“Mmmmm fuck, I missed you, daddy.”

Irritated by her choice of words, he pulled out and pounded into her aggressively. “What I tell you about that shit? I ain’t your fucking daddy, Halle.”

“Ahh, fuck. I forget, baby.”

Again, he pulled out and hit her deep.

“I ain’t your goddamn baby, either. Just shut the fuck up and take this dick.”

Doing as she was told, her teeth pierced her lip because she needed it to keep from saying anything that he didn’t like.

Being with Halle wasn’t about her, it was strictly about him, so MyZell’s focus was on his own pleasure. If she was satisfied in the process, it was just a bonus for her. He closed his eyes and held firmly to her waist as he moved in and out of her. His strokes were steady and deep. Halle’s pussy was decent to him, but not the best. She would likely be better if she would stop trying to overdo it.

She kept fucking up his rhythm by trying to throw it back to him, but she wasn’t matching his strokes, which irritated him and forced him to be aggressive and dig deeper, just so that he could be done. She was better when he felt like investing the time, but right now, all he wanted was a quick nut, which was rapidly building. His movements became erratic and stronger until he filled the condom he was wearing. He was grateful that Halle had climaxed with him because he wasn’t in the mood for her to beg him for more. He didn’t really care one way or another, but it would be easier for him to get her out of his house.

Taking a step back from Halle, he then started toward his bathroom and quickly thought of Ryan. Halle had been loud. She always was, so he assumed that Ryan had likely heard her. He wasn’t sure why it mattered, but it did. That made him want to get Halle out of there even faster.

“That’s it?” she asked, forcing him to glance at her over his shoulder just before entering his bathroom.

“Get dressed,” was all he said.

His voice was calm and steady. Not really mean, but there was no emotion in it.

“Really, Zell? I risked a lot to get here tonight and that’s all?”

He turned to face her and chuckled. “I already told you, I don’t give a fuck about that. You know how this works. Next time, just say no.”

“But I...”

She stopped when he turned and walked away. She didn’t know much about him, but she did know him enough to understand that whatever argument she was about to offer wasn’t worth the energy that she was going to use to make it. She began dressing, and when she was done, she sat on the bed and waited for him to enter his bedroom again.

Shortly after he returned, he escorted her to the door and locked up again. Once he reached his door, he stood outside of it for a minute, debating whether to go check on Ryan, but decided against it and retreated to his room. He’d see how she behaved the next day.

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THE NEXT MORNING, Ryan was up early. She lay on her back staring at the ceiling thinking about the fact that MyZell had a woman in his bed last night. She didn't know why it bothered her so much because from the first time she laid eyes on him, she knew that he was the type of man who had plenty of women. She wasn't surprised and she even expected it.

He carried himself in a way that would make any woman attracted to not just him, but his persona as well. He had the physical attributes that would make any woman easily fall under his spell. Exhaling, she rolled over onto her side and closed her eyes, hoping to go back to sleep. Having been up all night, she needed to rest, but the second she felt herself drifting, there was a knock at the door. Ryan decided to ignore it and then maybe he would go away and let her sleep in a little longer. Unfortunately, being the persistent one, MyZell pounded on it again.

“Ay, I know it's early, but get up and get dressed. I'm taking you to breakfast and then we're heading out for a little while.”

Hearing his voice brought back memories of him talking to whoever he had been sexing the night before. Their voices had traveled from the hallway down to the room she was in, taunting her.

“No thanks, I'm not really hungry,” she yelled through the closed door.

Ryan then reached behind her, grabbed one of the pillows, and then forced it over her head before growling into it to release her frustrations. She yanked it off quick when she heard the door open.

MyZell smiled at the sight before him, Ryan with an annoyed expression, scowling at him. Everything about her was cute to him, but he was trying his best to control it.

“I know that this is your house, but you said that this was my room, for now anyway. I’m not hungry, so will you please leave?”

His hands slipped into the pockets of the fleece pants that he was wearing as he leaned back, allowing his weight to rest on his heels while he peered at Ryan.

“You’ve been in this house for two days and I know that little ass bag my sister brought over here didn’t have enough shit to last you past today. So get up so we can go eat and then I’m taking you shopping.

“I’m sure you have a washing machine in here somewhere. I have what I need.”

Ryan pulled the covers up, tucking them around her body, before adjusting her head to where it rested on the pillow.

“Did I do something to you?”

MyZell kept his eyes on her while he waited. He knew for sure that she had to hear Halle’s big ass mouth last night, but he wasn’t going to address it unless she brought it up.

“You did something, but not to me,” Ryan mumbled, thinking that he couldn’t hear her, but he smirked at her statement.

“Look, just get dressed, please. Have breakfast with me, and then if you want to come back here, I’ll bring you back here. Or maybe we can swing by your apartment.” He chuckled and then turned to leave the room.

Ryan rolled her eyes about him mentioning the apartment that he knew she didn’t have, and the way he just dropped that statement and then left without waiting for her to respond. She

knew there was no point in arguing with him about it, so she aggressively threw the covers back and sat up. After stretching really good, her feet hit the floor and she moved to the bathroom.

Once she had the water running in the shower, she moved to the counter to brush her teeth, but yanked at the bun on her head first, letting her hair fall down around her face and shoulders. She planned to wash it while she showered then let it hang free and air dry into its naturally curly state, since she didn't have anything to tame it with. Aside from running her fingers through it, she was shit out of luck in the hair department.

An hour later, MyZell was at her door again, but this time he knocked and opened it at the same time, sticking his head in.

“You ready?”

Ryan could smell his cologne from across the room where she sat on the bed and it made her have to fight not to smile. She was really trying hard to keep her distance from anything remotely close to an attraction to him, but he was making that extremely difficult.

She surveyed his body after the door fully opened and admired his appearance. His clothes were simple, but she knew they were expensive. The dark jeans he wore appeared to be brand new but fit him perfectly and the white V-neck that covered his upper body looked as if it had also just come out of a shopping bag.

“Why you looking at me like that?” MyZell questioned.

“Like what?”

Feeling a tinge of embarrassment, she looked away and began running her fingers through the curls that swept her shoulders and were still partially damp.

“Nothing, let's go.”

He held his hand up, gesturing toward the hallway, and Ryan exhaled before following him. She felt out of place in the

leggings, t-shirt and Nike slides that she wore, but it was all she had at the moment, so couldn't really complain.

MyZell, on the other hand, was pleased with her appearance. As simple as she was dressed, she was still beautiful and sexy to him. Something that he knew was going to quickly become an issue for him. He decided that tonight he would take a break and head home. Aside from the fact that he needed some distance from Ryan, he needed to get back to his normal life.

An hour later the two of them were sharing a table at a little spot in South Beach, finishing off the last of their food. Ryan sat on one side with MyZell facing her, and aside from idle chit chat about where they were and what they were eating, not much had been said. She was impressed with the place, which was a little fancier than she really wanted to be, considering how she was dressed, but MyZell insisted that he loved the food and that no one would say anything to her. He was right, they catered to him the second they arrived, and treated her like she was royalty simply because she was with him.

"I'm glad to see you eating," MyZell said randomly and then leaned back with his focus on Ryan. She wiped her mouth with the napkin that had been in her lap and then placed it on the table.

"I eat," she replied with a bit of a frown and he smiled.

"I'm sure you do, but not since you've been with me. I guess I make you nervous or something."

"What would make you think that?" she questioned.

It wasn't that he made her nervous, she just didn't know him and was trying her best to keep a low profile.

"Because you only talk when I talk to you, you barely eat anything I get you, and when you're around me you avoid eye contact. I mean, I know I ain't a pretty muthafucker, but I damn sure ain't road kill either. But you act like you can't stand to look at me."



She smiled big and couldn't help but laugh a little. Having just taken a sip of the orange juice that she was nursing, she almost spit it out when she did. His confession was funny to her because it almost sounded as if his feelings were hurt at her lack of attention.

"No, you most certainly are not road kill. I'm not nervous, I just don't know you. You've been very generous and I appreciate that. I'm just trying to stay out of your way and not be an inconvenience, well, any more than I have to be."

"Inconvenience?" he questioned with a smirk. "Shorty, if you were an inconvenience you wouldn't be at my spot. Trust me, and I kinda like having you there."

"Why?" It flew out of her mouth so quick that she couldn't stop it and instantly regretted it after it did.

MyZell's hand moved down his face and then across his head. He smirked and looked her right in the eyes. He wanted to tell her the truth. That he was tired of being alone, that even with all the women he kicked it with, he was still left with an empty feeling, and Ryan being there somehow lessened that for him. He wasn't sure why because even though she was physically there, they didn't really have much of a connection. Instead of saying all that, he just chuckled.

"Shit, I don't know. It's just nice to have another body in the house, I guess."

"So it doesn't matter who, just anybody?" she asked.

"Nah, it matters. I don't open my home to just anyone, only certain people get that privilege."

"Like the woman you were with last night?" This time Ryan looked him right in the eyes.

MyZell was a little thrown by her boldness because up until this point she had guarded anything remotely close to wanting a connection with him.

*And there it was.* MyZell was on edge, waiting to see if she would bring it up. Now that she had, he felt like shit.

“I apologize for that. It was inconsiderate,” he said genuinely, which Ryan appreciated. She really didn’t have the right to have feelings about it one way or another, but she did.

“You don’t have to apologize. It’s your house and you can do what you want in it.”

Again, she watched as his hand moved across his head before he spoke. She realized that it was a tell to him being uncomfortable and Ryan thought that was cute.

“You’re right. It is my house...” he began slowly and paused, which made Ryan’s heart drop. “...but it was still inconsiderate, and I should have thought about that. I’ve been by myself for a minute now, and it’s going to take time for me to adjust to having to think about someone else’s feelings.”

The sincerity in his voice and the intensity in his eyes as they bore into hers made Ryan blush and look away. She was entering dangerous territory, and didn’t want to assume anything, but it sounded like he was insinuating that she would be around long enough to give him time to adjust to considering her feelings.

In no way did she plan on overstaying her welcome, but just the idea that he even considered it had her blushing.

“Ay, you alright over there? You zoned out on me.” His voice caused her to look his way again and his expression was neutral.

Nodding, she then lifted her glass and took a long sip of her juice.

“People act weird around you,” Ryan stated randomly to kill the silence that they had fallen into.

MyZell wiped his mouth with his napkin before dropping it onto his plate. After which, he leaned back and smiled.

“What’s weird? They treat me with respect if that’s what you mean.”

He knew exactly what she meant. MyZell knew the owner personally because he had been one of his biggest customers at one point. After almost losing everything he owned because of

his addiction, he was not just an acquaintance and no longer a customer.

“I guess you can say respect, but I don’t know, it’s like you’re royalty or something around here. The way they talk to you and cater to you.”

“It’s just respect,” MyZell said calmly and then looked around before he focused on Ryan again.

He wasn’t ready for her to know that he actually was more or less royalty, street royalty, but still highly revered, nonetheless. Until he knew what she was about, that subject would be off the table.

“Yo, looks like we’re both about done. How about we head to the mall now and get you hooked up, or you wanna head back to the house? I’m a man of my word.” He smiled, hoping that she would accept his offer, even though he promised that he’d take her back to his condo after breakfast if that was what she wanted.

“We can go to the mall.” Ryan was also not ready to part ways with MyZell, so she agreed. What could it hurt to spend a little more time with him?

“Aight, bet. Let’s go.”

Ryan watched as MyZell stood, reached into his pocket and pulled out cash. He tossed a fifty on the table and then reached for her hand. She scooted to the edge of the seat she was in and accepted it. Once she was on her feet, the two headed to the front hand and hand, until they reached the door because MyZell let go of her hand to pull it open, but the second she started moving through it, he placed his hand on the small of her back as if guiding her.

That one simple thing had her insides knotting up. It was hard not to feel anything for him, but she was still fighting it with everything she had.

“AY, you’ll never guess what I just found,” Dutch said as he tossed a manila folder down in front of Polo. “I think I know where she is.”

Dutch took a seat in front of the desk that Polo was sitting behind and waited for his boss to look through the papers that he had just given him.

“What’s this?”

Instead of looking for himself he looked at Dutch and waited for him to explain. Polo wasn’t a patient man, and everyone knew it. His fuse was short, especially when it came to matters that concerned Ryan. He knew that Dutch had to be referring to her when he referenced that he knew where “she” was.

“It’s the impound records for her car. Both of your names are listed on it, so when it got impounded and she didn’t claim it, they called your office. I—”

“Where is she?” Polo asked, cutting Dutch off.

He didn’t want to hear him gloat about having found Ryan like he needed a pat on the back. It was his fucking job and he got paid to do what Polo instructed him to. Finding Ryan was that current task.

“Miami.” Dutch beamed as he spoke. “Or at least that’s where the car is, so even if she’s not there now, she was, and it might help us figure out where she is now.”

“Miami?” Polo questioned aloud, but rhetorically. He knew that Ryan didn’t have any family in Miami. She really

didn't have family at all. Not that she was claiming, anyway.

“Yeah boss, Miami. You want me to go down there and see what I can find out?”

Polo now had his eyes on Dutch, not giving away his feelings with his expression. “Nah, I'll let you know. You can go now.”

Dutch looked at Polo and nodded. He knew better than to question him, and even though he was a little annoyed that Polo didn't seem to appreciate the information that he had given him, he wasn't crazy enough to speak on it. That could easily cost him his life, so he did as he was told and left.

When Polo's door shut, he lifted the file that Dutch had just given him and flipped through it. Any connection he had to Ryan was welcomed. He knew he had messed up with her and it was safe to say that he regretted it. The night she'd disappeared, he'd damn near lost his mind. Ryan may not have believed it, but Polo loved her. He was just young, paid, and not ready to settle down. The problem was, he knew what he had in Ryan. She was one of the good ones. Even as young as he was when they'd met, he knew it. Back then, his excuse was he was building an empire, but when he had that in place, it was that he was too young to settle down. With all the women that were around him constantly throwing themselves at him, it was hard to be faithful.

Polo knew that all of that was temporary, though. He was going to marry Ryan one day, which was why he'd kept her around. He would never be able to let her live in peace with another man. He'd kill her first and he knew that. It was crazy how that happened. He was too selfish to let her go, but not man enough to give her a reason to stay. He cheated, treated her like shit, and even put his hands on her from time to time. All of that was messed up and he knew it, but it didn't take away from the fact that he loved her.

Polo never imagined that she would actually leave him. He was all she had, he'd made sure of that. When her sister came looking for her, he paid her off to make her stay away. He'd never told Ryan because he didn't want her to know that she

had family. Polo needed her to depend on him. That was necessary to keep her around. Now she was gone and he hadn't been right since. He had to get her back. He was going to get her back, no matter what that took.

In fact, the only reason Avarie was still around was because she was carrying their second child. She was just a placeholder; she could never be Ryan no matter how hard she tried. Polo knew that she was part of the reason why Ryan left. Moving Avarie and their son in was a fuck move, but she'd threatened to disappear with their son if he hadn't. At the time, he couldn't process killing the mother of his child, and he loved his son. So, he moved her in to make sure PJ was safe and close and she wouldn't get rid of the one that she was carrying.

Polo regretted that decision because it was the thing that had caused him to lose Ryan, but Avarie would get what was coming to her. It was just a matter of time. Right now, he needed to keep her close for the sake of his son, but Polo knew that he was only prolonging the inevitable. Avarie was going to die. There was no doubt about that.

Once Dutch was out of Polo's office, he closed the door behind him and made his way through his boss's lavish home on his way to the front entrance but was stopped just before he got there.

“Did you tell him?”

Dutch stared at her fat ass before his eyes moved up to her face, which was covered with a scowl.

“You know I did. I had to. If Polo ever found out that I kept it from him, he'd fucking kill me, Varie.”

Avarie made her way to him and stopped inches away. Dutch could feel the swell in his jeans just from her being that close to him.

“I don't want her back here, Dutch. You need to figure out how to make sure that doesn't happen.” Avarie looked down between them then grabbed a handful of his dick and gave it a nice firm squeeze before she let it go.

“I’ll do what I can, but...”

“But nothing, Dutch. I don’t know why, but he loves that hoe. He won’t let it go, so as long as he knows that she’s out there, he’ll keep looking. I need him to stop looking. This is my house now, all my shit and my man. If he finds her, that’s over.”

Avarie knew her place in Polo’s life. She had always been the side piece because he was in love with Ryan. He cheated and treated her like shit, but that was just who he was. It didn’t mean he didn’t love her. He did and Avarie knew he did. He had no problem letting her know that she would always come second to Ryan. Even after he moved her and their son into his house because she begged him to let her stay there.

It was supposed to be temporary, and he’d made that clear, but Avarie made sure to tell Ryan anything but. She made her believe that Polo was replacing her with Avarie. She even lied about a pregnancy just to make it seem more convincing. After Ryan left, she’d planned to fake a miscarriage, but she knew that Polo would likely take their son and put her out.

Avarie needed Ryan to stay where she was or she knew that her life would change. Ever since Ryan left, Polo hadn’t been the same. He was obsessed with finding her and had gotten pissed with Avarie about simple things. She knew that the second he found her, Ryan would be back and she would be pushed to the side.

Avarie could tolerate his other side hoes because that was just sex, but he loved Ryan and she knew it.

“I don’t know how you expect me to feel about that.” He was trying not to sound like a bitch by complaining, but he was in love with her. Had been for years now and she was more worried about keeping Ryan away from Polo than she was about him risking his life by sleeping with her and keeping information from his boss.

“Sweetie, you know how I feel about you, but facts are facts. You only have one thing to offer me.” She looked down at the erection that she caused and smirked. “Polo can give me

everything. You get the best of both worlds, you get to fuck me and live. What more can you ask for?"

"That's messed up, Varie. I really don't know if I want to keep this up. Especially, if that's all its ever going to be. I already let you take this too far."

Dutch tried to walk away, but she caught his arm to stop him. She needed him to fix the situation with Ryan and that meant keeping him happy. Avarie would never leave Polo for Dutch. Polo offered her things that Dutch never could. Money, power, and respect that came with being a boss's hoe. That was why she didn't understand why Ryan was never satisfied. She didn't know her place. So what Polo had other women but look what you got in return.

"Dutch, wait. You're right. I'm not saying it won't ever happen, just not right now. I need to get to a place where I can survive on my own. I have to think about PJ. Give me some time. Polo will eventually give me access to what I need, but only if you make sure that hoe doesn't surface again. When I get the money I need to live the way I deserve to live, then we can disappear. Just you, me, and PJ."

Dutch knew better. Polo would never let that happen. He'd kill them both first, but Dutch also didn't want to lose what little connection he had to Avarie. He knew it was foolish of him, but love worked that way.

"Fine, I have to go." He snatched away and moved to the door.

"I'll try to get away later and maybe you can meet me somewhere," Avarie said with a seductive smile. Sex with Dutch was worth it, and it would keep him on course.

"We'll see," was all he said before he left.

He knew that he would be wherever she wanted him to be, but he also knew that he couldn't let her know just how bad he had it. For now, he was going to figure out if Ryan was really in Miami. If she was, he was going to make sure Polo found out. It was likely the only way that Avarie would ever be his, and if that's what it took, then he was going to make it happen.



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ONE MONTH *Later*

“Myah, why are you just walking in my house unannounced?” MyZell yelled from his kitchen where he stood in front of the monitors that showed all the cameras on his property.

“I’m obviously announced, if you calling my name and know it’s me,” she stated as she entered the kitchen, walking right up to him and throwing her arms around his neck. After a quick hug, he kissed her on the cheek and she let him go.

“What’s up, sis. What are you doing here?”

“I missed my brother.” She frowned. “It’s like you just disappeared on me the past month. You’ve been spending all you time at the condo with old girl.”

MyZell watched his grown ass sister pouting like a child. He leaned back against the counter before locking his arms across his chest. MyZell knew that his sister was a little jealous of the fact that he was spending so much time with Ryan, but he couldn’t help it. The two had gotten close over the past month.

“You jealous, My?” He smirked at her and she sucked her teeth

“Why would I be jealous of some homeless hoe, MyZell?” She knew she was wrong for saying that about Ryan, but she was in her feelings a bit about how close Ryan had gotten to her brother.

It wasn't Ryan's fault and she knew that. Truth be told, Myah actually liked Ryan from what little she knew about her. The two had hung out a few times when Myah dropped by to be nosey after MyZell told her to not to.

“Ay, that's not necessary. She ain't do shit to you, Myah, and she ain't trying to keep me from you. I spend time with her because I want to. That don't have shit to do with me not spending time with you. When you're not at the shop, you're with them birds you call friends, so check that shit, aight? If you need me, I'm there, and you know that.”

Myah knew he was right, but she wasn't about to admit it, so she changed the subject. Mostly because she didn't want him to start questioning her about what she had been up to lately. She had a secret of her own and she wasn't quite ready for her brother to find out. She needed more time to make sure her newfound crush was on the up and up.

“So you still don't know who she is yet, Zell?” Myah questioned over her shoulder as she pulled open his refrigerator to grab a bottle of water. Once she had it in her hand, she hopped on the counter next to him and untwisted the top.

“I know what I need to know. She's good people, Myah.”

“How can you say that? You don't know anything about her, Zell. I mean, she's cool, and seems legit, but I just don't trust that. Why hide who you are if you don't have anything to hide?”

“Everyone has secrets, My. I got a few of my own.”

Myah frowned at her brother. “Yeah, but yours are not about who you are. I mean, in a way they are, but not really. You might hide the fact that you running shit and pushing more weight around Miami than most states combined, and sure, you might not tell people that you take lives at the blink of an eye, but the bottom line is that you are who you are. You don't tell people that shit because it's a safety thing.”

MyZell chuckled at how his sister had summarized his life. She was right in a sense, but it wasn't really that simple. They

both knew it.

“Maybe the reason why she’s not talking is so that she can keep herself safe. Either way, it don’t matter. I’ll find out and if her shit is not legit, then I’ll deal with it then. But for now, she hasn’t given me a reason to treat her any way other than I am.”

Myah sat there silently thinking. She knew her brother, and just from the way he was acting, she could tell that he was feeling Ryan. That made her uneasy. It was like *déjà vu*. A repeat of Tan. Ryan had come out of nowhere and stolen her brother’s heart. She’d never really trusted Tan, and although she didn’t get that vibe from Ryan, she had to admit that it was too convenient. Tan disappearing really messed with her brother, and she didn’t want to see him go through that again, so she wanted him to be careful.

“You like her, don’t you, Zell.” Myah turned to face her brother and waited.

He looked down at his very expensive, imported tile floor before his hand moved across his head. MyZell then looked at his sister and smiled.

“Don’t worry about all that. I’m good, My.”

“Oh my God, you do.” She sucked her teeth and hopped down off the counter.

“Man, chill and mind your business.”

“Since when are you not my business, Zell? I know I can’t tell you shit, but just promise me you’ll be careful, please.”

MyZell smiled at how concerned his sister was. He exhaled before pulling his body from where it rested against the counter and then took a step toward Myah. After a brief pause, he closed her in his arms and held her for a minute.

“You know I love you, right?”

“Yeah, I know, but that don’t have anything to do with you being careful, Zell.”

“I know, I hear you, and I am. So stop worrying. I’m good.”

“You better be, because I’ll fuck somebody up over you, Zell. You know I don’t play that.” Myah looked up at him with a mean mug. He chuckled and let her go after a kiss on the cheek.

“I’m heading out. If you’re staying, lock my shit before you go.”

“Where you going, Zell?”

“None of your gotdamn business, Myah.”

“Zell, where you going?” She asked again, following him out the kitchen.

“I’m about to go hook up with Trez, if that’s alright with your nosy ass.”

Myah didn’t really care. She just needed to keep tabs on her brother because she had plans on meeting up with Cutty and didn’t want him popping up on her. She didn’t want to scare him off before she figured out if he was worth investing time in.

“I’m not nosy, I just care. But I’m leaving, so I’ll call you later. I might chill with my girls later.” She added that just to ensure no surprise visits.

“Bird ass hoes. Do better, My,” he said just before he entered his bedroom.

Myah rolled her eyes and went in the opposite direction toward the front door. “I love you too, Zell.”

After his sister was gone, MyZell thought about all the nights that he had been spending with Ryan lately. At least once or twice a week he stayed at his condo, but for the most part, he let her have her space.

He did however take her to lunch and dinner occasionally, and she had cooked for him a few times. It was a struggle for him, like being in a relationship without the sex. Intimate relationships were all MyZell knew because he had never had that type of connection with women unless they were physical at some point. That was his issue now. He was extremely attracted to Ryan, and the more he was around her, the worse it

got. Some nights they'd get comfy and close on the sofa watching TV or just talking and his dick would be rock hard the entire time. He knew for sure that she'd felt it a few times, but she wasn't concerned or was either really good at hiding her reaction.

He'd even fallen asleep in bed with her the first night after he purchased Ryan a TV for her room. She had insisted that the two of them watch a movie on it, to break it in. All he kept thinking about was breaking her in, especially after he woke up in the middle of the night with her legs thrown across his, and her head on his chest. It took everything he had not to take it there, but he didn't want to cross that line with her.

MyZell was still trying to figure her out. Even after he'd paid Lydia a visit a few days ago, the only thing that she could tell him was that she was from out of town and had only worked for her that one night to try and get enough money to get her car out of impound.

He thanked Lydia and paid her for Ryan's services that night in exchange for her leaving Ryan alone. MyZell knew how Lydia worked, once you were in, you were in. She made it almost impossible to be free. He didn't know much about Ryan, but he knew that she wasn't the type of woman who needed to be caught up with Lydia.

As of now, he had a few people searching databases to try and find Ryan's car. He planned on going through it to see if there were any clues as to who she really was. He just prayed that he didn't find out something that he didn't like.

\* \* \*

"Oh, so you got time for a nigga now, I see." Trez opened his door and then walked away while MyZell entered his house and locked up.

"Damn, nigga, you sound like Myah's crying ass. Why the hell y'all in your feelings and shit?" Zell said after he followed Trez to the living room and took a seat in his recliner.

“Muthafucker, I ain’t crying. I’m just stating facts. You been playing house for the last month and shit. Pussy must be banging.”

Zell laughed at Trez and pressed the control to make the chair recline. “I wouldn’t know ’cause I ain’t playing house. just ’cause you don’t see me, don’t mean I’m with her.”

“Yeah, aight. Just be careful. She got your ass wide open.”

“Nigga, I’m grown, what the fuck I need to be careful for? And she ain’t got me open. It ain’t shit, I told you that.”

“Zell, you my nigga, so I’m just gonna lay this out and then be done with it. She’s a goddamn stranger, yet you got her up in your shit. Not just visiting, but she lives there. Hell, you barely even want me and Myah in your spot, and we’re family. The fuck am I supposed to think? She ain’t Tan, but it’s really starting to feel like the same situation in a different package.”

The mention of Tan’s name had MyZell instantly annoyed. He knew Trez had issues with her, but regardless, it was his situation, and no one owned the right to tell him shit about it.

“I ain’t here to discuss my personal life, Trez. Let’s talk business.” Zell chose not to discuss his relationship with Ryan or address the fact that Trez had brought up Tan. It was better if he just left it alone. He didn’t even know what he and Ryan were, so how could he defend it?

It wasn’t like he and Trez hadn’t had disagreements, it was expected. They had been friends all their lives, which meant that they not only disagreed from time to time, they had actually come to blows before. They were family, so they always recovered from it, but right now wasn’t the time for a situation like that.

With a hard stare, Trez thought long and hard before he decided to let it go. He was well aware that when Zell was done with something, there wasn’t a thing that anyone could do to change that. They both were stubborn and headstrong. It was amazing that they could even get along because they were so much alike. Neither of them liked to be told what to do, or how to do it, which was why they were so successful. It was

hard for anyone to compete with them. They were both reckless, and had no fear about anything, so when people tried them, it usually didn't end well for those who did.

“Rex and Carter's people are at each other. It's over some bullshit ass territory issues. I keep telling both them niggas to get their shit under control because if either one of us has to pay them a visit, then we'll be finding replacements.”

“Fuck they arguing over territory for? They're both making money right?” MyZell asked but didn't really expect an answer. He was just annoyed that they weren't smart enough work hard and keep their heads down. How hard was that to do?

“Same shit I said. I swear they make me want to just kill both their asses and take over.”

Zell smirked. “So you ready to hit the streets again? You ain't been out there in a long ass time, Trez. I don't think you built for that anymore.”

Trez laughed. “Fuck you mean? If I wanted to, I could. Same way you could. It's in our blood, Zell. You know that.”

MyZell nodded to agree. He and Trez had both worked their way through the system, from runners to corner boys. You name it they did it. Once they put their time in, they gained respect and the loyalty of every important dealer in Miami. It didn't take long for the two of them to take over. Like any other nigga on the come up, they used what they had to work their way into one of the biggest organizations in Miami and it wasn't long before they took over.

The game eventually got old, so Zell and Trez split out their territory, put people in place to run it, and allowed them control for a monthly percentage. Minimal effort, but they were still making money. Zell's motivation to get out was centered around what had happened to Tan, and even though Trez knew that to be true, he never really spoke on it. That was a year ago, and it worked because if anyone had an issue or tried to cross them, they were handled and replaced, which was what happened to Graves. He'd gotten greedy and decided that he didn't want to pay to play. That had cost him his life.



“True, but that shit ain’t for me no more. Hell, it ain’t for either one of us.”

Trez agreed.

“You wanna give them time to work that shit out or you wanna replace them?”

MyZell rubbed his beard and thought about it. “You already warned them, right?”

“Yeah, a few days ago.”

“Give ’em a week. If they can’t work that shit out, we’ll replace ’em.”

Trez smirked. “Aight, bet, so what about tomorrow? You hitting up Rockwell with me or what? It’s been a minute.”

“Cause that ain’t my shit and you know it.”

MyZell did occasionally go out, but it wasn’t really his thing. That was for people who wanted to feel important or be seen. He knew who he was, and so did everyone in Miami, so the recognition was necessary, but he had to admit he missed it.

“It don’t have to be your shit, but you my nigga, so just chill with me. One night won’t kill you. I’m sure wifey won’t mind,” Trez joked in reference to Ryan.

Zell chuckled. “It don’t have shit to do with her, I just don’t like muthafuckers all in my face, you know that. Niggas be on your dick worse than females. *Zell, put me on, Zell, I know you and Trez need some good soldiers.* Fuck all that begging. If you doing your thing, you get noticed. You should never beg another man for anything. I don’t give a fuck what it is.”

“Hell nah, you work for what you want just like we did. Ain’t nobody give us shit because we damn sure wasn’t asking. Now we might have taken some shit along the way, but ay, it is what it is.”

Zell laughed. “Aight, I’m down, but you’re paying for that shit man and Myah better not have her ass up in there. I’m not

trying to see my sister getting drunk with some punk ass muthafucker all up in her face.”

“Ay, you tell her. She don’t listen to nobody but you anyway.” Trez laughed. “But her spoiled ass barely listens to you.”

“Shit, she does if she knows what’s good. But let me roll. I’m about to head home.”

“Your ass.”

Zell just smirked. He and Trez both knew that he was rushing out of there to get to Ryan. Trez just didn’t know how bad MyZell had it, or maybe he did, but either way, it was his business. After he left Trez’s spot, he was on his way to his condo. He hadn’t talked to Ryan all day, but he knew she was there. He always left her keys to both his cars, and other than heading to the store, she really didn’t go anywhere.

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## *twelve*

RYAN SAT in the center of the floor in MyZell's living room scrolling through the want ads in the paper. She was trying to find a job that would possibly hire her under the table, without asking too many questions. That was her reason for using the paper instead of searching job sites. Actual agencies and real companies would require legitimate documentation, which she didn't have.

She was hoping to come across a small business or person who would just hire her and pay her in cash. Ryan was getting too comfortable in her current situation and needed some independence. She refused to have a repeat of the situation with Polo. That was how things had started with him. She fell hard, he took her in and took care of her. Anything she wanted or needed, he made sure she had.

The problem was that he began to act like he owned her because technically he did. She couldn't do anything without him. He controlled her life because he controlled all of the money. So when he started cheating and treating her like a possession, she was stuck. She had been with him from the time that she'd dropped out of school at seventeen years old. She didn't have a high school diploma and had never worked a day in her life.

Her parents were too busy getting high to give a shit about her if they were even still alive. The only person she really had was her sister, but she'd tried to find her and never could. So that made it real easy for Ryan to fall victim to Polo's control. She loved him, even when she shouldn't have, but with her life turning out the way it had, who could blame her?

Ryan didn't want to fall into that cycle again. She refused, so as nice as MyZell seemed, and as generous as he was being, she needed to start taking care of herself. Something was better than nothing, so if she got a job while he allowed her to stay there, then she could save enough money to get her car out and eventually get her own place.

She called literally every day to make sure they still had it and the guy promised that he'd make sure they kept it there for her until she could afford to come and get it. They had become quite friendly, so he even found a way to stop the charges from accruing every day so that she would eventually be able to afford to pay and get it back.

"This is pointless, fucking pointless," she mumbled just as the door opened and MyZell walked in.

"What's pointless?" he asked as Ryan quickly started collecting the newspapers in front of her and folding them back together. She didn't know why it was such a big secret, but she didn't want him to know what she was doing until she actually found a job.

"Hey, nothing. I was just reading the paper." She stood and tucked the folded paper under her arm as he walked over and snatched it from her. She tried to grab it back from him, but he turned his back and moved away from her.

After surveying what he was holding, he turned and handed it back over to her. "If you need help looking for a job, just ask, shorty. I can make a phone call and get you just about anywhere you want to be," he said calmly as he moved toward the kitchen.

Ryan was right behind him, but she stopped at the entrance while he opened the cabinet. Once he had the bottle of Absolut that he was after in his hand, he grabbed a glass and filled it.

"I'm sure you could, but you've done enough."

MyZell ignored her statement and took a drink before he gave his attention to the stove after noticing the smell of something that had his stomach growling. That was another thing he loved about Ryan. She could cook her ass off and

insisted on doing it all the time. It was her way of paying whatever debt she thought she owed, but MyZell didn't want anything from her, and he'd made that clear more than enough times. He just liked having her around.

“What did you cook?”

“Lasagna and did you hear me?”

MyZell turned his glass up before placing it on the counter. He looked at Ryan briefly before walking over to the stove and lifting the corner of the foil that covered the dish.

Ryan watched him clenching her jaw. That was the one thing that bothered her about him. She'd learned early on that he did things his way. If he wanted to deal with something, he did, if he didn't, there was no changing that. Just like right now. He was purposely ignoring her.

“MyZell?” she stated firmly.

“I heard you, shorty, but if I'm offering then that means I don't mind doing it. You're forever trying to tell my what my limits are in regard to what I do for you. Let me handle that and why you looking for a job anyway?”

“Because I need one. I don't plan on staying here forever. I appreciate you letting me be here, but I need to start figuring out what's next.”

MyZell turned and stared at her with a smug grin. He didn't have an issue with Ryan figuring out her life, but that might mean her excluding him from it. He wasn't sure if he was ready for that. It was selfish, but he didn't care.

“If you want a job, I'll help you get a job. Like I said, it's as easy as making a phone call. Do you even know what you want to do?”

Ryan tucked her teeth between her lip and stared at him. No, she didn't know what she wanted to do, she had no idea what she could do. At this point, she was willing to do anything, but she damn sure wasn't about to admit that to him.

“It doesn't matter. I'll take care of it.”

MyZell chuckled and then started her way. He stopped just in front of her and his eyes moved up and down her body. The jeans she wore hugged her frame just right. He loved that she was thick in all the right places. When he reached her breasts which were slightly exposed because of the tank top she wore, a smirk crossed his face. He definitely wasn't ready for her to leave him.

“Why don't you get things ready so we can eat? I'm about to hop in the shower real quick and then we can talk about it.”

“There's nothing to talk about, I'll figure it out,” Ryan said, but it was too late. MyZell was already moving.

He simply said, “okay,” but he didn't mean it. They both knew it.

Annoyed by his reaction, instead of getting their dinner ready, she went to her room, slammed the door, and lay down. She stared at the ceiling for a while before she decided to turn on the TV. She wasn't really watching it, simply using it as a distraction to keep her mind off how irritated she was by her current situation.

When MyZell knocked and then entered without waiting for her to respond, she yelled at him for no reason.

“That right there is why I need a job. You don't respect my privacy.”

Thrown a little by her reaction, he stood there processing how to respond. Since she'd been there, Ryan had never really raised her voice nor did he even remember her getting upset about anything. It wasn't like she really had a reason.

“My bad, shorty, it's not that serious.”

She sat up, and the second her feet swung over the side of the bed, she stood and moved his way. Stopping when there was just about a foot's distance between them, she placed her hands on her hips, staring him right in his eyes.

“It is that serious. You just walk in here like it's nothing. I need a job so that I can get my own place. I don't expect you to understand that.”

MyZell stared back at her, and instead of speaking, he closed the space between them, placed his hands on the sides of her face, and pulled her into a kiss. She resisted at first, but then her mouth opened slightly, allowing his tongue to enter.

Ryan and MyZell got so lost in the kiss that neither of them remembered what the issue was in the first place when they separated again. They both stood with their chests heaving like they had just run a marathon.

“Why did you do that?” Ryan was the first to speak, and she knew her question was stupid, but it was the first thing that came to mind. When he laughed, she regretted it even more.

Noticing the way her expression changed, MyZell tried to recover. “Ay, don’t look like that. I didn’t mean to laugh. I just wasn’t expecting that.”

He didn’t know what else to say after that, so he stepped to her again and leaned down until she felt his breath on her face.

“I wanted to. I’ve been wanting to for a while, but I was trying to respect your privacy.” He smirked after mocking her reason for going off on him in the first place.

She opened her mouth to respond, but then closed it again, so MyZell spoke for her.

“You don’t think I respect your privacy, Ryan?”

He was so close that it took everything in her not to kiss him again.

“I just think I need to start working on a way to have my own—”

He cut her off again with a kiss, but this time it was more intense and his hands were gripping at her clothes, helping her out of them. Before long, they were both naked and she was being backed against the bed where he pinned her arms above her head. MyZell’s next move was to trail kisses all over her neck and then down her chest. He stopped briefly and looked into her eyes, just to be sure he wasn’t crossing lines that she didn’t want to cross. She stared back at him and neither of them spoke, but they shared the same lustful stare. That was motivation enough for him to continue.

His tongue circled her left breast before it connected with her nipple, sucking gently at first, and then aggressively before he moved to the right. The soft moans that vibrated through her chest and escaped her lips motivated him to please her more.

With a trail of kisses down her stomach and between her thighs, he stopped to admire his prize. The smirk that formed on his face from the sight before him had his dick throbbing. He wanted nothing more than to enter her right then and there, but he decided to pleasure her first. He had to taste her. He had imagined what it would be like to kiss both sets of her lips for quite some time now and he had accomplished half of that goal. There was no need to stop now.

After using his hands to spread her thighs apart, he felt her body tense a little, which caused him to stop briefly and look up at her.

“You want me to stop?” he asked as he held his breath, praying that her answer would be no. He wanted her so bad that it would have killed him to walk away before he had a chance to satisfy that urge.

With a simple shake of her head, Ryan gave him permission to continue and MyZell didn't waste any time. The second he made contact, Ryan's entire body began to quiver. The soft, warm feel of his mouth on her almost made her cum instantly. It had been months since she'd felt a man's touch and she'd missed it. Trying her best to maintain, Ryan's hands dug into the sheets while MyZell pleased her.

Nothing she had imagined about him compared to how he was making her feel. As his tongue moved down her slit and then back up to her clit before he began to suck it, she began to have an out of body experience. It was too much, but just right at the same time. Without even realizing it, Ryan began rotating her hips against his face to give him more access to her sweetness.

Ryan's moans grew deeper and louder, which was motivation for MyZell to go in for the kill. He wanted to see just how much he could make her holler. Using his tongue as a



weapon, he began to assault her pussy like it was a sworn enemy, and when she gave up and let him have control, she released months of tension, which soaked the bed and coated his face.

MyZell smiled to himself as Ryan's chest heaved up and down. His tongue moved across her pussy a few more times, causing her body to jerk. He just watched her lying there trying to recover, with her eyes closed and the sheet balled up in her fists. It was so sexy to him that he was content just watching her.

When Ryan had her mind right again, she sat up slightly with a lazy grin, which turned into a smirk. "Lay back," she said, looking him right in the eyes.

He felt his dick jump at just the thought of what was next, but he did as she asked. Removing his body from between her legs, he rolled over onto his back and Ryan crawled over to him. MyZell watched with anticipation, and when she positioned herself between his legs and her hands wrapped around his tool, he immediately flinched. When her head lowered and her tongue circled the head, he had to fight hard not to nut prematurely. It got worse when she attempted to make it completely disappear.

Ryan was an expert at giving head, or so she had been told, and even with MyZell's thickness and length, she performed as such. She began skillfully licking and sucking every inch of his throbbing manhood while stroking and massaging the base.

MyZell had never in his life had that combination and it had something powerful building inside of him.

"Shiiiiittt."

MyZell's hand tangled in Ryan's hair, guiding her motions and pushing her down further. Not once did she seem affected by it, which had his climax building so quickly that he had no control over the release when it hit. After taking it all in, she then climbed on top of him, not allowing him the chance to object. The warm tight feel of her walls opening up for him had MyZell about to explode again.

With the need to regain some control, his hands gripped her waist, and in one fluid motion, Ryan was on her back. This time, MyZell entered her slowly. He wanted to see the reaction on her face as pushed inside of her. That was enough for him to cum again, but he kept it together. As soon as he reached the point where he could go no further, he pulled back even slower, and worked his way back in just as slowly. He needed to feel every single movement and that he did. Knots formed in his stomach as his nut began to rise. It was moving faster than he wanted it to, but there wasn't shit that he could do about it.

Ryan's eyes were closed and she enjoyed the feel of MyZell penetrating her deeper with every stroke. The way his width stretched her wide and his length hit her deep, she got lost in the feeling. She wasn't sure if it was the introduction of sex after having not had it for so long, or if he was just that good, but the way he felt inside her was heavenly.

As he held his weight above her, Ryan moved her hands down his chest before they circled his arms. With his eyes on her, she watched as his teeth sank into his lip with the look of contentment on his face.

“Damn, this pussy. Fuck, shorty.”

MyZell was trying his best to contain what he was feeling, but the way Ryan was rotating her hips against his body, and the sensation of her hugging him as he stroked her nice and slow controlled him. He was lost in the moment and vulnerable. A feeling that he didn't like. It had been an over a year since he had felt that way. Not wanting to give in to the control that Ryan had over him, MyZell pumped faster and harder. The aggression in his strokes was noticeable, and as good as it felt, the sudden change alarmed Ryan. Her eyes opened and she was yanked out of her blissful state. And after a few more deep penetrations, MyZell collapsed on top of her as they came together.

Neither of them moved. Ryan was in her head about what had just happened and MyZell's regret started to kick in. He was emotionally connected to Ryan and he knew it. That wasn't something he was prepared for, so instead of

addressing it, he simply got up, collected his clothes without saying a word, and walked out. He knew he wasn't shit for that, but he needed a minute to think.

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## *thirteen*

“MAN, it’s crowded as fuck in here. We need to buy a club, Zell. I know they’re making a shit load of money up in this bitch.” Trez looked around at the sea of people who were everywhere. Mostly women, which was right up his alley.

“What the fuck do you know about running a club? How the hell you think that will work.” Zell smirked and inhaled the smoke from the blunt that he was working on. It was strong as hell, so his eyes were hooded and his head was swimming off the first few pulls.

Trez chuckled. “I don’t know shit about running a club, but we’re smart, Zell. You know we could do this shit.”

MyZell looked across from where he was sitting at his boy and nodded. “We could do this shit. It’s all a hustle. Instead of hustling that good shit, you’re hustling drinks. You want muthafuckers to buy this overpriced, watered down shit, so you give them an experience that gets them hype enough to feed into that.”

“So, let’s do it then. Hell, we could buy this muthafucker if we wanted to.”

“How the fuck are we supposed to do that? You don’t even know if it’s for sale, Trez.”

Trez smiled and then turned up the bottle of Patron that he was holding in his lap. “Everyone has a price. If we want this bitch to be for sale, it’s for goddamn sale. Who the fuck is gonna tell us no?”

MyZell chuckled and then took another long pull from his blunt. “True, but I didn’t say I wanted to do it. I like my life the way it is, Trez. No fucking stress anymore. Why the hell you think we left the streets alone?”

“Cause we’re paid, and why the hell would we be out there doing that shit when we can pay niggas to do it for us? That’s why, but this ain’t like that. This is some grown man shit. We need to own something.”

“For what? So that the fucking feds can keep an eye on us? We got dirty money, Trez. A lot of it, but it’s dirty. Buying a car cash ain’t shit. What the hell you think they’ll say if we come out of half a mil cash to buy a place like this?”

“Shit, I don’t know, and I don’t care.” Trez was drunk, he wasn’t really thinking things through but there was a way to do everything. He and MyZell both knew that.

“Exactly, so let that shit go and just relax.” Zell smirked just as his phone went off again with a text from Ryan. He read it and then slid his phone back into his pocket.

**Ryan:** When will you be back? It’s been two days. We need to talk, please stop ignoring me.

“What’s up, Zell? Who dat, wifey? She checking up on your ass since you out around all this available pussy?” Trez grinned.

MyZell ignored him. He knew he had to have a conversation with Ryan eventually. He just wasn’t ready to do that yet. Maybe he’d stop by there tonight after he left the club.

After having sex with her, his head was all fucked up. He didn’t know what was going on, but he got caught up in his feelings. Being with Ryan wasn’t like being with Halle or any of the other women that he occasionally had sex with. It was different. He felt something, something that he hadn’t felt since Tan, and he wasn’t prepared for that. She made him feel vulnerable and connected and that wasn’t something he wanted or needed right now. He knew he wasn’t shit for

treating her the way he had but avoiding her was a lot easier than admitting to her that he had feelings for her.

“Zell, can I talk to you?” Halle stood impatiently outside of his VIP area, knowing that she had better wait until he gave her permission to enter. She wasn’t in the mood to get embarrassed. Drex was drunk, so she’d managed to get a few free minutes and wanted to try and set up plans to get dicked down by MyZell later.

“About what, Halle? If I’m not mistaken, your nigga is here, right?”

MyZell looked around the club and located Drex, who was across the club in another VIP section. From where they were, he could see Drex, but Drex couldn’t see him, which he knew was the only reason why Halle was currently in his presence. Not that Zell was worried because he didn’t give a fuck about Drex or his feelings. It wouldn’t mean anything to him to give Drex a detailed description of how Halle sang his name when he was deep stroking her.

“About us. You haven’t called me in a while and I miss you,” she whined, which made Trez look her way and smirk.

Halle sucked her teeth when she noticed him out the corner of her eye. She really hoped that he kept his mouth closed about her servicing him recently, but she had a feeling from the way that he was looking at her that he wouldn’t.

“Ay, Zell, you still fucking Drex’s hoe? I thought you were over that shit, my nigga. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have let her suck my dick last week. My bad, bruh,” Trez tossed out casually, causing Zell to chuckle.

“Nah, you’re good. I don’t have no claims to her.” Zell looked right at Halle and she looked like she wanted to jump across the half wall that separated her from Trez and beat the life out of him.

“You ain’t shit, Trez, you really ain’t shit.”

He smirked and lifted the bottle that he was holding, turned it up, and then spoke. “Nah, you ain’t shit. Your nigga is over there, you in my man’s face over here, and you

probably sucked three dicks before you got up here. Gone with all that, Halle.”

“Fuck you, Trez,” she yelled and then glanced at MyZell.

He simply chuckled and held his hands up before he looked right at her. “Have a good evening, Halle.”

She stood there pissed, knowing that she couldn't do anything but leave. It took her a minute, but when she walked off a group of women brushed past her smiling and talking. One of them bumped her shoulder as they headed in the direction that she had just left. She knew exactly where they were going. Feeling defeated, she walked away, heading back to Drex before he started looking for her. That was a problem that she didn't want.

“What do we have to do to be a part of this party?”

Zell and Trez both looked up at the same time into the face of four very sexy shades of brown. The ladies were all smiling lustfully at both of them, which meant that they wanted to party, and were willing to do just about anything. Women had been approaching their section all night. Trez had entertained a few, but Zell had been more laid back. In situations like this, he wasn't really looking for companionship, just sex. And with everything going on with Ryan, he wasn't really looking for that.

“This ain't a party, baby girl, but it can be.” Trez signaled for them to enter, which they did, and separated.

Two of them moved to the left and right of Trez, while the other two made their way over to MyZell. One was bold enough to position herself in his lap, while the other clung to his side. They both had their hands on him in inappropriate places, which he didn't object to.

“What's your name, shorty?” he asked the one in his lap, while moving his hand up her thigh.

Her short dress was damn near up around her waist, exposing the pale lace thong she wore. He couldn't deny how sexy she was, especially with her fat, round ass grinding against his lower half, causing his tool to react.

“Shane.” She grinned before letting one of her bright red nails move down his chest.

“Shane, I like that, and you are?” He turned to the friend who had one hand on Shane’s other thigh and was caressing it.

“Trina. I’ve been trying to catch up with you for a while now.” She giggled like a child as she gazed lustfully at MyZell.

It was true. She had been watching him for a while and wanted nothing more than to experience for herself what she’d heard rumors about. Everyone thought that they could accomplish what the next couldn’t, so regardless of the fact that he had a reputation for only indulging in sex, in her mind, she could be the one who changed that.

He placed the blunt he was holding between his lips and squeezed Shane’s thigh with his other hand before inhaling and releasing it slow. Trina then grabbed it from his fingers and placing it between hers.

When she was done, he handed it to Shane, who inhaled deeply and then leaned forward to drop what little was left into the empty bottle that sat on the table in front of the sofa that they were on.

“And why is that?” MyZell questioned, already knowing the answer.

“Why wouldn’t I? Look at you? Plus, I’ve heard good things, really good things.”

Trez looked up from the breasts that he had his face buried in and grinned at his boy. He knew just as well as MyZell did that all any of them would accomplish tonight was possibly getting fucked. Any woman leading with her pussy wasn’t worth investing in. The only thing she could do for either one of them was offer a good nut.

“You might not be ready for all that and you really shouldn’t believe everything you hear.” MyZell looked her right in her eyes in a way that had her questioning whether or not it was smart to take it there with him, but lust outweighed any fear that was building inside of her, so she kept going.



“I can look at you and tell that it’s true. Trust me, I’m ready.” She looked at her homegirl who was grinding in his lap and the two shared a private thought as they smiled at each other.

“We’re both ready,” Shane added.

“Ay, who the fuck is that?” Trez yelled before MyZell had a chance to respond to the offer that Trina and Shane were throwing at him.

His eyes moved in the direction that Trez was looking in, and moments later, he was on his feet, which landed Shane in a spot on the floor. Trez was right behind him.

“Damn, nigga, you could have given me some warning,” Shane snapped, causing Trina to snicker. Shane shot her a glance and she shrugged.

“You can leave now,” MyZell said as he started to the entrance of their section. His hand moved under his shirt and Trez already had his piece by his side.

“Leave? We just got here,” Trina said, too stupid to realize that she was playing with her life by questioning him.

“Ay, get the fuck out now,” Trez yelled.

Zell was already moving, so Trez cleared the girls out as they all caught attitudes and complained before he caught up with his boy.

“Myah, who the fuck is this nigga?” Zell stepped between his sister and the guy who had just had his mouth and hands all over her.

Myah jumped at the sound of her brother’s voice and backed away from him but ran right into Trez.

“A friend,” Cutty answered with a smirk.

He knew exactly who MyZell was and was hoping to eventually run into him. This just happened to be the perfect setting because as crazy as he knew MyZell to be, he knew that he wouldn’t shoot him in a club full of people.

“Muthafucker, I wasn’t talking to you.”

MyZell had his gun under Cutty's chin so quick that Myah just knew he was about to shoot him. Cutty didn't flinch though, because he knew that if he showed any fear at all, he would never accomplish what he needed to accomplish.

"My bad, but, shit, you asked."

"Zell, put that away before you get your ass locked up," Myah pleaded.

Although she didn't want Cutty to die, she cared more about what would happen to her brother if he pulled the trigger.

"Ay, shut the fuck up, baby girl, and let him handle that. You know better than to be up in here like this anyway. We don't know this nigga." Trez glared at Myah, daring her to debate him.

She knew it wasn't going to help the situation, so she backed down.

"No disrespect to either one of you, but you don't need to handle her like that. It's my fault. I know who you are, and how you are about your sister, and I should have come to you first to make sure you knew who I was. I wanted to, but Myah said she wasn't ready for all that, but if you put that away, we can talk."

MyZell glared at his sister but kept his gun in place. "So you know me, huh? Then your ass knew better than to be out here all over my sister if I don't know you. I don't give a fuck what she wasn't ready for, if you wanted to be down with her, you shouldn't have come to me first."

"You're not my fucking daddy, MyZell. He don't need clearance from you to be with me."

"Ay, don't get fucked up over some nigga you don't know, Myah."

"Chill, baby, it's cool. He's right. Again, no disrespect."

"Nigga, there is disrespect. You're here, ain't you? And we don't know your ass," Trez said.

He wasn't feeling the situation any more than he knew MyZell was. Myah was grown, but she still was their responsibility, and anybody she was with needed to be cleared by them first. There had been too many situations where she'd opened her heart and her home to some punk ass nigga who was only using her to get to them or get something from them. It wasn't right, but it was real. Neither he or MyZell was willing to risk her life, so yeah, they were extreme, but it was necessary.

"Look, all I want is a chance. I like your sister and regardless of what you think, that's all it is. You wanna know who I am, then ask. I'll tell you anything you want to know. I don't have shit to hide."

MyZell chuckled before he lowered his gun. "You ain't got shit to hide? Aight, bet, but how about this? I'll check you out, and if I don't like what I find, then I'll put a bullet in your head. If you check out, then I might consider letting you talk to my sister."

"MyZell..."

"What? Shit, he said he don't have anything to hide. I think that's fair. You up here defending this nigga, so you must like him. Take it or leave it, 'cause I could just shoot his ass right now and get it over with."

"Nah, I'm good with that, but trust me, after that, ain't gon' be too many more times where you put a gun on me." Cutty stared MyZell down but didn't show an ounce of fear.

MyZell respected that, but at the same time, it made him want to shoot him now and get it over with. Not many people stood up to him, and if nothing else, dude got points for that. Either way, he didn't play about his sister, so until he knew for sure who dude was, she wasn't going to be anywhere near him.

"Aight, we'll be in touch. Enjoy your evening. My, let's go."

MyZell turned to walk away, expecting his sister to just follow, but he heard her behind him.

“I’ll call you later. I apologize for all this.” She was pissed at how Trez and MyZell had acted, but she expected it.

“Ay, bring your ass on. You want me to change my mind and shoot this nigga, Myah? I’m not fucking playing with you,” MyZell growled at her after he realized she wasn’t moving.

“Just go. We’ll talk soon.” Cutty glanced at MyZell, who chuckled.

Dude was cocky as fuck, but he was crazy and didn’t play about his sister. He had better tread lightly or fuck a background check, MyZell would just get rid of his ass.

Once they were outside the club, Myah started toward her car, but Zell stopped her. “Ay, where the fuck you think you’re going?”

“Home,” she yelled.

“Nah, let’s go. I’ll take you.”

“My car is here, I can drive myself.”

“Fuck that car, we can get it tomorrow. I need to holla at you. Let’s go.”

“I’m not a fucking child, Zell. You already embarrassed the fuck out of me in there. I’m going home in my car. I’m tired of you acting like the gatekeeper to my life. You do realize I’m older than you, right?”

“Then act like it, Myah, and chill with all that damn language. I don’t know who the hell you think you’re talking to. Damn, I know this shit is a game to you, and you think I’m trying to run your life, but I’m not. I just want you safe. What if that nigga is out for me? What if he trying to get close to you to get to me? Do I need to remind you of how many times that shit has already happened?”

“Every guy that likes me is not out to get you. I’m so fucking tired of this. Maybe I’ll just move the fuck outta Miami. Then I can meet somebody who doesn’t know you or give two fucks about what you have.”

“You wanna move, then move. You think that will fix it. It won’t. I don’t care where you go, Myah, I’m always gonna make sure you’re good, and that means checking out any man that’s trying to get next to you. Why do you care? If that nigga is legit, then what difference does it make if I check him out? You’re worried ’cause you don’t trust that shit either.”

“I trust him. I didn’t bring him around you because I’m a grown ass woman who needs her baby brother’s permission to date. Do you know how embarrassing that is?”

“Ay, I’m heading back inside.” Trez walked up after watching Zell and Myah going at it. He didn’t want to take sides because he understood both, but as much as he hated to admit it, he was with Zell.

He pulled Myah into a hug, which she resisted at first, but then gave in. “Stop fighting us, Myah. Some shit is what it is, baby girl. You know that.” Trez let her go and she rolled her eyes. She was so tired of hearing that.

After Trez dapped MyZell, he left the two of them and made his way back to the club. He planned to find the ladies he had left before they had to go deal with Myah.

“Can I go now?” Myah asked, with her arms folded tight across her chest.

Letting his hand move across his head and then down his face, MyZell stared at what was the female version of himself. The scowl she wore tugged at his heart a little, but some things just had to be a certain way.

“Why do I feel like we have this same conversation every other day, Myah? It’s not about me controlling you. I just need to know you’re safe. Niggas don’t give a fuck about feelings. You don’t think they’ll tell you all type of shit, fuck you, and then put a bullet in my head. You want that?”

“No, I know that. Damn, how could I not when you say it every five minutes? I just want to be happy. Cutty is not like that. I know you don’t believe it, but he’s not. When we’re together it’s about us. He doesn’t ask about you or care who you are. It’s just about us. I like him, Zell, I really like him.”

Zell stared at his sister and she was breaking him down. “You really feeling this nigga, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” Myah smiled, hoping that she had gotten a break.

“Aight, let me check him out. Stay away from that nigga until I do, but if he comes back all right, then I’ll step back a little.”

“Thank you, Zell, thank you. He’s good, I promise.” Myah threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. He hugged her back and then pushed her off him.

“Chill, man, I have to check him out first, and even if he comes back clean, I’m still gon’ keep an eye on him, so don’t get all happy and shit. Don’t bring that nigga to your house, and I’m serious, My. Stay away from him until I check him out.”

“I will, I promise,” she said, which was a lie and they both knew it, but MyZell planned to have somebody watch both of them until he found out what he needed to know.

“Aight, call me tomorrow and tell me what you know about that nigga. Call me when you get home.”

“I will. Thank you, Zell. I love you.”

“I love you too, with your punk ass.” He grinned and she shot him a bird.

Zell watched as she made her way to her Range, and once she was backing out and on her way home, he got in his Tesla and left. He was undecided about where he was going, but he had a feeling it was to his condo and not his house. He had his own shit to deal with for now, and even though he wasn’t looking forward to it, it was time for that conversation with Ryan.

## *fourteen*

THE SOUND of the alarm startled Ryan, jarring her from where she slept on the sofa. After vegging on reruns all night, trying to keep her mind off the fact that MyZell was still avoiding her calls and texts, she eventually fell asleep.

After the door shut and she laid eyes on him, she quickly sat up and wiped her eyes before she pulled her feet up on the sofa and crossed her legs Indian style.

She glared at him, wanting to be mad, but she'd missed him not being around and that feeling took over.

"It's late, why are you up?" he asked after he shut the door.

Instead of keeping his eyes on her, he turned to the keypad and entered the code to reset the alarm.

"It's late, why are you here?" Ryan snapped as the anger she had been feeling over the past two days took over again.

It had been two days since Ryan and MyZell had sex and she was really in her feelings about it. The way he'd acted afterward had her totally confused. He got up and left without saying a word, and an hour after that, she heard the front door.

She had no idea what was going on, but it wasn't like she was the one who initiated things; it was all him. Ryan couldn't understand what the problem was, and she couldn't ask because for the past two days, he hadn't been around and he wouldn't answer her calls. It pissed her off, but even more than that, it hurt her feelings.

"I live here." MyZell chuckled but knew exactly what she meant.

“No, you don’t. You have a house somewhere else. You just show up here when you feel like being bothered.”

He deserved that, so he didn’t respond. Instead, he just stared at her, trying to figure out where to begin. He owed her an explanation but wasn’t even sure what that would be.

“What, no words?” she yelled and then lowered her feet to the floor before she stood. “I’m going to bed.”

“Ay, hold up, let’s talk for a minute,” MyZell said calmly, but didn’t move.

Ryan stopped and turned to face him again.

“We should have talked two days ago. I don’t really feel like it right now, so I’m going to bed if that’s okay with you. I mean, this is your house, so I guess I need to clear that with you, right?”

MyZell knew he should have been more concerned about what she was saying, but it wasn’t even registering. He was sidetracked by how she looked. The little ass shorts she had on and the sheer tank top that covered her had all of his focus and attention. He could see her nipples through it and the only thing on his mind was circling them with his tongue.

Noticing his lustful stare irritated Ryan even more, so she turned on her heels and started toward the hallway again, but MyZell got it together and called her name.

“Ryan, I fucked up and I apologize for that.”

“You think? But it’s cool. I should have expected that.”

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?” MyZell looked at her in confusion.

“Nothing, it’s not important.” Ryan tried to walk away, but this time, MyZell followed.

She wanted to tell him that she knew his kind and that a man like him couldn’t respect women. Women were just an accessory or sex. But she decided to let it go. It was her fault for taking it there with him. She couldn’t blame him. She had allowed it to happen and expected it to mean something.



When she reached her room, she walked in and attempted to shut the door, but he was right behind her and his hand caught it and pushed it open.

“Nah, tell me what you mean by that.”

“It’s not important,” she said, glaring at him with her hand still on the door.

“It must be if you brought that shit up. I know I shouldn’t have left like that. It was a childish decision, and I said I apologize for that shit, but you saying you should have expected that, like you somehow judging me or trying to say I’m a certain way. You don’t know shit about me. I’m not a dog ass nigga, Ryan.”

She laughed arrogantly and peered at him. With her eyes on his, she glared at him hatefully. “Did you not bring some women here, fuck her, and send her home? You’re trying to tell me that’s not you? That’s not who you are? Seems to me like it is.”

His jaw tightened at the way she was talking to him, but he let it go because what she was saying was more important than the delivery and he understood that.

“Yeah, I did, but you’re not my girl, so what the fuck does that matter? And she knew she was only here for sex, so that don’t make me anything but honest.”

“You’re right. Good night,” she stated and then waited, expecting him to leave.

“That’s all you have to say?”

“What else is there to say?” she questioned.

“You can ask me why I left like that because that’s what you really wanna know.” He knew that was the problem.

If it was really about him having Halle there then she wouldn’t have let him have sex with her in the first place. And if she really thought he was some type of dog ass nigga, then she would have just said it. He knew her feelings were hurt.

“Okay then, why?” She let go of the door and folded her arms while she waited.

He laughed and then moved further into her room before he sat on the bed. “I ain’t telling you shit with you looking like you ready to slap the fire out of me. Relax and we can have a conversation,” he said, patting the bed next to him, signaling for her to sit down.

She didn’t move for a minute, but he called her name again. “Ryan, sit down, man, and we can talk.”

After a few more minutes, she gave in and sat next to him, making sure to have space between them. MyZell chuckled because he knew she did it on purpose.

“Aight, you want me to be honest, then you have to be honest with me too.”

“About what?”

“You, man. I still don’t know who you are, Ryan, but we’ll get to that.” He exhaled and rubbed his chin before he placed his hand back in his lap.

“Over the past year, I’ve just been kinda chilling. No relationships or shit like that, just kicking it with a few people here and there. That was good enough for me.” He paused and looked at Ryan, who was looking at him. “The reason is that I really didn’t want to get caught up with anyone.”

“Why didn’t you just say that? I would have understood,” Ryan said.

“Because it’s not that simple. Being with you was different.”

“Different?”

“Yeah, different.” His hand moved down his face. How could he tell her without really telling her that he had feelings for her?

“Is that good or bad?”

“Both. I don’t know if I can trust you because I don’t know you. And the last time I had feelings for someone, it cost both of us.”

“Tan?”

Hearing her name made his body tense up. “Yeah.”

“I’m not asking for anything and I don’t expect anything. You’re obviously not over her, so I get that, but I just didn’t expect you to act like you did. My past isn’t perfect either, but I know that has nothing to do with you, so it wouldn’t be fair of me to treat you like it was.”

He looked at her and smiled. She was right. “I know, which is why I said I fucked up. I don’t know what this is and I can’t tell you what it’s not. But she’s not here anymore, so I have to let that go because I can’t do shit about that.

“You’re not ready and I can’t do shit about that. Maybe we should just go back to how things were. I’m okay with that. I need to figure out my life anyway.”

Zell laughed. There was no way he could go back to the way things were. Even sitting next to her right now, all he could think about was spreading her legs and hitting her deep. It wasn’t even just the sex. He knew things were different when he saw the look of disappointment in her eyes when he walked in tonight. It was different because he wanted to fix it and he felt like shit knowing that he was the reason for it. No matter how many times other women, Halle included, had given him that same look, he didn’t care one way or another. But with Ryan, he did.

“Nah, we can’t go back. Ain’t no way I can be up in here with you and not sample that again.” He looked down at her legs before his eyes moved up her body.

Ryan felt her clit throb at the way he stared at her.

“What if that’s what I want?” she asked.

“Then I’ll respect that.”

MyZell knew that was a lie. There was no way he could be around her and not have sex with her. If that was what she really wanted, then he’d have to stay away.

“That’s what I want,” Ryan said and then stood.

She was also lying, but she felt like it was what they needed. After her situation with Polo, she just didn’t want to

fall for the wrong guy again, and she could tell that MyZell was still living in the past. That was dangerous because he could be using her as a way to move on, and then what?

“Aight. I’ll give you that.” He also stood and walked to the door. It was killing him to agree, but if it was what she really wanted, he couldn’t do anything but respect that. “Night, Ryan.”

“Night,” she said so lowly that he barely heard her.

After MyZell returned to his room, he showered and climbed into bed. The more he thought about Ryan, the more he wanted her. He didn’t understand what it was about her that had him feeling her so much, but he knew it wasn’t going to be easy to stay away.

Lucky for him, she was feeling the same way because as he lay there in his dark room, dick rock hard because Ryan was on his mind, she was apparently thinking about him too. The knocking on his door made him smile.

“Come in,” he barked into the darkness, just before the door opened and Ryan appeared. He could see her silhouette and it had him anxious.

“What’s up? You need something?” he said coolly, trying to mask the fact that he was happy about her standing there.

“I can’t sleep. You feel like talking?”

“Amongst other things,” he mumbled. “Yeah, come on,” he said loud enough for her to hear him.

She shut the door and moved to the empty side of his bed. After pulling the covers back, she climbed in and lay on her back staring at the ceiling. They were both quiet until MyZell couldn’t stand it anymore.

“What’s on your mind, Ryan?”

“I’m hiding.” She didn’t know why, but she decided that it was time for him to know who she really was.

“I already knew that. What I don’t know is from who and why? Is that nigga after you for something? Are you sure he doesn’t have a reason to be?”

She exhaled and began to explain. By the time she was done, she felt like one weight had been lifted off her shoulder and another one was added. That was the weight of not knowing how MyZell would feel about her situation, or even worse, her. What man wanted a woman who doesn't even know who she is? For so long, Ryan's identity had been based on who Polo said that she could be and who she had become with him. That was the thing she loved about being around MyZell. She felt free and was starting to discover things about herself that she never knew existed or had suppressed because she wasn't allowed to let them show.

"You sure he doesn't know where you are?"

MyZell had been quiet while he processed everything that Ryan had just laid on him, so when he spoke, it startled her a little.

"No, I mean, I don't think so. I don't know anybody here, so he wouldn't have any way to connect me to being here."

"What else?"

"What?"

"What else are you hiding?"

"Nothing, that's it."

"Are you sure, 'cause I'm only gonna ask once."

"I'm sure," Ryan said with confidence. There wasn't anything else. She had left the only life she knew and ended up here. She didn't have any other secrets.

"Aight, tomorrow we'll go get your car."

"You don't have to—"

MyZell sat up and climbed on top of her, balancing his weight above her. He looked down, only able to see her silhouette because the room was so dark.

"Stop trying to control what I do for you, Ryan."

"I'm not, I just—"

This time, she was cut off by his lips connecting with hers. She accepted the motion and kissed him back. When he ended the kiss, he found his spot on the bed again, but brought her body close to his. She lay cradled against his side while the two got comfortable.

“I can go back to my room,” Ryan said after she felt his breathing slow down. She assumed he was falling asleep and didn’t want to intrude. He hadn’t asked her to go, but he hadn’t asked her to stay either.

“You’re good,” he mumbled, half asleep.

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## *fifteen*

“AY, WAKE UP, TAN.”

Tan pulled her baby girl close to her body at the sound of Cutty’s voice. She knew it was late because she had been up at two to feed her daughter and he still hadn’t been back then.

“Tan, get your ass up,” he barked, causing her to open her eyes and look up at him.

“Shhh, you’ll wake her up,” Tan whispered as she gave him a nasty look.

“I don’t give a fuck about that nigga’s baby and you know it. So if you don’t want me to wake her up, then bring your ass in the living room.” Cutty pointed into the darkness in her direction and then walked away.

Tan nuzzled her face into her daughter’s thick curly hair before she delivered a few kisses and then climbed out of bed. She pulled the covers up over her and surrounded her with pillows before she left the room.

“It’s time,” Cutty announced as soon as Tan entered the room.

He had a beer in one hand and the remote in the other as he stared at the TV across the room. He didn’t even bother looking up at her.

“I thought that you were—”

“You thought wrong and I didn’t say shit about you not going back. I just said I needed to get close to make sure you don’t fuck up this time.”

“Get someone else, Carlton. I need to think about my daughter.”

“What I tell you about calling me that shit? And this ain’t got shit to do with your daughter. You shouldn’t have had that damn baby in the first place. I swear if you weren’t my sister —”

“Then what, you would have killed me or killed your niece?” Tan snapped at her brother.

She never should have agreed to help him in the first place, but what she thought would be another simple hit had changed her life forever. She and her brother had been running the same game for years. Carlton would find a mark, she would befriend him and get to know everything about him, how he functioned and what made him tick. Then her brother would use that information take them down. He’d robbed them and had even killed a few. After they had what they needed, they’d move to another state and start all over.

This time was different. From the day she crossed paths with MyZell, she knew that she was in trouble. He wasn’t the type of man that you could walk away from. Tan had messed up and fallen in love, and to make matters worse, she’d gotten pregnant. That was when Cutty had pulled her out. He was pissed, he knew that it would mess up everything. If MyZell knew that his sister was having his child, then he’d protect her and maybe even forgive her and fuck up his plans.

Cutty wanted everything MyZell had, but he knew in order to do that, he’d have to get rid of him and his boy Trez. But first, he needed to know how they functioned and how they operated. He needed all that to take over, which was what Tan was doing before she’d lost her way, fell for the mark, and got pregnant with his child. In order to make things still work, he had to pull her out since she refused to get rid of the kid. Cutty loved his sister, but he needed her to understand that this was more important. If they could pull this off, then they’d be set for life, so this time, he decided to get involved by hooking up with MyZell’s sister.



It was risky because after doing his research, he knew that MyZell didn't play about Myah, but Cutty knew he was clean. He had no record and nothing suspicious in his background. They'd never stayed anywhere long enough to allow that to happen. He could easily pretend to just be the nice guy who fell for Zell's sister. She was nice on the eyes and her pussy was good, so it was a win-win. After he killed her brother, he would maybe keep her on, but if not, he'd get rid of her too.

For now, it was time to send his sister back to MyZell, and hopefully he'd let her back in and believe her story about being held hostage because of him. Her story was going to be that she escaped and made her way back to him. Perfect plan. He would never know about the baby and MyZell would feel responsible for what happened to Tan and let her back in. Then she could get him everything he needed to take over.

"Why would you say some bullshit like that? Just get ready, it's time."

"What makes you even think that he'll take me back, Carlton?"

Cutty looked his sister over and examined the bruises that were on her body. Bruises that he'd put there in preparation for what was to come. They had to make it believable when Tan resurfaced.

"Cause I've been watching that nigga. He ain't been with nobody really since you. Plus, his sister mentioned that you disappearing had that nigga's head all messed up. You fucked up when you started catching feelings, Tan, but at least you made that nigga love you back. That's working in our favor."

Tan felt a tightening in her chest as she thought about MyZell. She didn't want to go through with this, especially after hearing that he hadn't moved on. So many times she'd thought about just reaching out to him and telling him everything. She wanted him to know about his daughter and maybe then he might consider forgiving her.

"Tan?" Cutty yelled his sister's name, noticing that she had zoned out.

“What?”

“Are you listening to me?”

“Yeah, I hear you, but maybe we should just move on. Why are you so dead set on making this happen? He’s been through enough.”

Carlton laughed arrogantly. “What, you want to spare that nigga some pain? Trust me, you can’t do shit but take a bullet for setting his ass up. You think that baby in there will make him spare your life? Well, it won’t. If anything, he’ll kill your ass and raise her himself. This is it, Tan. *We* make this happen, and no more running. Aren’t you tired of that shit? I know I am. We make this happen and we run things. You and that baby in there won’t have shit else to worry about for the rest of your lives.”

“That baby is your niece. Stop referring to her like that. Her name is Zyen.”

Carlton didn’t care about that. Yeah, it was his niece, but half of her belonged to MyZell and he couldn’t allow himself to feel anything for her. He didn’t need anything that would make him change his mind about what needed to be done.

He loved his sister, and even though she couldn’t see it, this was for her. True enough, he wanted the money and power, but he also wanted both of them to be in the position where they could actually have everything they could ever dream of.

“I know that, Tan, but she’s still his. I don’t give a fuck about that. Just get ready. Tomorrow, you show up and your ass better be convincing because we need this to work.

“We or you?”

He just looked up at her briefly before he chuckled. But didn’t respond.

“And what about Zyen? I’m not going to be away from her for that long, Carlton.”

He was tired of her debating him. This time he jumped up from his spot on the sofa and stood in her face. “You want to

be away from her long enough to get what I need or permanently? Trust me, I'm good either way."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Tan asked, watching the darkness in her brother's eyes. She knew what he was hinting at because she knew what he was capable of. She had witnessed it firsthand the day he'd killed their parents. True enough, he had done it for her, but he'd seemed so cold and disconnected when it happened. Her father, she understood. He was a bastard who had molested her from the time she was ten years old, but their mother was innocent. Carlton killed her just because she said she wouldn't turn him in. That still bothered Tan to this day. She was torn because she loved her brother for saving her, but she feared him because she knew that his heart was cold.

"It means the faster you get me access to what I need, the faster you can be back with your daughter."

He walked away and found his spot on the sofa again. Just that quickly, he was calm. "I have somebody in place to take care of her. You can visit her anytime you want to make sure she's good, but how long she stays that way is up to you, Tan."

She felt chills move through her body at the threat he was tossing out. She really considered just taking her daughter and leaving but she knew that was a bad idea. If he ever found her, he'd kill them both and she couldn't risk that. Besides, she didn't have anyone or anywhere to go.

"What if it doesn't work? He never talked to me about business stuff, how am I even supposed to get you what you need?"

"Figure it out."

"How?" she yelled.

"I can't tell you that, just figure it out. I need to know how he operates and who all is involved. Once I have that, I can get rid of him."

Tan just stared at her brother for a minute before she turned to walk away. She knew it was pointless to even try to reason with him. When she returned to her room, she carefully

removed the pillows and positioned herself next to her daughter who was still fast asleep. Tan felt tears building as she tried her best to fight against them. Zyen was the one thing that she had ever done right in her life. She loved her daughter with everything that she was and she knew that the only way to keep her safe was to do what her brother asked.

“I wish you knew your father. He’s such an amazing man,” Tan whispered into her daughter’s ear, causing her to stir a little.

She surveyed her baby’s face and smiled. She looked so much like him it made it hard for her sometimes. Zyen had his eyes, his lips, and his nose. Her thick, soft curls reminded her of all the nights she’d lay in bed with MyZell, moving her fingers through his. She missed everything about him, which was why she was afraid to go back. It would break her heart if he rejected her, and if he didn’t, and he let her back in, she didn’t know how she could look at him every day and not tell him about their daughter.

She let her head sink into the pillow, and right after, the tears began to fall. She was stuck and she knew it. At this point, all she could do was pray that she made it out alive. She had to for her daughter’s sake. Zyen was all that she had.

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## *sixteen*

“I THOUGHT you were coming to my place last night?” Myah sang into the phone. She knew after the little performance from her brother at the club that she wouldn’t likely see Cutty that night and possibly never again. That was usually how things happened when somebody she was interested in crossed paths with her brother.

That was exactly what had happened after MyZell ran up in her house and caught her with Halo. He gave her some sorry excuse about hooking up with his girl again, but Myah knew it was about the fact that he was scared of her brother. She didn’t care one way or another because it had been a huge turn off to her the way he’d acted like a bitch in the first place. Cutty, on the other hand, had surprised her. He hadn’t backed down, even when MyZell had his gun on him, which really had her feeling him.

“I was, but I got tied up with some other stuff.” Cutty smiled, knowing that he had her right where he wanted her.

“Other stuff or another person?” Myah questioned, which made Cutty chuckle.

“Come on, shorty, I know we’re new, but I told you I ain’t fucking with nobody else. I meant that shit. I’m just trying to see where this goes. You think I would have let your brother pull that shit last night if I wasn’t trying to give this a chance? I ain’t no bitch, Myah, but I knew that bumping heads with him wasn’t going to help the situation, so I’m just laying back for a minute while he does his thing. Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere.”

Myah smiled and relaxed a little as she pulled up at her brother's condo. "I appreciate that. He's just very protective. A little too much sometimes, but—"

"Nah, don't even sweat that. You're fine as fuck, Myah. If you were my sister, I'd be the same way. I'd be shutting niggas down left and right 'cause nobody would be good enough. Shit, I'm surprised he didn't shoot me on the spot, to be real, so I respect that."

"Thank you, but I still want to see you. Can you come by tonight?"

Cutty smirked and ran his tongue across his lips. He welcomed the invitation to slide up in Myah and wasn't about to turn that down. "Yeah, I can do that. It will be late, though. You good with that?"

"Yeah, but don't be all night. We need to make up for lost time." Myah tightened her thighs just thinking about what she had planned for later.

"I'll be there, trust me. You just be ready."

"I'm always ready."

"Aight, I'll hit you later."

Cutty ended the call and smiled. Things were working out just as he'd planned. While he was fucking Myah into a coma, his sister would be showing up on MyZell's porch giving him the shock of his life. He just hoped she didn't fuck up the plan. The only insurance that he had was that she had to leave her daughter in his care. She loved that baby and wouldn't do anything to jeopardize her safety.

He knew he was wrong for threatening her with the life of her child, but he needed this to work. Cutty already had plans for killing MyZell and Trez and then taking over what they had. If he played his cards right, he'd make Myah his main hoe while he ran her brother's empire. What would be better than that? He smiled as he drove through the streets of Miami, checking out what was soon to be his. It was just a matter of time before everything worked out as planned.

When Myah entered her brother's condo, she was beaming. For the first time in a really long time, she actually felt like she had the right one. Cutty was so different. He wasn't in the streets, which meant that he didn't want or need anything from her brother. He had moved around a lot, just trying to figure things out, but had fallen in love with Miami and was here to stay. She didn't care that he was just trying to figure out his life.

She had money, so she didn't need anything from him. Besides, he had plans of starting his own business. He laid out all the plans for her and Myah had fallen in love with his ambition. It was just going to take him some time to get it all worked out. She was okay with that. As long as he wasn't connected, that meant that he wasn't trying to be involved in what her brother had going on, and that was all that mattered.

Myah loved her brother, but his life was too much, and she didn't want any part of that. She didn't want to raise kids and constantly have to worry about their safety. She didn't want to be in love with a man who she wasn't sure would make it home to her every night. Worrying about her brother and Trez was enough.

"Hey, I didn't know you were coming by." Ryan smiled when she came down the hallway to see who had just entered the condo. MyZell was up and out early, so she'd assumed it was him returning, but found Myah instead.

"You're not busy, are you?" Myah asked and looked around.

"Nope, I basically have no life," Ryan joked.

She and Myah were cool, but they didn't really spend that much time together, so she wasn't really sure how to act around her. Ryan also didn't know how much Myah knew about her personally or her situation with MyZell.

"That's kind of why I'm here. Zell mentioned that you were looking for a job and asked if I had anything at the nail bar." Myah walked into the living room, sat down, and Ryan joined her.

“I am, but you don’t have to do that. I’m sure I’ll find something.” Ryan didn’t want to be anyone’s charity case. Especially not MyZell’s sister.

“I know I don’t have to, but it’s cool, and I don’t mind. Looks like you’re not going anywhere and that means we need to get to know each other.”

Myah checked Ryan out and noticed she looked different. She had been staying at her brother’s place for almost two months, and it wasn’t like she saw her all the time, but something about her was different. She seemed more at ease and like she belonged there. Myah wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

“Well, if you’re sure, then that would be great. I’m tired of just sitting around doing nothing.”

“Good, because Zell wasn’t trying to hear anything but that. He’s not really the type to accept a no when he has his mind made up about something.”

Ryan grinned. “I’ve noticed.”

Myah couldn’t help but notice the way she lit up because of their conversation about her brother. That had her in her feelings a bit.

“Can I ask you something? I mean it’s your business, so if you don’t want to answer that’s cool, but I’m just curious.”

Ryan’s expression dropped and she braced herself for what she knew was coming. “Yeah, sure.”

“What’s your deal? It’s like you appeared out of nowhere and everything about you is like some huge secret. You’ve been here almost two months. You don’t have friends or family that come by or that you go see. That’s just strange and the last time that happened...” Myah stopped mid-sentence. She hadn’t really meant to say the last part out loud, but it was too late to take it back.

“You’re talking about Tan?” Ryan asked with raised brows and then relaxed her expression.

“He told you about her?”



“Sort of. I know she was important and I know she’s gone and he feels responsible for that. I don’t really know anything else,” Ryan admitted.

“Well, it’s like the same thing. She was like you, just walked into his life with no past, no family.”

“I don’t want anything from your brother. I’m here because he asked me to stay.” Ryan knew what Myah was getting at, and even though she knew it was more about her protecting her brother, she still didn’t appreciate it.

“But you do, though. You want this.” Myah waved her hand in the air, signaling that she meant her brother’s place. “You’re here, right?”

“Maybe me working with you is not such a great idea. It seems like you already have your mind made up about me. I’m not whoever this Tan person was. It’s clear that you don’t care for her. I saw it all over your face when you brought her up.” Ryan stood and folded her arms defensively.

“I don’t know if you’re like her or not, which is why I’m asking, and no, I didn’t like her. She had some shit with her, and I feel like my brother fell in love with who she wanted him to see and not who she really was. I’m not going to apologize for trying to make sure that doesn’t happen again.” Myah was now on her feet and the two faced off in a staredown. “I’m just asking what your deal is.”

Before Myah could answer, the door opened and MyZell walked through it with a frown on his face. He could feel the tension in the room the second he entered and seeing Ryan and Myah staring each other down confirmed that something was up.

“Ay, what’s going on?” he asked after he shut the door behind him.

Ryan and Myah kept their eyes on each other for a few moments longer before Myah turned to her brother. “Nothing, we were just getting to know each other. She agreed to take the job at Xpressions, right Ryan?” Myah gave her a look and prayed that she went with it. The last thing she needed was her

brother in her shit because she was being nosy and doing the one thing he'd told her not to, which was interrogating Ryan.

It took Ryan a minute, but she answered. She didn't want to be stuck between MyZell and his sister. "Yeah, I appreciate her offering."

MyZell could tell they were both lying. "Nah, fuck all that. What did you do, My?"

"She didn't—" Ryan began, but MyZell cut her off.

"Don't protect her ass. I know my sister and I know she was asking you shit that don't concern her. Something I specifically told her not to do." MyZell cut his eyes at his sister and she smirked, knowing that she was busted.

"It's fine. She's just looking out for you. I don't have an issue with that," Ryan said, cutting her eyes at Myah.

"No it's not. She needs to mind her business."

"I thought that was what I was doing," Myah said with a touch of attitude.

"It's your brother, I get it. There's no hidden agenda. I'm here because he asked me to be and I don't have family or friends that visit because there aren't any. It's just me. Blame that on my ex, I guess. At least the no friends part. He was an abusive asshole and a habitual cheater, so I'm here. Your brother let me stay and I appreciate him for that. There's no big mystery or secret other than I hope Polo never finds me," Ryan said, looking right at Myah.

Myah's expression softened and she instantly felt like shit for prying.

MyZell was pissed, but also took note of the fact that Ryan finally gave her past a name. Until this point, she just kept saying her ex or that she fell in love with the wrong man.

"I'm sorry that I asked. You're right, it was none of my business." Myah glanced at her brother and then back to Ryan. "It's just that he's all I have and I love my brother."

"That don't give you the right to be all in her shit, Myah, damn."

Ryan relaxed a little and smiled. “Yeah, it kinda does.” She shrugged a little and Myah was grateful that she wasn’t pissed at her. Either way, she didn’t really care, it was her job to make sure her brother was straight. The same way he looked out for her.

“See, we’re good,” Myah said. “Come see me tomorrow. Zell can bring you or tell you where it is.”

“What time?” Ryan asked, trying to ease the tension that she felt between MyZell and his sister.

“Any time is good, we open at eight.” Myah smiled at both of them.

“Ay, why don’t you change so that we can get ready to head out. I need to holla at Myah real quick.” MyZell grabbed his sister’s arm and started toward the door.

Ryan shook her head and went the other way to her bedroom to change. They had dinner plans that she was looking forward to. Any time with him was always welcomed.

“What?” Myah asked after the two of them were on the front steps. She faced her brother and tried her best to keep a stern look on her face.

“You know what. Didn’t I tell you to mind your goddamn business? Ryan ain’t none of your business, Myah.”

“But you want me to hire her, so she kinda is. Why is she such a big secret. So what she was in a bad relationship? Shit happens, but you’re guarding her like there’s something else to it.”

“It’s not a secret, it’s just her business and not yours. If she wanted to tell you, cool, but you interrogating her ain’t the move. I like her, so I’m looking out.”

“You like her?” My asked with raised brows. “It’s more than that, Zell. You were damn near ready to get in my shit just for asking her questions.”

“Don’t worry about all that. She’s good people, that’s all you need to know. I’m a grown ass man, Myah. I don’t need you policing my personal life.”

“Personal life?” Myah grinned. “Damn, I guess that says it all right there.”

Zell chuckled and folded his arms. “How about you just worry about your situation? I didn’t find shit on your boy. He moves around a lot, but don’t look like he’s connected. I still don’t trust that shit ’cause finding nothing is just as suspect as finding something.”

Myah’s entire mood changed. “So you’ll give him a chance?”

Zell balled up his face. “I ain’t giving him shit.”

“Dumb ass, you know what I mean.” Myah shoved her brother in the shoulder and rolled her eyes, which made him laugh.

“I’m not saying all that, I’ll still be watching his ass, but at least I won’t shoot his ass next time I see him. Just don’t get too comfortable, Myah. Shit ain’t always what it seems.”

“Exactly,” she said and glanced at the door.

He knew she was referring to Ryan, but he didn’t care. Something about her just made him feel comfortable. He could easily be wrong, but he didn’t think he was. “Man, get the fuck outta here with all that.”

“If it counts for anything, she seems okay,” Myah said as she made her way down the stairs, “but I’ll be watching her ass.” She winked at her brother over her shoulder and he chuckled.

They looked out for each other and nothing was going to change that. As much as her persistence annoyed him, he wouldn’t have it any other way.

## *seventeen*

“DUTCH, I need you to make sure she doesn’t show up here again. Find her and kill her, for all I care. I’ve got a sweet deal right now and all that ends if he finds out where she is. You know he’s obsessed with the hoe. He’ll be on the next plane there trying to bring her ass home. I can’t have that, Dutch.”

“And I can’t just leave. How the hell am I supposed to explain that shit to him?” Dutch was getting more annoyed by the minute.

“You figure that out. I have my own problems to worry about, like trying to get pregnant by this nigga so that he won’t put my ass out.”

“Why are you trying to get pregnant by him, Varie? It’s bad enough you lied to him and he already thinks you are. I’m really starting to think that you never had any plans for this shit to work out with you and me.”

Avarie panicked, realizing that she had fucked up. She needed Dutch on her side. As long as he felt like there was a chance for the two of them, he’d keep doing what she needed him to do and right now that was making sure Polo didn’t find Ryan.

“Baby, I do want this to work. I just have to play it safe right now. I can’t get what I need from him if he finds out I lied. It’s about that money, that’s all. Just the money Dutch.”

“You’re a goddamn lie, Varie. You got that nigga raising my son like he’s his and now you trying to make sure you give him one of his own. It ain’t got shit to do with money, Varie. The only reason I let you do that shit is because he would have

killed us both the second he found out that I'm the one who got you pregnant and not him."

"Don't say that. I'm not trying to give him a son. I love our son, Dutch, and you don't think that bothers me? I want you to be with your son just as much as you do, but you know that can't happen. Hell, we got lucky that he didn't ask for a DNA test because you're right, he would have killed us both. It's just about the money. I promise. That's it."

Dutch laughed arrogantly. He knew she was lying and he was tired of the bullshit, so if it was about the money, then he was about to make her prove it. "Okay then, since it's about the money, pack your shit and get ready. I'll have a million dollars tonight. That's more than enough to disappear, Avarie. You'll have everything you need."

"A million dollars? And where do you think you can get your hands on that kind of money, Dutch? Polo damn sure ain't gonna give it to you."

Dutch chuckled, just thinking about it. "He don't have to give me shit, I'll take it. Our biggest shipments are coming in tonight. I'm responsible for them. It's all cash."

"You sound crazy. Polo will put a bullet right in your head if you take that money."

"He'll have to find me first. You said it's about the money and it's not about him, then prove it. Meet me at my place tonight at midnight. If you don't show up, then all bets are off. I'm going straight to Polo and telling him everything."

"You wouldn't do that. He'd kill you and not even give it a second thought."

"Not if I'm the only one who knows how to find her. He don't give a fuck about anything else but Ryan and you know that. Shit, you said it yourself, Varie, he's obsessed with her."

Avarie knew she was screwed. If she didn't do what Dutch asked, then he would sure enough run right to Polo. Hell, they'd both die, and that was a chance that she was willing to take. She wasn't really feeling a life with Dutch, but a life with him was better than none at all.

“But you don’t know where she is, all you know is that she’s in Miami. Do you know how fucking big Miami is? And what happens when you can’t find her? He kills you anyway. You know that nigga crazy as hell.”

“I guess I’ll take my chances. Meet me at midnight, Varie, I’m not fucking playing with you.”

“How the hell am I supposed to get out of here to meet you at midnight? You really think that he won’t be suspicious?”

“Like you told me, figure it out. I got my own problems to worry about. My place, midnight. I’m done playing with your ass, Avarie.”

Dutch hung up and Avarie just sat there staring at her phone. She had no clue what she was going to do now. Dutch had changed the game with his demands. She had no intention of ever being with him. Sex with him was great, but he wasn’t Polo and never would be. All she ever wanted was for Dutch to get rid of Ryan and now that was all messed up. She felt her chest getting tight, and then Polo’s voice damn near made her jump out of her skin.

“Ay, baby, you on the phone?” he asked nodding to her hand where she still had a tight grip on her phone.

“No, I was. My mom called about seeing PJ.”

“Word, what you tell her?” He stepped into the room and her eyes moved from the top of his tall frame down to the Timbs on his feet.

“I told her not today, maybe this weekend.”

“Cool, ’cause I think I might swing him by my mom’s spot tonight. She’s been asking about him.”

Avarie rolled her eyes and tried to hide it, but Polo caught it. Avarie knew that his mother hated her. Even though she was the one who had his son, his firstborn, or so they all thought, his mother still hated her, yet she loved Ryan. Every time Polo brought her around his mother, she made little comments about Ryan being so great and it pissed her off.

“Ay, don’t do that. You know how my mom is. Just give her time and she’ll come around, Varie.”

“It’s been three years, Polo. How much time she need?”

He chuckled. “You’re right. I’ll talk to her, but let me ask you something, though.”

Avarie softened up a little at the mention of him talking to his mother for her. She didn’t know if it would help, but Polo had a way of putting everyone in their place. Including his mother. She had seen it for herself.

“Sure, baby, what’s up?” She grinned seductively and waited as she sat up on the leather sofa.

“How long you been fucking Dutch?”

Averie’s eyes grew wide and a panicked expression took over her face. “What... what are you talking about?”

Polo reached behind his back and removed his nine millimeter. Averie’s heart started to race. She had no idea that he had been listening to her entire conversation with Dutch.

She jumped when he chambered the first round. With an ice cold expression, Polo moved closer and Averie backed into the corner of the sofa.

“Maybe you didn’t understand the question, so let me ask you again. How long you been fucking my man? I know at least three years since you just admitted that PJ wasn’t mine, but I want to know how long.”

Tears immediately began to fall and Avarie felt her heart pounding in her chest. “It’s not what you think, he took advantage of me and I—”

“You what, you want to be with him, you just need my money, ’cause I know I ain’t crazy. That’s what the fuck I heard, Varie.” He lifted the gun from where he held it at his side and aimed it at her head, causing her to cry harder. There was no coming back from this and she knew it.

“Polo, please. I’m sorry. I messed up and I’m sorry.”



Those were her last words because he sent two shots her way. One through her head and the other through her disloyal heart.

“Fucking disrespectful hoe,” he mumbled before he pulled his phone out to make a call.

“What’s up, Polo?”

“I got a situation at my house. Bring your team.”

Ford didn’t hesitate. “Aight, give me an hour and we’ll be there.”

Polo hung up and went to go find his son.

When he made it upstairs, he stood in the doorway to his son’s room watching him stretched out on his stomach, chin propped up in his hands. He smiled just seeing him there. PJ was his, fuck biology. He had been there since the day he took his first breath and nothing was going to change that. Not even the fact that he had Dutch’s pussy ass blood running through his veins. Besides, Polo knew that he was all that PJ had because by twelve oh one tonight, Dutch and Varie would be together forever since that was what they both wanted. He had two bullets with Dutch’s name on them too. After that, he was catching the first flight that he could get to Miami. It was time to find Ryan and bring her home.

## *eighteen*

“TELL ME ABOUT YOUR FAMILY,” Myah asked as her fingers moved across Cutty’s exposed abs. The two had just finished an intense session, showered, and were now in her bed.

He kissed her on the forehead while his hand moved through her hair. “There’s nothing to tell. My parents are dead, my sister is dead, so it’s just me. Well, me and my daughter.”

Myah lifted her head and frowned at him. She felt like her heart dropped to the pit of her stomach at the idea of his mystery child. It had been a month and he had never once mentioned her.

Cutty grinned at the idea of spinning the lie he was about to tell. With Tan going back to MyZell, he knew that there would be times when Zyen was around and he had to explain that. The only thing he could think of was claiming her as his own. He’d figure the rest out later, but after the way he had been putting a hurting on Myah’s pussy, he figured it was safe that she wasn’t going anywhere.

“I know I should have told you before now, but I needed to see how shit played out. I’m protective of her, and if things with us weren’t going to work, then there was no point.”

Myah sat up and he admired her full breasts. Just looking at them made his dick swell again. Myah was most definitely fine as hell. She was short, thick, and curved just right. Her pretty, chocolate skin was soft and smooth, and he loved the feel of her body against his.

“But you never even mentioned her. How old is she, Cutty?” Myah was disappointed. She hadn’t so much cared that he had a daughter, just more so that he’d kept her a secret.

“Six months.” He did the math in his head really quick before he answered. Zyen was his niece, but he didn’t know shit about her. He had barely ever held her or acknowledged her, but he knew the time frame because he counted lost time every time he looked at her.

“Six months. She’s a baby. Are you still with her mother?”

“Hell no. She’s a dumb hoe that never should have had her in the first place. I told her to get rid of it, but she didn’t.”

Myah cringed at the anger in his voice and it was displayed on her face, so Cutty tried to clean it up. He couldn’t let on that he hated his niece that he was now claiming as he daughter.

“I love my daughter, though, so it’s all good. But no, I’m not with her. Shit, she could die tomorrow and I wouldn’t give a fuck, but my baby girl is everything,” he lied with a straight face, trying his best to sound sincere and it worked.

Myah smiled and relaxed a little. “When can I meet her?”

“So you not gon’ bail on a nigga ’cause I got a kid?” He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to him. After Myah landed on top of his firm body, she smiled and pecked his lips.

“No, as long as you promise me you’re not still with her mother, and don’t lie, Cutty. I mean it. If you still fucking her, let me know now ’cause I want out.”

He smirked and held her in place so that he could flip her over. Once she was on her back and he hovered above her, he used his legs to spread hers apart.

Placing his length at her opening, he then leaned down to kiss her. “Why I need to be with her when I got you? This right here...” He paused and pushed into her slowly at first, then with a little more force until he couldn’t go any further. “It’s just you, Myah.”

“Mmmmm, okay,” she moaned, loving the feel of him inside of her. He deep stroked her a few more times before he lifted up enough to see her face.

“You like that, Myah?” he asked as he pushed into her as far as he could go.

“Shit, yeah.” Her eyes were closed, but the look on her face was sexy to him.

He knew that he had to find a way to keep her around. There wasn't any way he was letting pussy this good go, no fucking way.

\* \* \*

“Ay, come get this baby,” Cutty yelled to Eve.

She sucked her teeth and tossed the remote that she was holding onto the sofa before she stood. When she reached the spot where Tan stood in the center of the room clinging to her daughter, Tan gave Eve a death stare and held her daughter tighter against her chest.

“Man, give her the damn baby, Tan, so we can get this shit over with.” Cutty was growing impatient. He was ready to put his plan in motion and they had a lot to do.

“Hold on,” Tan yelled, startling her daughter, which made her tiny body jerk a little. Tan kissed her fat cheeks to try and settle her again.

“I'm not gon' ask you again. It's not like you won't see her, shit. Myah thinks she's mine. You need to be glad I did that shit, 'cause now you can see her.”

Eve held her hands out and Tan hesitantly handed her over. Her heart was breaking at the thought of leaving her. Eve was cool, and she knew that she would take care of Zyen, but she wasn't her mother. Tan had never been away from Zyen like that and the thought was killing her.

“Stop fucking crying, man. You do this shit right and you can have her back. Now let's go.”

“I’m leaving my daughter, Carlton. How the fuck do you expect me not to be upset?” Tan yelled just before he grabbed her arm and yanked her into her bedroom.

“You did this shit, Tan. You shouldn’t have had her in the first place,” he yelled back after he slammed the door.

He was a few feet away from her and felt no sympathy. His need to get what he wanted outweighed anything he felt for his sister.

“Just get it over with so that I can leave,” Tan said, bracing herself and holding her head back. She lifted her chin slightly.

That was the only thing that softened his expression a little. He hated having to put his hands on her, but it was necessary. They needed MyZell to believe that someone had actually held her all this time and abused her, so over the past few weeks, that’s what happened. He’d choked her and beat her just enough to leave bruises.

There had to be a mixture of old and new in order to be believable and Tan had suffered through it. She hated her brother for what he was putting her through, but the idea of being free with her daughter helped her through it. If she could just hold on long enough to get through this, then she could have that. She knew that her brother would be satisfied once he got what he wanted. It would mean knowing that she was the reason that MyZell would lose his life, but she couldn’t think about that. Her daughter was just that important.

Thirty minutes later, Cutty walked out of the room and she had a bruised eye and fresh handprints around her neck.

“It’s the last time,” she muttered as she stood in the bathroom examining her body.

She had stripped down to nothing to check out the damage that he had done. Tears slipped from her eyes and she looked away before bending down to get her clothes so that she could dress again.

After Tan was dressed again, she took ibuprofen to help with the pain that was slowly setting in and then she went into the living room to get her daughter. She only had a few hours

to spend with her before she had to go. She didn't know if she could do it, but she knew she had to.

When she entered the living room she found Zyen asleep in Eve's arms. When Eve noticed Tan standing there, she scanned her body with sympathy in her eyes.

"He just left. He said he'll be back for you," she said softly before she stood and walked over to Tan. She lifted Zyen from her body and handed her over. Once she was secure in Tan's arms, Eve rubbed Zyen's back.

"Why won't you just leave, Tan? You could do that."

Eve knew the mental hold that Cutty had over his sister because he had the same one over her. She was stuck right in the middle of this situation because she loved him even though she knew that Cutty didn't love her back.

"So could you, but then what? I'll be free when he has what he needs," Tan said, looking Eve right in her eyes.

"I'll take care of her. I promise." Eve looked up at Tan whose eyes began to fill with tears again.

Tan didn't speak, she just nodded and walked away. This was going to be harder than she'd expected.

## *nineteen*

“I THOUGHT we were going to your house?” Ryan didn’t know much about Miami, but she did know the way to MyZell’s condo. She could even make it there and back without GPS from the few places that she went on her own.

“We are.”

He wore a smug grin before placing his hand on her leg and gently gripping her thigh. They weren’t far from his house, which Ryan had never been to. MyZell had made up his mind to really try and move on with his life and that started with allowing Ryan to be a part of it. He was taking her to his house, which no one knew about but Myah, Trez, and Tan.

“I know I get confused about where I’m going sometimes, but this is not the way to your house.” Ryan frowned as she looked out the passenger window, checking out her surroundings before she looked across at MyZell.

“My house, not my condo,” he stated and then waited for her to respond.

“So, I get to see the bat cave? I’m moving up in the world.” Ryan grinned, which made him laugh.

“Yeah, but I’m about to pull over in a minute and knock your little ass out before we get there. I don’t know if I can trust you yet.”

“Then don’t take me.” She shrugged. She knew from the slight smile that he wore that he was only playing with her.

“Nah, you’re good. I don’t think you’d fuck me over.” MyZell winked at her and she smiled.

“You sure about that?” Ryan teased.

“Shit, you’re asking, so I’m not sure now.” He chuckled.

When they pulled up to his property, he made the short distance up to his driveway and parked. Ryan was impressed because his home was modest, not at all what she expected. With his personality, she expected some overly lavish home that was way too much for one man.

“This is it?” she asked after they parked.

MyZell got out and pulled open her door.

Not sure where she was going with the statement, he glanced over his shoulder as she followed him up his front stairs.

“Sounds like you’re throwing shots, Ryan? I can take your ass back to the condo if you want.” He smirked before he unlocked his door to let them in.

“No, I’m really not,” she said, quickly trying to recover.

His home was nice, really nice, just not what she had in her head when he’d mentioned that he was taking her there. “I guess I just expected something totally expensive.”

He shut the door behind the two and smirked. “Like that shit Graves had. That’s not me. I can afford it, but what’s the point when I’m the only one who lives here? This is good enough for me.”

“I like it,” she admitted.

Ryan appreciated the fact that he wasn’t over the top about things. She knew he had money, and even though she wasn’t sure just how much, she did have an idea that he was not pressed about anything, so to know that he harbored a humbleness was attractive to her. Polo had been the opposite. The flashier the better was how he lived. He wanted people to know how deep his pockets were.

As soon as they were inside, her eyes moved around the room that they were in. It was similar to his condo in that everything was neat and clean. There was also an open floor plan and the furniture was simple, but classy. The living room,



which she could see from where they stood while she waited for MyZell to lock the door, was decorated in deep browns. It was extremely manly, but still nice.

“So, do I get a tour?”

“Yeah, of my bedroom.” MyZell winked at her before he took her hand and began guiding her through his five-bedroom home. He showed her every room, including the kitchen, and their final stop was his bedroom.

It felt foreign to him, having another woman there, but he knew it was time. There was no point holding onto a past that he no longer had access to. It had been a year, and even though he wasn't sure what had happened to Tan, he had to come to terms with the fact that she wasn't coming back.

“This looks just like your room at the condo,” Ryan said, breaking him from his thoughts. He then watched her move down the length of his dresser, dragging her hand across the edge of it.

“I like what I like.” His eyes were on her as she surveyed her surroundings.

“I see that.” Ryan looked his way and blushed at the intensity of his stare. She still wasn't used to the way he looked through her sometimes. It was nice but intimidating.

MyZell chuckled at what the way she blushed. It was cute to him because as tough as she tried to be sometimes he could see the innocence hidden beneath it. He was falling for Ryan.

“Do you need anything?” MyZell approached Ryan and stopped just in front of her. He stared at her intensely and she returned the favor.

“No.”

“You sure?” He moved closer and they were inches apart. The tension between them was magnified with each breath that they took.

Instead of answering, Ryan closed what little space was left between them by initiating a kiss. It was hungry and passionate. MyZell's hand cuffed the back of her head,

pressing her further into their kiss, and when they finally came up for air, the two just started at each other.

“Do you mind if we stay here tonight?”

“Umm, I guess not, but I don’t have any clothes.”

He chuckled and stepped around her. “You don’t need them.”

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“YOU READY?”

Tan and Cutty were sitting in the van that he had secured to deliver her to MyZell’s house. She knew that MyZell had cameras everywhere, so she couldn’t just randomly show up on his doorstep. Cutty was driving her there, would open the rear doors, shove her out, and then leave. MyZell was a creature of habit and Tan knew that. He would survey the security cameras at some point, so her showing up had to look convincing. After that, she would have to work hard to convince him that she had actually been held for the past year against her will, tortured, and then let go to return to him with a message that they were watching him. Tan narrowed her eyes at her brother before she inhaled and released it slowly.

“The hell you looking at me like that for? You know this shit is all your fault. We could have been had this shit over with.”

“Don’t. I’m not in the mood to have this conversation with you again. I’m doing what you want, but after this, I’m done, Carlton. I need to start figuring things out for me.” Tan knew that wasn’t going to go over well, but she didn’t care.

“Done? You sound stupid as fuck, Tan. I’m your goddamn brother, we’re never done. What, you don’t need me anymore? Don’t think you’re about to get up under that nigga and change the plans. Think about your daughter.”

She felt her pulse racing as her anger rose. “Don’t threaten my daughter. I’m doing what you want, and when I get what

you need, I'm done and I mean it. I'm not staying here. You want this, not me."

Cutty chuckled before he grabbed the filthy t-shirt that Tan wore and pulled her across the passenger seat of the van. "I'm doing this shit for you, Tan, so don't ever act like you don't appreciate it. You're ungrateful as fuck," he yelled before he shoved her toward the passenger side door.

"I'm ungrateful? I never asked for any of this, and you're not doing this for me. You want what he has, that don't have anything to do with me. It's never been about me."

"It wasn't about you when I shot your father because he liked fucking you more than he did his own wife? 'Cause if I'm not mistaken, that shit was about you, Tan. So now I'm the bad guy? Fine, you think you can survive without me, then do that shit, but not until you make this happen. If you fuck up, your daughter pays, so think about that before you get any ideas about switching shit up."

Tan clenched her jaw as she narrowed her eyes at her brother. "I won't," she said confidently.

"Good. Now get your damn mind right."

"My mind is right, Carlton. I just don't know how you think this is supposed to work."

"Fuck you mean, you don't know how it's supposed to work? You get back in, make him feel bad about the fact that what happened to you is all his fault, and then find out how shit works. Once I know that, I'll handle the rest."

"That's the part that doesn't make sense. I told you before, he never talked business to me. What makes you think he'll do it now?"

Cutty smirked. "Shit, that's on you. Figure it out, Tan, 'cause if you don't..." He paused and then chuckled. "Now get back there so that we can make this convincing when I roll through there and drop your ass off. He'll be so hellbent on finding out who did this to you that he'll let his guard down. Either way, I'm gon' kill that nigga and take his shit. You just get what I need so that I can make that happen."

Tan stared at the psychotic look in her brother's eyes. It was like the person she used to know was lost in there, but she knew that she didn't have a choice. Her daughter's life depended on it, so, for now, she'd just do what he asked and figure out the rest later. She didn't have a choice.

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## *twenty-one*

“AY, STOP MOVING MY HANDS, RYAN.”

MyZell slid his fingers down her slit again as the hot water they were standing under beat against their bodies. His front was pressed against her back as he worked his fingers inside her. Ryan gave up and spread her legs just enough to give him more access.

The two of them had been at it for the past few hours and were supposed to be showering so that they could get some rest. It was damn near three in the morning, and Ryan was exhausted, but she wasn't about to deny MyZell and they both knew it.

With one hand firmly gripping her breast and the other pushing inside her as deep as he could go, MyZell was addicted already. When his fingers were swimming and coated, he stepped back just enough to help Ryan bend at the waist before he pushed inside of her slowly. Her hands went palm first onto the tile wall in front of her to brace herself as her body shuddered from the feel of him entering her tunnel.

“Mmmmm, shit,” slipped out of her mouth before her teeth sank into her bottom lip.

MyZell simply chuckled because he had the same reaction, but he was able to keep it to himself. Gripping her waist, he stroked her nice and slow. There was something about the way her insides hugged him tight that had him struggling every time he entered her. After a few more deep penetrations, MyZell came inside Ryan for what was easily the third time tonight. As much as that should have mattered to him, he

didn't even care. In a way, it was like he was marking his territory, and since Ryan hadn't objected, he assumed she was okay with it.

After their quick session, the two showered and Ryan dressed in one of his shirts so that they could pillage his kitchen for something to eat. The intense sessions they had been having all night had left both of them hungry and exhausted.

"It's too late to cook, so I can make you a sandwich," MyZell said into the refrigerator with his back to Ryan as he surveyed its contents.

With a slight shrug, she watched the muscles in his back flex as she sat at the kitchen table. "That works."

He surfaced and began removing everything he needed. After a few more trips, he had the counter lined with everything and began assembling their food.

"Can I ask you something?" Ryan asked hesitantly. It had only been a few months since MyZell had entered her life, but things had moved fast and tonight felt different. It wasn't just the sex because that had happened plenty of times before, but he felt different, like he was more connected this time. She didn't want to assume anything, but she didn't want to set herself up, either.

"Yeah, what's up?" he released casually, with a quick glance before he went back to what he was doing.

"What are we doing?"

This time he paused completely and focused on her. Even though he knew the conversation was coming, he hadn't expected it tonight.

"What do you mean?" he asked, knowing fully what she meant. He just wanted her to clarify so that he would know exactly how to answer.

"I appreciate everything you've done for me. You really didn't have to do any of it, but lately things are different. It doesn't feel like you just being nice. I could be wrong, I hope I'm not, but things feel different. You feel different."

MyZell watched the nervousness in her expression and it almost made him smile, but he kept his expression neutral, which made Ryan's pulse race a little. She regretted even bringing it up, and when he just stared at her without speaking, she tried to talk her way past it.

“Never mind. I think I'll just go...”

“Go what, Ryan? Hide because you think I'm not going to confirm what you already know?” His smile relaxed her a little, but she still needed him to say what she was thinking.

“No, that's not what I mean. I just don't know what this is. It may not be anything, but I'm here, you brought me here tonight... why?”

MyZell turned his back to the counter he was in front of and leaned against it. One hand moved across his head before he slipped both of them into the pockets of the shorts that he was wearing.

“Me bringing you here was more about me than you.”

“Oh,” she said so quickly that she hadn't even realized it came out until he smirked.

“Chill, it's not what you think. I brought you here because it was time. Shit, Ryan, I don't know what this is, or what we are, so I can't explain that, but I brought you here because you're not just some female that I let chill at my condo who didn't have anywhere else to go. But because I like having you around. I still don't really know who you are, but what I do know, I like. I don't do this, and I haven't since...”

“Tan.” Ryan finished his sentence after he paused.

“Yeah, since Tan, but that don't have anything to do with you. I can't promise you how things will turn out, but, for now, I just like you being here.”

Smiling so big, it made MyZell smile too, Ryan tucked her hair behind her ear. “So what now?” she questioned.

He chuckled and removed his body from the counter. “Now, we eat, and then I'm going to bed. I'm tired as fuck from messing around with you all night.”



“That’s not my fault, Mr. Stop Moving My Hands. Just one more, Ryan, come on,” she teased, mocking him from earlier.

He looked up with a smirk. “Nah, that’s all you. Your shit is addictive, so you can’t put that on me.”

Just as Ryan was about to respond, the doorbell sounded, causing MyZell to glance at the clock on the stove, even though he knew it was well after three in the morning. Ryan watched as his eyes fell on her next before moving to the monitors that sat on the counter. She stood and moved closer so that she could see too, but the second his eyes met hers she knew something wasn’t right.

“Who’s that?” she asked, feeling a tightening in her chest as she nodded to the image on the monitor.

She had no way of knowing, but something about the look in his eyes gave her the answer before she even asked the question. It was all confirmed with the next thing out of his mouth.

“Tan.”

“TAN?” Ryan repeated mechanically, not really meaning to, but her voice fell on deaf ears because MyZell was already moving toward the front door.

She was right behind him, but moving at a slower pace, as if her feet were somehow as heavy as her heart felt in that moment. If that was indeed Tan at his front door, then everything was about to drastically change, just when it seemed like things had finally fallen into place.

She watched MyZell from behind as he keyed the security code on his alarm. His movements were slow, which was noticeable because any other time he moved methodically like there was no thought to it. Things just flowed. But watching him now, it was as if he had to concentrate on every number he keyed.

Once the light flashed green, he did at least acknowledge her by glancing at her over his shoulder before his hand touched the door. For a brief moment, the two made eye contact. That hurt even more because Ryan could see the desperation in his eyes that whoever was on the other side was indeed the love that who had disappeared on him.

“Can I come in?” Tan’s voice was soft, barely audible as MyZell’s eyes surveyed her presence.

He was almost at a loss and was now waiting for something to happen to prove to him that her being there wasn’t real. That his mind was somehow playing tricks on him.

He then asked a question of his own. “How did you get here?”

“I don’t know. Well, I was in a van and they brought me here, but I don’t know who. They never told me who they were. All they said was to...”

“They? How the fuck do they know where I live, Tan? Did you tell them that I lived here?”

“No,” she yelled defensively. Tan was expecting a different reaction. She hadn’t expected him to be angry with her. She was hoping that after all this time he would be so overwhelmed that she was there, that the questions would come later. “They knew.”

MyZell exhaled before he stepped aside to allow her to enter. Once she did, Tan’s eyes went right to Ryan, who she hadn’t noticed until now. Softly, she spoke, being sure not to let her true feelings show.

“Who’s... who’s this?” Tan worked hard to disguise the hate she was feeling for Ryan, who was only dressed in a t-shirt.

She knew right then that Ryan was more than just some female. MyZell didn’t function that way. When they’d initially met, it had taken months before she was even allowed to know where he lived. They spent time at her place and his condo, so if Ryan was there at this hour of the morning, she was important to him.

“Nobody,” Ryan said, quickly cutting her eyes at MyZell before she started toward the hallway that led to his bedroom.

“Ay, Ry, hold up,” MyZell called out, but he didn’t move. Instead, he focused on Tan. “Go in there and wait for me. Don’t fucking move, just wait in the living room.”

His voice was icy and it made Tan shudder, so she didn’t dare do anything other than what he demanded. She needed to get in his good graces, and as much as she wanted to stop him from going after Ryan, she knew it was best to just wait in the living room as instructed.

Without waiting for Tan to fully disappear into his living room, he turned and went after Ryan. By the time he reached his bedroom, she was already in her jeans and pulling his shirt over her head. Once she tossed it on the bed, he caught her arm.

“Where are you going?” The question was stupid and he knew it but at this point, his mind was spinning and he wasn’t thinking clearly. Tan had just appeared on his doorstep after a year and Ryan had just left his bed. He was stuck because he had feelings for both.

“Home. Well, to your condo, and I’ll figure that out in a few days. Just give me time, please.” Ryan snatched away from him. She was crushed and not going to stay there and let him tell her that she wasn’t a factor in his life anymore. She knew that was coming. Even if the words hadn’t left his mouth yet, they were dancing around in his eyes.

“Don’t do that, you—”

“Don’t do what, MyZell?”

“Run, damn.”

“I’m not running, but I’m not going to stay here and watch whatever this was get pushed to the side while you rekindle what you lost when she left. It’s fine, I get it, and you don’t have to be torn. I never expected anything.”

Ryan grabbed her shirt and pulled it over her head.

MyZell watched her as frustration settled in. He moved his hand down his face and exhaled, trying to ease the tension that he was feeling.

“Just stay here tonight. I can take you in the morning. It’s late.”

Ryan’s eyes narrowed like he had just lost his mind. “Stay here? You have got to be kidding me. No thank you. I’m a big girl, I’ll be fine. The two of us here together is not a good idea. Do you even realize what you’re asking me to do? Just let me go and deal with her. It’s what you wanted, right?”

MyZell just stared at her, searching for the words that would fix things, even though he knew they didn't exist.

"It's not that easy, Ryan," he began slowly. "You have to understand that I didn't expect to ever see her again. I don't know what's going on, but I have to at least try and figure it out. You're telling me that you don't want me to be torn, well how can I not be? I don't know what this is between us, but it's important. Hell, we just had the fucking conversation about it. I just need to figure this out. Can you give me time to do that?"

He understood that he was asking a lot, but he also knew that he didn't have a choice. Tan was back and he needed to find out her story. But, then there was Ryan. He knew that he couldn't have them both, but he wasn't willing to let either of them go. He was in a fucked up situation.

"Yeah, you do that. I don't have to understand anything, MyZell. Like I said, I wasn't expecting anything. If you can just give me a few weeks, I'll be out of your place."

"Ryan, chill, man. You can stay there as long as you want. I don't give a fuck about that. It doesn't have anything to do with this situation."

Ryan laughed sarcastically before she looked him right in the eyes. "The fact that you are even saying that lets me know just how confused you are. It has everything to do with this situation. Do you think she will want me around, knowing our story? Should we go ask because I could see the way she looked at me."

MyZell couldn't say shit because he knew that she was right. It didn't change anything, though. Ryan wasn't going anywhere and he would make sure of that.

"Just give me a few days. Please, you owe me that much," he said calmly. His eyes on her in a way that demanded that she agree.

Ryan just shook her head and moved past him. Once she reached his dresser, she grabbed the key to his BMW 740,

which he praised and loved and she had never driven before, her purse, and phone.

“I’m sure you have something else here that you can drive,” she said, referring to the fact that she was taking his car. With that, she started toward the door, but MyZell stopped her.

“Ay, just a few days. Promise me, please,” he said again, this time in a pleading tone.

With no response, Ryan snatched away and made her way to the front door. She and Tan shared a glance before Ryan left. Even though no words were exchanged, the two shared an entire conversation with that one glance. Both their fates were undetermined, and at this point, it was may the best woman win. But seeing Ryan leave had Tan feeling like she had the upper hand.

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## *twenty-three*

“SHE DIDN’T HAVE TO LEAVE.” Tan stood when MyZell entered the room. Her heart smiled a little at the fact that he had sent Ryan away for her. Even if it wasn’t true, that was what she had told herself.

Ignoring her statement about Ryan, he focused on the issue. “It’s been a year, Tanessa. An entire fucking year, and you show up with some bullshit story that a van dropped you off? Where the hell you been and why?”

MyZell’s cold tone was like a dagger through Tan’s heart. She eyed the man standing before her. Something about him was different. He was closed off and reserved and the anger radiating from his words had her feeling like he no longer loved her the way that he used to.

“I don’t know where I was. In a house, in a room alone. A year?” she questioned, knowing full well how long it had been. She had left when she was three months pregnant, six months passed before she delivered their daughter, who would be seven months in less than a week. She knew how long she had been away.

“Yes, a year!” MyZell, yelled unable to contain the anger he was feeling.

Maybe it hadn’t been someone who was out for him. Maybe she had simply walked away. Here she was, alive and well. If his enemies had kidnapped her, why hadn’t they killed her? What would be the point in just letting her return to him?

Not knowing what else to do, Tan broke down. The tears that fell were forced at first. “This was your fault. Why are

you mad at me? They took me and every day they put their hands on me to remind me that I was paying for your sins. Look at me, Zell. They did this because of you.”

Her words caused him to survey her exterior and it was then that he noticed the bruises on her face and around her neck. His mood softened.

“Tan, I’m sorry, but you have to consider the fact that this is a lot. You can’t expect me to just take it all in without feeling some type of way about it, ma. Calm down.”

He took a step toward her and she took one back. “I get that, but you blaming me doesn’t help. I’ll just go.”

Tan wasn’t about to leave, but she had to make it look good. She had him right where she wanted him. This was all an act, but it didn’t stop the fact that she’d actually missed him. She loved him while they were together, and for a year she’d missed his voice, his touch, and now here he was. Tan wanted that back, even if it wasn’t going to last. Cutty would never let that happen.

“Nah, you stay. We need to talk but we can do that in the morning.” MyZell had his eyes on her while he waited. He wanted to hold her so bad, but he wasn’t sure how she would react, so he waited.

With a nod, she agreed, and the two stood silently for what felt like forever before he said fuck it and forced her body against his. Closing her in his arms, everything he felt came rushing back all at once, but just as quickly as he embraced it, thoughts of Ryan entered.

“Come on. I’m sure you’re tired. We can finish this conversation tomorrow.”

MyZell let her go and waited for her to move. They both moved to the hallway, up the stairs. When they reached his bedroom door, Tan stopped, but he kept going until he reached the first guestroom. Tan followed, disappointed although she tried her best not to let it show.

“I’ll be right back,” MyZell instructed after he opened the door.



Tan entered the empty room and looked around. She knew this house well, but never in a million years did she assume that she would be sleeping in one of its guestrooms. Her heart felt heavy for how much her life had drastically changed.

“Here, it’s just clothes and stuff, but they’re yours.” MyZell set the box down at the foot of the bed. He’d kept most of her things, unable to find the strength to get rid of them.

“Thank you,” she replied softly. It broke her heart to think about what he had gone through, but it made her smile that he hadn’t totally let her go. It had her optimistic that she could somehow figure out a way to fix this.

“There’s stuff in the bathroom. Get some rest, and we’ll talk in the morning.”

“Is it hers, her stuff?”

“Don’t, Tan.”

MyZell wasn’t about to have a conversation with her about Ryan. He still didn’t know if he believed her story, so, for now, she’d just have to deal with shit.

“Sorry,” she apologized, but felt her chest tighten at the way he defended Ryan without even trying.

“Good night.”

With that, he left the room and Tan sat alone. She knew she had her work cut out for her, but she would find a way to get her life back.

MyZell had too much going through his head, so instead of heading to bed, he only stopped in his room long enough get his phone. His next stop was the kitchen, where he looked around and immediately thought of Ryan. The sandwiches that he had prepared for the two of them were still on the island where they’d left them. After collecting his thoughts, he opened the cabinet and wrapped his hand around a bottle of Crown. He removed the top and turned it up. There was a slow burn as the dark liquor flowed down his throat.

Moving around the kitchen with the bottle in one hand, he began cleaning up with his free hand. Most of what he considered cleaning was actually trashing anything he could get his hand on when he didn't have the bottle of Crown in the air.

Once MyZell was done, he leaned against the island staring blankly into his dark kitchen. He focused on the glowing monitors that sat in the corner of the expensive charcoal and oak colored marble countertop.

He knew he needed to verify Tan's story about how she'd arrived, but he was almost afraid to because if it didn't add up, he'd have an entirely different set of issues to deal with.

After finishing off the bottle in his hand, it clanked as it landed on the island behind him. He made his way over to his monitor and ran back the footage from before Tan had arrived.

He watched the same thing over and over again. A black passenger van pulled up. A tall figure dressed in all black, with a mask covering his head that only exposed his eyes, got out and opened the rear doors. Moments later, Tan appeared, after being roughly pulled from the back. She was shoved to the ground before the guy hopped in the driver's seat and pulled away. No tag or markings on the vehicle that he could track.

The effects of the half bottle of Crown were starting to settle in and calm his thoughts, so MyZell headed back to his bedroom, but somehow he bypassed it and stopped outside of the guest room that Tan now occupied. With his hand on the knob, he stood there fighting the urge to go in, but instead, he just placed his palm flat against it for a brief moment before walking away. He was stuck between what he wanted to be true, what his gut was telling him. And then there was Ryan.

Thoughts of her face, the sadness in her eyes had him wanting to hop in his car and go to her. But, he instead entered his room, closed his door, and dialed her number. After three calls and no answer, he sent a text. While he waited, he climbed in bed, the same bed that he had just been in a few hours ago with Ryan. He could still smell the faint scent of her

perfume mixed into his sheets, which made the wait for her to respond even more torturous.

***MyZell: Ay, let me know you made it safe or I'll come see for myself***

What felt like an entirety passed before his phone vibrated against his chest where he'd let it rest.

***Ryan: I'm here. Please don't make things worse than they have to be. Good night.***

The crazy thing to him was that as he read the text, he could actually hear her voice. It had him all fucked up and inches away from getting dressed to go make sure she was okay. That thought only lasted for a brief moment when reality set in.

She was right, it would only make things worse, so until he figured out his situation with Tan, he knew it was best to give Ryan her space. He couldn't be around her and not be with her, and that wasn't going to be beneficial to either one of them. MyZell also knew that he couldn't take the rejection if she refused and wouldn't allow him to.

He glanced at the time on his phone, which read five oh eight a.m. Before he closed his eyes and sleep took over, Ryan was the last thought he had before his mind began to fade.

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## *twenty-four*

TAN WOKE up the next morning feeling out of place. She was happy to be back in MyZell's home, even if it was simply the guestroom, but she missed her daughter. Waking up without Zyen's little body snuggled next to her felt foreign. It was more or less depressing, and in a way, that made it hard for her to appreciate her current situation.

After climbing out of bed, she made her way to the bathroom to clean up. When she was done, she left the room that she was in and found herself standing outside the room that she used to share with MyZell. The door was shut, so she knocked first before pushing it open. The room was empty, so she closed it and went to search the rest of the house. She found MyZell stretched out on the sofa asleep.

Tan smiled lustfully at the sight before her, reminiscing about the days when she would have easily joined him without a second thought. His bare chest was adorned with colorful art, some of which she had been there to watch him receive. One hand rested on his chest, while the other was folded behind his head.

He was even more handsome than she'd remembered. The memories that she held onto while she was hiding away were nothing in comparison to the sight before her.

After walking slowly over to where he lay, she knelt down beside him and delivered a kiss to his lips that she was fighting hard to hold onto, but his reaction made her chest tighten.

She watched as the hand on his chest moved down until he reached the rise in the shorts that he was wearing and mumbled something that made her blood boil.

“Ryan, chill, ma.”

“MyZell,” Tan all but yelled before she could stop herself.

It was her voice that jarred him from his thoughts of Ryan. He opened his eyes slowly and tried to focus. The dream he had was so real. Ryan was there, he felt her lips on his right after she whispered that she still loved him against his ear, but he was looking into Tan’s face, which caused a mixture of emotions. He was annoyed that she was there and not Ryan, while a part of him was grateful that it was Tan.

“Is something wrong?” He stretched, extending his arms above his head before he lifted his body to a seated position. His body was stiff from having slept on the sofa. Its buttery soft leather was still no comparison to the bed that he abandoned when Ryan’s scent kept haunting him. He was too exhausted to change his sheets, so he’d just settled for the sofa.

“You said that we could talk in the morning. I didn’t mean to wake you, but I figured we might as well get this over with. I know this is a lot and maybe its best if I just go somewhere else while you decide what to do with this situation.”

MyZell let his hand move across his head before he motioned to the leather recliner next to where he was sitting.

“Sit down.” His deep, raspy voice filled the room and caused Tan’s body to shudder. She just wished that it wasn’t laced with so much hesitation and doubt.

“So, tell me what happened,” he calmly said.

MyZell was torn between his suspicious nature and the way his heart longed for what the two of them had. He needed her to convince him that the feeling rising in him was something that he could ignore.

“The night it happened...” Tan began slowly, she had been practicing for this moment for months now. She had rehearsed what she would say and how she’d needed to deliver it for so long that it was etched in her memory in a way that had almost

convinced her that it was real. “I was on my way home and someone grabbed me from behind. I couldn’t see anything. All I could hear was his voice telling me that he would kill me if I screamed. I did anyway and he made me regret it.”

Tears slipped from her eyes and MyZell sat silently watching her. His pulse quickened as he listened to her talk.

“What happened next?” His tone was calm, but icy, and Tan couldn’t tell if he believed her, so she continued.

“I blacked out and when I woke up, I was in a room alone. It was small and dark, and for the first few days, no one came in or said anything to me. I was just there. On the fourth day, a man came in with his face covered and told me that I was there because of you. That he was teaching you a lesson that you weren’t as untouchable as you thought. He told me that if I cooperated, he wouldn’t kill me, so I did. What else was I supposed to do?”

“Cooperated how, Tan?”

“Not like that. They never touched me, not in that way,” she said quickly, not wanting him to think the worst or believe that she was damaged goods. She needed him to love her again the way he used to. If he thought those things about her, even if it wasn’t her fault, he might not be able to get past it.

“So, they never touched you?”

Tan noticed how robotically he spoke and it made her nervous. It was like he had no feelings about it one way or the other. She was starting to believe that this entire situation was pointless.

“No, not like that. I learned that there was more than one. There were three altogether. Two of them were okay. They gave me clean clothes and made sure I ate everyday but one of them, he hated you. All he talked about was how much he hated you.”

“Is he the one that did this to you?” MyZell’s eyes were on her now as he surveyed her body. There were fresh bruises around her neck and on her face. Nothing over the top, but they were still there. The bad thing was it made him think

about Ryan and the night he'd met her instead of feeling sympathy for Tan like he should have.

Nodding, the tears began again. She felt like she was getting through to him because his expression softened. She just didn't realize that it was because of his thoughts for Ryan and not her.

For the next hour, MyZell asked questions and Tan answered as best she could. There wasn't much to say. Everything ended with she didn't know or she couldn't remember. That irritated MyZell because it just didn't add up, but he was torn between what he believed and what he wanted to be true. Tan was back, that was what he wanted. He'd loved her and missed her for a year and now here she was.

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## *twenty-five*

IT HAD BEEN two days since Tan had shown up on his doorstep, and after two days, he still didn't know how to deal with that. The morning after, he'd questioned her about the past year and came up empty. Everything was "I don't know" or "I don't remember". The only fact she had was that whoever had kept her away from him had done it because of him. For a year, they kept her tucked away, never showing their faces. How the hell was that possible and what was the point?

It just didn't make sense. Who would go through so much trouble just to hurt him, and if that was really their intent, then why not just kill her? Why send her back? What was the message in that? It was bugging the hell out of MyZell because he needed things to add up and make sense. To make it worse, he missed her. A part of his heart still belonged to Tan and it was hard for him to be around her with all of those unanswered questions. For that reason, his routine had been the same for the past two days.

He was up early and in late. He avoided her as much as possible because he didn't know how to deal with being around her. The way she looked at him had him wanting to hold her and apologize for the time she'd lost and the things that she'd suffered. But, then again, his gut was telling him not to trust her.

"I think maybe I should leave."

MyZell felt Tan's presence behind him even before she spoke. He stepped out of his closet, pulling his shirt over his head before their eyes met. She was still beautiful and that



didn't help the situation. But, regardless, he didn't fully trust her, which was why he'd wanted her there. The cameras in his home recorded her moves, and so far, all she did was sleep and watch TV while he was gone. He wasn't sure if she knew he was watching her because she never once acknowledged the cameras that he could tell but that could have also been planned.

"No, stay here," was all he said before he broke the intense stare they had on each other and headed back into his closet.

Frustrated, Tan exhaled and followed him, stopping at the door. "Why? It's like I'm not even here. You're gone before I get u, and don't come in until after I'm already asleep. When I am lucky enough to see you, you barely even acknowledge me." Her breathing picked up as she spoke because she was getting emotional. True enough it was part of an act, but it didn't meant the feelings weren't genuine. She had missed him and wanted him to miss her just as much.

MyZell turned to face her and the tears got to him this time. This was the reason he'd stayed away from her. He didn't want to let his emotions cloud his judgment, and seeing her, being close to her, did that.

Stepping close enough to smell the strawberry scent that radiated from her body, MyZell could no longer fight the urge to touch her. He slowly reached out and pulled her into his embrace. Her body flinched at first, but then relaxed against his.

"Ay, don't cry, Tan. This shit is hard for me too, but I just don't know how to handle it yet. I need time and I need you to respect that, but I don't want you to leave, aight?"

Their eyes met again when she looked up to offer a slight nod.

Feeling like she had reached a small victory, Tan hugged him back and tried to take it a step further. She placed one hand on the side of his face and tried to kiss him. He let their lips touch, but then turned away and stepped back.

“I can’t take it there with you, Tan.” He stepped around her, wrapped his hand around his phone before lifting his keys and then heading out of his bedroom door. She was behind him as soon as he hit the hallway.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to complicate things,” she said softly, hoping to stop him.

“I’ll see you later,” was the last thing he said before he was out the door, leaving her standing there stuck in her feelings. It was right then that she realized, this was going to be a lot harder than she’d thought.

MyZell slipped into his Alfa Romeo, instantly missing his BMW, and it also made him think of Ryan. He sat there for a minute trying to get his thoughts together before his palm landed forcefully on the custom leather steering wheel in front of him.

“Fuck.” He groaned before his ringing phone distracted him.

His sister’s name flashed across the screen and he exhaled before using his push start and then answering.

“What’s up, My? It’s not a good time.”

She paused for a moment, balling up her face, and then responded. It had been a couple days since she’d last spoke with her brother because she had been wrapped up in Cutty. But after receiving the call from Ryan letting her know that she’d planned to start today, she figured that she would check in with him. It also wasn’t like them to go too long without speaking to each other because the two were so close.

“Ehhh, why you snapping at me, Zell?” she responded with a touch of attitude.

“I’m busy, Myah. I just have a lot of shit going on right now.” He softened his tone a little, even though his mood hadn’t changed. Myah wasn’t the reason behind his frustration, so he didn’t mean to take it out on her.

“Something wrong?” she questioned, knowing her brother. She could read his moods about as well as she knew her own.

“Nah, just busy. What’s up, though? You need something, you good?”

“Ryan called, she’s starting today,” Myah sang into the phone, her entire mood changing. “Are you bringing her? I haven’t seen you in a few days.”

“I’m not sure, let me hit you back.”

“Fine, but if not, I need to see you soon,” Myah demanded.

“You will.” Zell hung up without waiting for her to respond. His mind was on Ryan. He hadn’t seen or talked to her since the night Tan showed up. MyZell had been dreading this moment, but he had to see her before she got to Myah.

He was on his way to go talk to Trez about the situation with Tan. Neither him nor Myah knew that she was back and he needed a voice of reason to help him work through the situation. Even though Myah and Trez felt the same about Tan, he knew that Trez would be more objective, where Myah would just be emotional.

She hated Tan, and Zell knew that, so until he figured out what his next move was, he wanted to keep it away from her. The problem with that was with Ryan starting at the shop today, she was bound to say something to Myah which would only make things worse. Myah wasn’t totally in love with the idea of Ryan, but he knew that she would take her over Tan any day. Right now, he had to go do some damage control and as much as he hated to admit it, he missed Ryan and needed to see her.

## *twenty-six*

“WHAT DO you mean it’s not there anymore?” Ryan was beyond frustrated with the woman on the other end of the phone.

She had been calling for two days trying to figure out what had happened to her car and no one was cooperating. After showing her ass and cussing out damn near every person she’d talked to because they couldn’t provide her with any details, she was finally put on the phone with Cecilia who was in upper management. She wasn’t doing much more than any of the other people she had spoken with. All Ryan wanted was her car, and if they could tell her where it was, she could then figure out how to get it back.

“Says here that it was paid for and collected by a Mr. Abrams a week ago. Do you not know who that is? The paperwork shows that you approved for the car to be released to him, Ms. Henderson.”

“How? How would I approve that? Even if I did, why would I be calling everyday trying to figure out where the hell my car was? You have got to be the stupidest people on this earth.”

Ryan stood and began pacing again. A million questions floated through her head. How did MyZell know about her car? What did he want with it? And why hadn’t he mentioned it to her?

“Ms. Henderson, I understand that you’re upset, but we follow procedure here, so if my people released the car then they had permission to. You might want to—”

Ryan was over it. She hung up on her mid-sentence. If she no longer had the car, then there was nothing that she could do to help her. And giving her some bullshit explanation about policy and procedure wasn't going to help her get her car back. At this point, she would have to speak to the one person she had been avoiding.

“Damn it!” she yelled before flopping down on the bed.

Ryan dropped her phone next to her before both hands moved across her head and through her wild curls. Releasing a frustrated breath, she leaned forward, lowering her elbows onto her knees and then let her fingers massage her scalp.

That only lasted for a moment before she felt someone watching her. When she looked up, MyZell's tall, lean body was standing a foot outside of her room and his eyes were on her. She couldn't read his expression, but if she'd had to guess, he looked nervous. Trying her best to control the tightening in her stomach from being in his presence, she peered at him before speaking.

“What are you doing here?”

“Myah called.” He spoke slowly but kept his eyes on her as if it would somehow control her reaction.

“And?”

“Ryan?”

“What, MyZell? Why are you here?”

“Can we talk?”

“Yeah, we can talk. Where the hell is my car? Let's talk about that.” She raised her voice and her eyes bored into his.

He had completely forgotten about that. With everything going on, that was the last thing on his mind. He had it at one of his warehouses but had yet to go through it like he'd originally planned.

“I'll have it delivered tomorrow.”

Ryan laughed sarcastically. She was angry, but that was overpowered by the feelings she had for him.

“Why do you even have it? How did you even know how to find it?”

“Because I didn’t know shit about you and you weren’t telling me. I already told you I make shit happen. Finding out more about you was something I needed to do, so I made it happen.” Myzell didn’t back down because he had no apologies for that. Since the decision had been made, she had opened up and things had changed, but that wasn’t the case back then.

“So, you couldn’t find your girlfriend who was missing for a year who you knew everything about, but you managed to find a car that belonged to someone who you knew nothing about?” Ryan clenched her jaw. “You might want to get you some new resources. That seems a little backward to me.”

She stood and pushed past him to leave the room, making contact with half of his body because of where he was standing in the doorway.

“Ay, that’s not necessary. I can’t really say shit because I know the situation is beyond messed up, but acting childish about it won’t fix shit, Ryan.” He was behind her before she made it to the end of the hall. His hand grabbed her forearm, pulling her toward him so that they were now face to face. The second she stopped, she yanked her arm from his grasp.

“Don’t fucking touch me. I’m not being childish. I’m stating facts. I’m not even angry because you made it very clear that you belonged to someone else, so how can I be? I’m fine. I just want my car and for you to leave me alone.”

She turned to walk away, but he was after her again. Not knowing what else to do, he stepped in front of her and the two just stared at each other for a moment before Ryan tried to move around him. This time, his hands cuffed the back of her head, bringing her into a kiss which she resisted at first, but then gave in. How could she not? He owned her heart, and she had no idea how or when it’d happened, but it was evident every time she was near him. The fact that she lay awake at night for the past two days fighting the urge to call him was

also proof and a constant reminder that she had once again fallen for the wrong man.

“Please don’t do that,” Ryan said softly after breaking free.

“I can’t help it. I know this thing with Tan is fucked up, but it doesn’t change what happened with us.”

“It changes everything. Don’t you get that? And you being here, doing shit like that doesn’t help. Just please leave me alone. I told your sister that I’d be there by eleven. I have to go.”

He watched as she moved away from him, grabbed her purse, and then headed toward the door.

“If you’ll bring my car, you can have yours back. As soon as I have enough money to leave, I’ll be out of here too,” Ryan said over her shoulder before she opened the front door and disappeared through it.

The second it slammed, Myzell knew he was screwed. His heart was with Ryan, but he couldn’t do shit about it until he figured out what the hell was up with Tan. It wasn’t fair to either one of them and he had no argument with that.

## *twenty-seven*

IT TOOK Trez a minute to respond after MyZell had explained everything that had gone on over the past few days. He knew he had to choose his words carefully, so he let them process before he voiced his opinion.

“And she’s at your house right now?” Trez questioned and then turned up the beer he was holding.

“Yeah.”

“Myah know?”

MyZell looked at Trez again before he emptied the glass he was holding. After the contents spilled down his throat, he responded. “Nah, not yet, but Ryan is on her way to the shop now. She’s supposed to start working there today.”

Trez chuckled and then shook his head. “You know you’re fucked, right?”

“The fuck was I supposed to do? Tell her she couldn’t go? Shit, she already hates my ass right now. Last thing I wanted to do was make it worse.”

“Bruh, I ain’t talking about Ryan. Yeah, shit is fucked up for her ’cause ten minutes after you nut in her, your past shows up at the door, but Myah is who you need to be worried about. The second baby girl finds out Tan is back, she’s coming for her, and she’s gonna be in your shit for not telling her. You already know that. The shit don’t add up, Zell. I know you got history and you really don’t want to see shit for what it is, but you got to believe that there’s more to it.”



“Fuck, man, I know that. I didn’t ask Tan to stay because I feel like we can just pick up where we left off as if shit is cool. I know it don’t make sense and I need it to. Until I find out what she’s hiding, I have to keep her close.”

“You sure that’s it?” Trez had to ask. He knew MyZell and it was no secret how gone he had been over Tan, so her being back had to be doing something to him. Even if he was suspicious about why.

“I’m sure. I moved on, hell you just said that yourself. I’m not saying that her being there doesn’t affect me, because it does, but shit don’t make sense, Trez. And until it does...” MyZell paused and Trez nodded.

“But when you find out, then what? You gonna be able to do what you need to?”

“Yeah.”

“Ay, you’re my people. Couldn’t be closer if we shared the same blood, Zell, so I need you to understand that it’s my job to protect you when you can’t protect yourself. That’s some shit that I won’t ever hesitate about.”

“No doubt, and if it comes to that, I expect you to. For now, I just need to figure this shit out.” Trez knew that MyZell was asking for space, which he planned on giving him to a certain degree, but in no way whatsoever did he plan to step completely back.

After his meeting with Zell, Trez had some issues of his own to deal with. Korri had been blowing up his phone after their brief separation. He just really wasn’t trying to hear anything she had to say at this point. He couldn’t get past what she had done and it was really making it hard for him to talk to her or be around her. As much as he loved her, it just seriously complicated things.

When he made it to his car, and after what was easily the tenth call from Korri, he decided to answer, knowing that she wouldn’t stop until he did.

“Korri, I’m not in the mood, shorty.”

“It’s been a month. When are you going to at least talk to me about this?”

He cringed at how dismayed she sounded. It got him every time, which was why he’d avoided talking to her all together. She had been his heart for the last five years, so it was complicated trying to shut that off and not feel anything.

“We talked, Korri. What the hell you expect me to say?”

“I don’t know, something, anything. You just walked out and never looked back. Is it really that easy for you?”

He laughed at how stupid her question was on the surface. Was it easy for him to walk away? Hell no, it was the hardest thing he had possibly ever done in his life. The second it had come out of her mouth that she’d killed his baby, it had taken every ounce of control he had not to take her damn life.

“Ain’t shit easy about any of this, Korri, you already know that. So why do you want to keep bringing that shit up? Give me my goddamn space.”

“Trez, I’m sorry. How many times do I need to say it before you believe me?”

“I believe you. But that don’t mean shit because you saying it and me believing you is not going to bring my baby back, is it? My goddamn baby. You did that shit without me and for some fucked up reasons. Did you really not trust me enough to make shit work for you? Hell, I would have found a way, Korri, even if I had to raise it on my own, but you really didn’t give me a chance to do that, so what else is there to say about it?”

He held the phone and listened to the rhythm of her breathing on the other end. Just when he opened his mouth to speak because she wouldn’t, her voice flowed through.

“I’mma let you go. Just please think about it. I miss you. I know you don’t believe that, but I really miss you. I miss us, and I’m not ready to let that go, so please just think about it.”

“Aight, Korri, I have to go.”

Trez ended the call and tossed his phone into his empty passenger seat. With both hands securely on the steering wheel of his car, he gripped it tight as his foot pressed harder on the pedal, further accelerating his speed. Already moving at an illegal speed, he began dodging in and out of traffic. He was angry, felt reckless, and couldn't do shit about it except drive.

The entire time, his mind was jumping all over the place. He replayed the conversation he'd had with Korri in his mind, trying to find even the smallest thing that would allow him to forgive her, but it was pointless. She'd killed his kid because she was "dealing with too much". That was what she had said. Medical school and internships were already consuming her life and adding a baby to that would make it impossible for her to accomplish her goal.

All he could think was how fucking selfish that shit had sounded. She'd made it about her. Korri had never even considered how it would affect him. She just kept saying over and over that now was not the time.

Trez was snapped out of his thoughts by the sound of his phone going off again. Grasping it, he glanced at the screen and answered. At this point he needed a distraction and Sya could be that for him.

"Hey baby, are you busy?" her voice flowed through his phone, bringing a smirk to his face.

"Nah, not right now. What's up?"

"I miss you."

"You miss me?"

"That shouldn't be a question, Trez. Can you come through?"

"When?"

"Now."

"I need to go check on a few things but give me an hour and I got you. You need anything?"

"Just you. Get here as soon as you can."

A smug grin surfaced before he answered. “One hour.”

Trez knew that it wouldn't change his situation, but right now, he didn't need resolution. He simply wanted a release. He wasn't really the type to deal with multiple women. In fact, until he'd split with Korri a month ago, he had only cheated twice in their relationship and with the same person. Once, when he was too drunk to say no, and the other time was when Korri had accused him and wouldn't let it go, so he eventually said fuck it and did just that.

The day after he'd found out that Korri had an abortion without his consent, he ran into that person and she helped him through his frustration. It was just sex with Sya and she knew that. Trez had made it clear. He loved Korri, even through the anger of what she had done, but right now he just really couldn't deal with her. He hoped that he would eventually be able to get past it, but for now, he needed his space.

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## *twenty-eight*

POLO SLAMMED his hand down on the counter in front of him before he narrowed in on the attendant standing on the opposite side. Clenching his jaw and gritting his teeth, he then rubbed his chin.

“Why can’t you tell me who paid for the car?” His tone was icy, but his delivery was calm.

“Sir, I’ve told you more than once, I don’t have that information. He paid for it in cash and...”

The fact that she said *he* paid for it in cash let him know that she had exactly what he needed. She just wasn’t trying to give it to him. Unfortunately for her, Polo wasn’t going for that. Polo chuckled before he reached for his gun and then placed it on the counter with his hand firmly gripping the handle.

“So you mean to tell me that some random ass person came and picked up the car that I paid for?” He paused and used the barrel of the gun to move the registration to it closer to her. “...and you can’t tell me who the fuck it was. I’m not understanding that, so here’s what’s going to happen. Look in your files, that goddamn computer, or whatever else you have here and give me anything you have that can lead me to my fucking car or only one of us is leaving here today. Well, alive, that is.”

With a hard stare, his eyes were on the attendant while he waited. She was clearly shaken and began fidgeting with her hands.

“Sure, I can do that. All it says here is where the vehicle was delivered. I can give you that, but it’s all I have.”

She glanced at the screen in front of her before jotting down the information. Losing her job was one thing, but losing her life was not up for debate. At this point, she was going to do whatever necessary to extend her life. The second this man walked out the door, she was going to grab her purse and be right behind him. As far as she was concerned, this was her official resignation.

“Preciate that,” Polo said with a sly grin when he lifted the paper that the attendant slid across the counter. “See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” He slid the registration to the car he’d purchased Ryan off the counter before shoving it in his pocket.

His eyes moved across the information on the paper that she had given him and his brows furrowed as he walked out like he hadn’t just threatened an innocent life.

“MyZell Abrams,” he mumbled under his breath as he made his way to his car. He was pissed because whoever this was, was somehow connected to or close to Ryan. That meant that she had possibly moved on. The thought alone had his blood boiling. She was his, and if she thought that she could just start a new life without him, then she’d pay for that tragic mistake with her life. It was him or no one.

After receiving the information from the impound lot, he decided to grab some food and head back to his hotel. Until he located Ryan, his stay in Miami was indefinite.

“You’re not from here, are you?” Ivey asked after she accepted the fifty-dollar bill from Polo and began counting out his change. She couldn’t help but notice how attractive he was. He was so distracted with his thoughts, almost to the point that he was in his own world. Ivey was positive that he hadn’t even noticed her.

“No.” His delivery wasn’t necessarily cold, but it was clear that he had no interest in her at all.

“Visiting someone?” she asked, unable to help herself.

His dark eyes and handsome face had her intrigued.

This time, he actually looked her way. And for the first time, Polo realized how cute she was. She wasn't Ryan. Hell, no one could compete with that in his eyes, but she was worth entertaining. Especially since he had no idea if or when he would find Ryan. Polo wasn't the type of man who was used to being alone. That was part of the reason why Ryan had left him in the first place, but that in no way changed things.

"I don't know, you tell me." Flashing her a sexy smile that had her insides melting, Polo knew that he had her full undivided attention.

Fumbling a little, she handed over his change, which he accepted and then immediately placed in the tip jar that sat next to her register.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked, not wanting to confuse what she was hoping with what was actually happening.

Releasing a slight chuckle, Polo looked her right in her eyes before he then broke his stare and let it move across her body. After checking out her thin hips and then moving up to her full breasts, he smirked before his eyes met hers again.

"What time you get off?"

"Six." She answered so quickly that he almost laughed at her eagerness.

"Aight, how about this. I'll be here at six. If you wanna chill with me tonight, you can, unless you have a man that might object to that."

With a childish giggle, Ivey blushed. "No man."

"I guess I'm lucky then, even though I don't believe that bullshit. You're cute as hell, ma, I can't believe you single."

"As a dollar bill." She turned to grab his order after hearing it being placed on the counter behind her.

"Cool, I guess that's what's up then. Six. I'll see you then." Polo took the bag from her hand, winked at her, and started toward the door.

“Yes, six,” Ivey announced to his back. She didn’t even know his name, nor had he even asked for hers, but if he was there when she got off, she was going to spend time with him.

Once Polo was in his car again, he tossed his food into the empty passenger seat before he leaned back enough to get his phone out of his pocket. He needed to check in at home. Regardless of what was going on with Ryan, he still had a business to run, and since Dutch was no longer breathing, he had to move people around to make sure things were being handled.

“What up, boss?” Trent answered coolly. He had been trying to move up for years, so when Polo came to him with the opportunity, he agreed, never asking questions about why the offer was there. At this point, all he wanted was to prove himself and hopefully put himself in the position to gain Polo’s trust enough to replace Dutch.

“What’s going on there? Shit moving, we making money?”

“Yeah, we’re good. We just separated and distributed the last shipment. I personally collected the money and took it to Dylan.”

“Aight, cool. Don’t fuck up,” Polo said and then disconnected the call. He had no problems replacing anyone who couldn’t carry their weight. Anyone who worked for him knew that, so it was risk versus reward for anyone who wanted to be a part of his team.



## *twenty-nine*

“GIRL, you’re crazy. Why would you trust some nigga you don’t even know? Didn’t you just say he’s not from here?”

“Yeah and that’s the part I like best. These niggas around here ain’t shit. You know it and I know it.”

“Ivee, you’re tripping. You don’t even know his name. You don’t know shit about him other than he ordered a po’boy with a side of fries, paid with a fifty, and left the change for you as a tip.”

Ivee sucked her teeth and rolled her eyes before she glanced at the clock on the wall in the storeroom where she was hiding out. Ten minutes until her shift was over and she was praying that her mystery man returned.

“I’ll find out what I need to know when he comes to pick me up.”

“I swear I’m going to see you on the eleven o’clock news tonight.”

“Okay, negative Nancy. Why can’t you appreciate the fact that I might have found a great guy?”

“I’m not trying to be negative, I’m just trying to make sure you don’t end up in tiny pieces floating in the ocean.”

“Kim!” Ivee yelled.

“What, man? I mean it. But just text me later. And keep checking in so that I know you’re okay. If that nigga gets out of line, you better just run and don’t look back. I’m serious, Ivee.”

She burst out laughing and then smiled. “Girl, bye. You worry too much.”

After glancing at the clock one last time, she sighed. Three minutes until it was time for her to leave. She wiped her hands on her jeans and then sashayed over to the mirror that hung on the wall. Her hand moved to the elastic tie that held her ponytail in place before she yanked at it, allowing her shoulder length hair to fall freely around her shoulders. She ran her fingers through it before she shook it free. It was newly done, so it looked good even after having been in a ponytail all day.

Once she was satisfied, she slid her phone into her back pocket and then moved to her locker to grab her belongings. Kat was already there, early as usual, so she could clock out and leave whenever she was ready.

“You look happy,” Kat said as soon as she caught sight of Ivey moving from the back and then rounding the corner.

“Why wouldn’t I be? I’m leaving this hellhole.” Ivey glanced at the glass storefront and checked to see if her date had arrived. Problem was, she didn’t know what he would be driving. None of that had even registered to her at the time.

“Don’t rub it in, Ivey, I’ll be here until midnight.” Kat pouted slightly until they both heard the front door chime.

She and Ivey both smiled at Polo as he entered. Although he looked right at Ivey, his expression never changed. He didn’t seem the least bit happy to see her until she mindlessly waved and then regretted it.

“Ay, you ready?” he asked, stopping short of the area where she stood.

“Yeah. See you tomorrow, Kat,” Ivey stated with a smug grin after she noticed the disappointment on Kat’s face.

She beamed even more when she was close enough to him and his hand moved to the small of her back before he grabbed her hand and lead her out of the restaurant.

When they reached his car, Ivey tried to hide her excitement. She assumed he had money from his clothes and jewelry, especially after she’d noticed the Rolex on his wrist.

But when he hit the remote to unlock the doors of his Lamborghini, it was definitely confirmed.

She even overlooked the fact that he'd moved straight to the driver's door, not even attempting to pretend like he would open the passenger door for her. She didn't mind, she didn't know him that well.

"You hungry?" Polo asked as soon as he pulled away from the curb.

"Umm, not starving, but I can eat."

He looked her way and smirked. "Ay, what's your name, shorty? I didn't even ask you that shit earlier."

"Ivee," she replied with her eyes on him.

One hand gripped the steering wheel, while the other moved under his shirt and rested on his abs. She watched the muscles flex in his biceps and triceps from even the slightest movement. A few tattoos graced them both, but nothing over the top.

"That's cool. I like that," he replied before he focused on the road again. "So, what's up? You feel like chilling or what? I don't know shit about Miami."

"Trust me, there's not much to know. Well, I mean, not in my opinion anyway."

"Damn, it's like that? I haven't seen much, but it seems aight to me."

"Where you from?" she asked, curious about why Miami seemed so appealing to him. He had an accent, so she knew he wasn't local.

"Up north," was all he said, not wanting to give away details. He had yet to decide what she would be to him. "You from here, though?"

"Born and raised. Not for long, though. I really want something else."

"Word, like what?"

Ivee shrugged as she thought about it. No one had ever really asked her that and she'd never really put much thought into it. She just knew that she wanted to get out of Miami.

"I never really thought about it," she admitted, feeling a little childish

"You should, ma. How you gonna jet if you don't know where you're going?"

"Maybe I'll come up north," she tossed out, just to see his reaction.

Polo ignored her and threw out a suggestion of his own. "How about we just chill at my hotel. We can order in if you want."

"That works."

### ***Later That Night***

Ivee looked down at Polo as she rocked back and forth from where she straddled his waist. For the past two hours, they had been sexing on and off with very little conversation or rest. He wasn't much of a talker, but she was okay with that because after multiple orgasms and the way he felt inside of her, he more than made up for that.

"Fuck, shorty, work that shit."

Polo's hands tightened on her small waist, letting his fingers dig into her soft skin as helped guide her motions. Ivee was in a blissful state as he touched parts of her insides that had never been touched before. For her, this was the best part of the time that they'd spent together. When they were together like they currently were, she felt like she meant something to him.

Polo let go of one of her sides and rubbed his fingers across her clit and began pushing deeper inside her because he felt his nut rising fast. He wanted them to cum together because he was tired and hungry after the past few hours that they'd had.

“Damn, you feel so fucking good,” Polo grunted as he watched her full breasts bouncing from her movements up and down his length.

“Oh my God, I’m about to…”

With a smirk, Polo placed his hand on her side again to have full control as he pushed upward while he held her down at the same time. Seconds later, he released so hard that he said a silent prayer that the condom held up.

Ivee leaned forward, no longer having the energy to stay upright and let her head rest on his chest until he slid from underneath her and sat up with a pleased smile. He kissed her shoulder and stretched out next to her, which had her in her feelings. She wanted to lay with him, but he’d pulled away from her, so she crawled to the edge of the bed and sat with her back to him for a moment and then left him there to head to the bathroom.

“Ay, get dressed. I’m hungry as fuck after all that. Let’s go grab some food.” Polo folded his arm behind his head as he lay naked on one side of the bed in his room while Ivee sat on the other. She had just returned from the bathroom where she removed the fourth condom they’d used and then cleaned herself up.

Now she sat with the blunt in her hand, which she and Polo were sharing.

“I really don’t know if I can walk, sit, or stand long enough to go get food,” she said over her shoulder before she took a pull from the blunt and then extended it his way.

He removed it from her fingers and smiled, feeling accomplished.

“Come on, ma. I know you not gon’ flake on me like that.”

Ivee felt butterflies in her stomach at the fact that he wanted more of her time. He’d invited her to his room, which in her eyes was a clear sign that all he wanted was sex. She knew she should have expected more, but a man like Polo was not the type you turned down, even if you knew it wasn’t

going anywhere. She was hopeful and he had just taken that hope to the next level.

“I figured you would want me to go,” she admitted.

His deep-throated laugh embarrassed her a little because it seemed that he was laughing more at her than at her statement.

“Nah, you cool, shorty. You can chill with me for minute. Get dressed.”

Ivee blushed, and once she was on her feet, she began collecting her things. After she worked her way into her bra and panties, she grabbed at her jeans which had ended up under his. When she did, the tiny piece of paper with the information that Polo had received slipped out of his back pocket.

Polo was now on his feet and moving her way so she leaned down and lifted it. She couldn't help but notice the name on it before she handed it over to him.

“Is that who you're visiting?” Ivee asked as her eyes moved to the paper in his hand.

“You know him?” Polo redirected the conversation, not wanting to give her any more details than he had to. She was cool and he felt like he could chill with her for a minute, at least until he located Ryan.

“Not personally, but everyone in Miami knows him. He's a big deal around here.” Ivee frowned, trying to figure out what the connection was.

“Oh, aight.” Polo tossed the paper on the bed and began getting dressed.

Looked like he would be keeping Ivee around for a minute. Finding Ryan might be a little easier than he expected and Ivee would be useful.

## *thirty*

“HEY, everyone is gone, so we’re pretty much done here.” Myah walked into her office, rounded her desk, and looked over Ryan’s shoulder. “What’s all this?” she asked peering at her MacBook which Ryan had literally been in front of all day.

“It’s your inventory. I have everything cataloged and itemized. Whoever was doing this before was really costing you money and a lot of it. All of this...” Ryan pointed to one section. “is stuff that you have more than enough of. It was like they just kept ordering it for no reason. I’m guessing that they just randomly placed orders without really checking to see what you needed.”

Myah studied the screen and then frowned. She wasn’t the best with business, which was why she’d paid her girl, Rita, to keep up with stuff like this. She had a master’s in business and claimed to be on top of things. As far as Myah was concerned, the money was always right, and the nail bar always had what they needed, so she never questioned things. A few of her technicians complained here and there about little things, but as soon as Mya stepped to Rita it seemed to be handled.

“So is she losing me money?” Myah asked with a frown. She knew her girl wasn’t shit, but she’d never really assumed that she would fuck her business wise. MyZell hated her and told her it was a bad idea, but it was her business, so he stayed out of it.

“You’re ordering things you don’t need, expensive things so you’re wasting money.”

“You can’t trust people for shit.” Myah sucked her teeth and mumbled.

“And not just that, who does your accounting? Your cash deposits are always off and by a lot.”

Ryan needed something to keep her mind off her current situation, so when she got there and Myah had suggested that she help get her paperwork in order, Ryan dove right in. She didn’t really know Myah well enough to get in her business but after spending all day going through the piles of paperwork she had in her office, creating spreadsheets and matching bank statements against store sales, she’d realized that somebody was stealing from Myah. Ryan hadn’t graduated from high school and she wasn’t a genius or anything, but she was good with numbers. Anyone who took the time to look at Myah’s paperwork could clearly see that she was getting screwed.

“Off like how?” Myah felt her pulse racing at the thought that her own friend was stealing from her.

“Okay, look at this. On this day, your deposit was ten thousand eight hundred and twenty-two dollars, but based on your appointments and sales, you should have made this much.” Ryan pointed to a number on the screen before she continued. “Your credit card receipts were for a little over eight grand, which means that your cash was short.”

“Fucking hoe,” Myah said and then clenched her fist.

“Is that the only one?”

“No, they’re all off. Enough here and there but it’s always the cash. If someone is stealing, there’s not much that they can do with the credit transaction.”

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” Myah grumbled.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing, not tonight anyway but I’ll be checking a few hoes first thing in the morning, so if you don’t mind doing this full time I’ll pay you to do it.”



“I’m not really qualified to be an accountant or anything. I’m just good with numbers,” Ryan admitted.

“If you can make sure my inventory and money is right then that’s all the qualification that you need.” Myah shrugged and looked right at Ryan.

“I’m good with it if you are.”

“You’re not gonna fuck me, are you?”

“No, I wouldn’t do that,” Ryan answered quickly and Myah smirked.

“Job’s yours then. I’m sure my brother will be happy to hear that.”

“I guess I’ll head home,” Ryan said more to herself than to Myah. The two hadn’t really communicated much the entire day. Myah was in and out and Ryan had been stuck in her office all day.

“You wanna get a drink, I mean if you don’t have plans with my brother.”

“That, I definitely don’t,” Ryan mumbled under her breath before she stood and stretched. She had literally been sitting all day and her body was stiff.

“What’s wrong?” My asked with a slight frown. She hadn’t really been sold on the idea of Ryan and her brother, but the more she was around her, the more she was making peace with it. Especially after what she had just discovered for her.

“Nothing.”

“I know it’s none of my business, he made that very clear.” Myah paused and rolled her eyes “But I know my brother can be a bit much sometimes. I wasn’t really feeling you at first, but only because I didn’t know you. I guess we’re cool now, so if you want to talk about anything I’m here. I mean, it’s not like you have friends or anything.”

Myah tossed out about the fact that Ryan had been alone since she’d showed up in her brother’s life. Befriending her accomplished two things. It’d helped Myah figure out more

about the woman that her brother was so into and it helped her keep Ryan close.

“It’s not really my place to say. Just talk to your brother. You guys are close, I’m sure he’ll tell you.”

“Tell me what?” Myah looked at Ryan with raised brows. Now she was really curious. It was like Ryan was insinuating that her brother had a secret and they didn’t do that.

“Just talk to him. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Ryan stated calmly.

Myah decided to let it go, but she was heading straight to his house to find out what was up with the two of them. Something had changed. It hadn’t gone unnoticed that Ryan had looked sad when she’d talked about MyZell and she seemed extremely put off by the entire conversation. Myah needed to know why and she was on her way to find out.

\* \* \*

“Cutty, where are you?” Myah whined into the phone as she sat outside of her brother’s house. It was just after ten and she hadn’t heard from him all day.

“Home, what’s up?”

“You’ve been home all day and you haven’t called me not once.”

Cutty chuckled and that annoyed Myah. “Shorty, you haven’t called me either. And besides, didn’t you tell me you were going to be at your shop training someone all day?”

Myah sucked her teeth at his explanation. It was true but that shouldn’t have stopped him from at least calling or texting to check on her.

“I did, but you still could have checked in nigga, damn. I do own the place. I could have made time,” she snapped.

“Ay, calm the fuck down.” Cutty’s voice got stern and deep, which caused Eve to look up at him before she lowered

her head again taking him as deep down her throat as she could.

Cutty had been home having sex on and off with her all day, knowing that he was going to be with Myah later. It was the only way he could keep her head straight about the fact that he was sexing Myah too. Right now she was topping him off one last time before he planned on heading out to see Myah, but that might change if she didn't get her attitude in check.

"I am calm. I'm just saying."

"You saying what, Myah? We cool, but we ain't married. Don't clock my fucking moves, aight. I been home all day with my shorty and so fucking what if I didn't have time to pick up the phone? I knew I was gonna see you tonight, so there was no need for all that, and your ass was working. My daughter comes first, Myah. I told you that shit, so if that's an issue, then we got problems."

Cutty's large hand moved through Eve's hair, gripping it tight enough to guide her movements. His conversation with Myah was messing up his concentration, and he wanted to get his nut over with, so he let his head fall back and closed his eyes while Myah processed the lie that he had just told her.

"It's not a problem, Cutty. It would just be nice to at least have heard from you once today."

"Fuck," he mumbled as he finally reached his high and released down Eve's throat. She lifted her head and scowled at him, which made him chuckle as she turned and marched away.

"Look, Myah, I should have called. I was busy with my shorty, but I'll do better, baby girl. You still want me to fall through or what?"

Myah was annoyed, but she still wanted to see him. She had been thinking about him all day and couldn't wait to lay up under him.

"Yes, but I'm not home yet. Meet me at my house in an hour." Myah tried her best not to sound anxious.

Cutty chuckled under his breath. “Aight, bet. I’ll see you then. Be ready for me, shorty.”

“Whatever,” Myah said as she blushed.

“Aight, act tough if you want to. I’ll break your little ass down, Myah. Don’t play.”

“Mmmhmm. I bet. I’ll see you in an hour.”

She ended the call and smiled big before getting out of her car. Armed with only her keys and phone, she made her way to her brother’s front door and rang the bell. His car wasn’t parked in front, but that didn’t mean anything. He could easily be parked in his garage, especially since Ryan was driving his BMW, which she’d noticed when they’d left the shop.

After she didn’t get a response, she used her key and let herself in, stopping at the keypad to disarm the alarm. To her surprise it wasn’t activated. That felt off because if he wasn’t there, he would have surely set it. That was something he didn’t play about.

“Zell, you here?” she yelled, moving from room to room until she hit the hallway that led to the bedrooms and that was when shit got real.

“He’s not here.”

Myah knew she had to be losing it because the body in front of her and the voice coming from it belonged to Tan and there was no way that could be happening.

“What the fuck? What are you doing here?”

Myah and Tan stared each other down until Tan spoke up.

“Ask your brother and right now he’s not here, so...”

“I’m not asking him shit. I’m asking you. You’re the one standing here.”

Tan smirked before releasing a cocky laugh and folding her arms across her chest. “Still the same, I see. I don’t know what you have against me, but—”

“There’s an entire list of things, but right now, the fact that your ass pulled a disappearing act and are now here standing

in my brother's house is at the top of that list, so start talking or you can get the fuck out. I'll drag you out if I have to."

"She's not going anywhere, so mind your damn business, Myah. What are you doing here anyway?"

MyZell's voice from behind her didn't stop her from staring Tan down. She now had a satisfied smirk on her face that really wasn't helping the situation.

When MyZell was close enough, he stepped between his sister and Tan, but faced Myah.

"She's not going anywhere? Yes, the fuck she is. I don't know what lie she came up with to convince you that it made sense for her skank ass to just disappear for a year, but I know you're smart enough not to believe it, Zell."

"Myah, shut the fuck up. You don't know shit. Yeah, she was gone, but she didn't just walk away. Someone took her and kept her from me for the past year."

"Took her and kept her. Please tell me you don't believe that bullshit, Zell. This hoe—"

"Ay, watch your goddamn mouth, and bring that tone down, all the way fucking down." MyZell grabbed Myah firmly by the arm and pulled her with him down the hallway until they reached his living room.

"You really gonna handle me because of that hoe, Zell?"

"Ay, what I just tell you, Myah? Watch your goddamn mouth and your tone." MyZell gave his sister a look that had her sucking her teeth but she backed down.

"Please tell me you don't believe whatever lies she showed up with?" Myah looked at her brother to see what was going on with him. She could read him better than anyone.

His hand moved down his face before he folded his arms across his chest.

"Honestly, I don't know what I believe. She's here though, Mya. A part of me don't trust that, but then..."

“Zell, no, don’t fall for that. You know better than that. I know you want to believe that whatever the hell happened to her was your fault, but does that really make sense? Someone kidnapped her and kept her for a year. They didn’t kill her, they just... I don’t even know. Did she simply show up? Did you see her out somewhere?”

MyZell sighed before he answered. “They brought her here. I saw it for myself.”

“How?”

“You know I got cameras everywhere, Myah, damn.”

“Come on, Zell, you don’t think that shit could have been staged? What if they wanted her in here, in your house, with access to you? You giving them exactly what they want.”

“They who, Myah? Who the fuck is they? And I can protect myself. She ain’t gon’ do shit to me. She walking around here like a lost damn puppy just begging me to pay attention to her. You really think she can do anything to me?”

“She already has. She got you defending her, that’s the first step. That’s how she got your ass before, had you thinking me and Trez were the enemy and she was God. I know you think you loved her, and I know it really messed you up when she disappeared, but, Zell, you’re smarter than that.”

“Chill, Myah, I’m good. I know what I’m doing. If she’s working with somebody, I need to know who. She can’t do shit to me so her being here don’t matter. I need her close until I know for sure.”

“If her being here don’t matter then what about Ryan?” Myah looked MyZell right in the eye and could see the answer before he even spoke it.

“What she say?”

“She didn’t say shit. She told me to ask you, but she’s hurt, Zell. I didn’t know why earlier, but now it makes perfect sense. That shit ain’t right and you know it.”

MyZell chuckled at Myah defending Ryan. “How you choosing sides? Weren’t you just telling me to leave Ryan

alone, and now you telling me that having Tan here ain't fair to her. Make up your damn mind, My."

"I didn't know Ryan, so it was natural for me not to trust her, but we're good now. She seems like good people and I don't get the same vibe from her that I get from that snake hoe." Myah cut her eyes in the direction where she knew Tan was.

"Gone with that shit, My. You don't trust nobody when it comes to me, but then you lay your ass down with any fuck boy that smiles at you. Worry more about that 'cause I still don't trust that nigga you with, but you grown, so I'mma let you do you. How about you just let me do me? I'm glad you're cool with Ryan, though, because she needs that right now. She ain't fucking with me and I can't really blame her. She really don't have anybody here, so it's good that y'all are cool."

"No, you can't blame her. If I was Ryan, I would have fucked you up. Stupid ass."

"Ay, cuss at me again and I'm gon' fuck you up, and I mean that shit." MyZell stepped closer to his sister and she rolled her eyes but knew better than to challenge that.

"Did you sleep with her?"

"Who, Ryan?"

"No, nigga. I already know you slept with her. That's why she looks like she lost her best friend. I'm talking about that hoe." Myah pointed toward the hallway.

"No, but that's none of your business. I'm grown."

"I know you're grown, but that don't have nothing to do with you thinking with the right head, which apparently, you are. Don't have sex with that hoe, Zell."

MyZell looked at his sister and chuckled. "Man, take your ass home. I know what the fuck I'm doing, Myah."

"You say that now, but trust me, if she gets out of line, I'll fuck her up. And I mean it."

“I know, and I’m sure she does too, which is why she won’t. Just go home and be there for Ryan until I figure this out. Will you do that, please?”

“How you want me to be there for her? You just need to fix it, Zell. Go let her know that you’re not about to mess up what you have for that hoe. I don’t care what lies she showed up with, something ain’t right, and if you don’t know that then you’re slipping, Zell.”

“I told you already, I’m not taking it there with her.” He looked up and down the hall briefly to make sure they were still alone. “Until I know why she’s here and what she’s up to, I need her close, aight. Now go home.”

“Fine, but you need to go home too.”

“What the hell are you talking ’bout? I am home,” Zell said and narrowed his eyes at his sister.

“Nah, not even close. Your home is wherever Ryan is. You know it and I know it.” Myah looked her brother in the eyes with a hard stare before she turned to leave. She cut her eyes at him one last time before she left his house. She planned on talking to Trez soon. He was the only one who could possibly talk some sense into her brother, even when she couldn’t. Right now, she had to get to her house to meet Cutty, but trust and believe, this thing with Tan wasn’t over and it wasn’t going to be until Tan was out of her brother’s house.



## *thirty-one*

“I THOUGHT the whole purpose of you sending Tan back was to get the job done. Why do you still have to be with her, Cutty?” Eve held Tan’s daughter against her chest and rubbed her back to help relax her. She had just woke up crying again. Eve knew that she missed her mother, but she couldn’t do anything about it. This entire situation was insane to her, but she loved Cutty, so she was sticking by him.

“I need to keep an eye on Tan. She loves that nigga, so she might fuck up again. If she knows I’m around, she’ll handle business.”

“But it’s different than it was last time. You have her daughter. She’s not going to do anything stupid, Cutty, and what does that have to with you sleeping with that woman?”

“Is that what this is about? You worried about that?” He moved closer to her so that his tall frame towered over her. “She doesn’t mean shit to me, Eve, it’s just business. Sex with her is just a part of the job and the shit ain’t even good, bae. She can’t do it like you. You think I’d be fucking you like I do if she even came close to satisfying me?”

Eve looked up into his handsome face and smiled. She didn’t know why, but she believed him. She hadn’t even known him that long, but she believed the things he told her. No man could be with her the way that he was and not care. They had spent the entire day together, loving each other. He made love to her in a way that had to mean something, the way he touched her and kissed her and moaned her name every time she spread her legs wide for him and let him caress her insides.

“I’m just ready for this to be over. I know this is important to you, but I don’t care about any of that. The money doesn’t matter, I just want you.”

Just that quickly, he changed. It was like something in him snapped and the evil inside of him began to surface. She noticed the dark look in his eyes and stepped back. When he got like that, no one was safe, not even his own niece whom she was currently holding in her arms.

“Why do you keep saying that shit, Eve? The money don’t matter. Yes, the fuck it does. You expect a nigga to be broke? You, of all people, should want more for me. You claim to love me, right? You want your nigga to be some broke ass nobody. The fuck type of shit is that?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I just love you for who you are. I don’t care about anything else. What’s wrong with that?”

“Yo, you sound dumb as fuck. Everything is wrong with that. I’m better than that, and if you don’t see that shit, then what the fuck are we doing? I don’t need a weak hoe who can’t hold me down and step up when I need her to. If you can’t support a nigga, then why you here, Eve?”

Again, he stepped close and she stepped back. His words made her heart feel like someone was squeezing it tight.

“I support you. I’m here every day keeping your niece while you’re out sleeping other women for *business*. Is that not support? How could you even say that? Whatever you ask me to do, I do.”

“Ay, calm down, you’re right. I’m sorry.” He moved close, but this time in a soft calm way. His hand cuffed the back of her head and he forced her to look at him. “I’m sorry, baby. You’re right. I know you got me. I’m just frustrated right now. I want that nigga and I can’t do it alone. Don’t leave me, okay? I know you love me and I love you too. Just be patient.”

Eve nodded to agree and he leaned down to kiss her lips soft and gently before it turned aggressive and intense. He thought long and hard about taking it there with her again, but

she was holding his niece, which annoyed the fuck out of him. Besides, he also had to get going to meet Myah.

“I have to go.” He stepped back and then kissed her on the cheek.

“Are you coming back tonight?”

“Nah, in the morning.”

Eve felt her chest tighten again at the thought of him spending the night with Myah, but she kept it to herself. It was just business. He’d promised her that and had shown her every chance he got how much she meant to him, so she believed him. She just had to be patient and it would all be over soon. He would have his empire and she would have her man.

\* \* \*

“Fuck, Myah. Bounce on that shit, ma.” Cutty smiled when Myah obeyed his command. They had been going at it for the last hour and he still wasn’t tired yet. She was wearing down, and he could tell, but he needed to get one last nut out of her before they called it a night.

“Oh shit, I’m about to...”

Cutty tucked his lip in and reached up to pinch Myah’s nipples while he thrust his pelvis upward, hitting her as deep as he could. That was all it took for her to cream all over his dick and motivate him to fill the condom that he was wearing.

After a few minutes, Myah climbed off him and disappeared into the bathroom. She spent time cleaning herself up then ran a clean washcloth in warm water for Cutty before she returned with tissue that she handed to him so that he could remove his condom. After he had it off, he then handed it to Myah, and she handed him the washcloth to clean up.

“Ay, where you going?” he asked when he noticed her walking away from the bed.

Instead of responding, she held up the hand that housed the condom wrapped in tissue. Cutty had made sure to strap up

every time, even with Eve because if he'd learned anything at all from being around his niece, it was that he didn't want kids. They were too much work and all the crying and shit was annoying as fuck. His niece was cute as hell and she was a good baby, but she looked just like her father and that infuriated him. Every time he looked in her face it reminded him that she was the reason why he hadn't already killed MyZell and taken over his business.

Once Myah was wrapped around his body again, he used his large hands to grope and caress her soft skin while the two lay there in silence. He enjoyed the peace, but he also knew something was up. Myah talked all the time, in fact too much, as far as he was concerned, so he decided to see what was up. Not that he really cared, but he knew he had to continue to convince her that he was who he was pretended to be.

“Yo, you haven't really said shit since I been here. Well, except when I was hitting your ass deep.” He chuckled to himself. “What's up, My, you still mad at me for not calling your ass all day.”

“A little, but it's not really that. I just have a lot on my mind,” she said before releasing a sigh.

“So, tell me. Sometimes it helps to talk about it.” Cutty was tired as hell, and really wasn't in the mood to listen, but he would if it helped him get to his goal. And keeping Myah close was an asset.

“It's nothing, just worried about my brother.”

That got his attention.

“Your brother? Don't seem like he's the type you need to worry about.”

“He's not, like not about some things, but...” Myah stopped. She knew she shouldn't be discussing her brother's personal business with anyone. Even if she did trust Cutty, she knew that MyZell didn't.

“What's up, My? Why you stop.”

“It's nothing.” She let her hand run down his chest to his abs before she let her hand rest there.

“Ay, you can trust me, Myah. If not, I don’t need to be here in your bed, shorty. I don’t give a fuck about what your brother has going on. I know that’s what you’re used to dealing with, but I’ve already proven that to you. If something’s bothering you, and you need to talk it out, then I’m here to listen. It ain’t about him, it’s about you.”

Myah lifted her head and stared at him for a moment before she lowered it and exhaled. What would it hurt? It wasn’t about his business; it was just about Tan.

“He used to date this woman and she sorta left him for a while. She’s back, and I don’t trust it, even if he does. Like it just doesn’t make sense.”

“Why not?”

“Because I never trusted her. She came out of nowhere and fell in love with him just like that. It was just weird, and then she just left with no explanation, and now she’s back.”

“If he trusts her, you should too. He’s a smart man, Myah, and sometimes shit is what it is. You can’t tell a man who to care about or who to be with, otherwise I wouldn’t be here. What if you were like that with me? I came from out of nowhere, but you gave me a chance, and you feeling me, right?”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“Well, for one, I don’t have anything you want, and two, men aren’t like that. Women are conniving and I just don’t trust her. My brother has a lot to lose and a lot that people want.”

Cutty chuckled. “So you’re conniving? Maybe I shouldn’t trust you and believe me when I say you got something I want. I’d pay a lot for that shit too.” Cutty slid his hand between her legs and Myah yanked it away.

“Nigga, please. I’m far from conniving. Now, that hoe, I just don’t trust. She’s got some shit with her and I’m going to make it my business to find out what it is.”

“I feel you. That’s your brother, so you want to make sure he’s good. But sometimes you have to step back and let people make their own decisions.”

Myah rolled her eyes, remembering that MyZell told her the same thing. “Nah, not with this hoe. She’s up to something and I’ll find out what it is. I just need time.”

“Well, you do that, but right now, I need you to figure this out.” Cutty moved her hand further down his body until she reached his erection.

Myah smiled before she slipped her head under the sheet and moved down his body. If her man wanted her attention, then he would definitely get that.

Cutty folded his arms behind his head and enjoyed the feel of her soft, warm lips moving down his length. While she licked and sucked, he tried to decide what was next. Myah coming for Tan was going to be a problem, but he knew he couldn’t just get rid of her, so he had to make sure to take up all of her free time so that she wouldn’t have any to focus on Tan.

At this point, that was a win-win for him. Especially with the way she was sucking the life out of him right now. A smirk formed on his face before he slid his hand under the covers and ran his fingers through her hair. Yeah, he could definitely get used to this.

## *thirty-two*

“HEY, CAN I COME IN?” Tan asked after she knocked on MyZell’s bedroom door, which was partially opened.

“Yeah, what’s up?” he asked from where he sat on the bed staring at an old text conversation with Ryan.

“Is this how it’s going to be? I mean, I’m grateful to be here, but I feel like you don’t really want me here.”

Tan used her hands to smooth the shirt that she was wearing. The V-neck clung to her body, exposing her full breasts and slim waist. Their daughter, the daughter that he didn’t know he had, had put weight on her, but it was all in the right places. Even the slight pudginess around her waist didn’t take away from that. MyZell naturally followed her hands as they moved down her body, while she used the opportunity to glance at his phone to see what he was up to.

Noticing that it was a conversation with Ryan sent Tan into her feelings. She had no idea if he was still dealing with her, but she assumed he was. His routine hadn’t changed, up early, gone all day, and in late. He made sure she had what she needed, but he showed no interest in her at all. They barely talked, and aside from the few lustful stares that he gave her when she purposely walked around the house in things that she knew would entice him, he acted as if she wasn’t there.

“It’s not that I don’t want you here, Tan. Truthfully, I really don’t know what I want. This still doesn’t make sense. It feels off and I need time. I do want you here, though. I’m not gonna pretend like I didn’t miss you because I did. I’m just trying to get to a place where I can deal with everything.”

“You missed me?” Tan smiled inside but kept her expression neutral. Her eyes were on his because she wanted to read his feelings.

“You know I did.” He couldn’t lie about that. It was true, and looking at her now, having her this close did something to him. He had been fighting it since she had been there, but his gut was telling him not to trust her.

“Then why don’t you act like it?” Tan pouted and moved closer to him. She wedged her body between his legs where he sat on the edge of the bed, keeping her eyes on him the entire time. When he didn’t move or push her away, she placed her hands on the side of his face and let her lips softly touch his. When he didn’t resist, she slipped her tongue in his mouth and delivered what she thought was a meaningful kiss.

MyZell let his tongue dance against hers while his hands gripped at her shirt. He couldn’t fight it anymore and he needed to feel her skin. One hand grasped at the back of her neck while the other moved under her shirt, pressing into the small of her back. A flood of emotions moved through him while he battled with what he believed and what he was feeling. Physically, she felt right, and he’d missed that part.

He pulled back enough to look at her again, watching her chest rise and fall. She was uncertain of what to do, so she didn’t move until he did. Sliding off his bed he stood for a minute, towering over her before his hands moved to her waist and lifted her from the floor where he turned and lowered her to his bed. Tan smiled nervously as she waited. This was what she’d wanted, she had waited for so long to feel him again and she finally was getting the chance.

She kept silent because she didn’t want to say anything to change his mind, and when he pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it to the floor, every muscle in her body tensed up. What if he could tell that her body had changed? Would he know that she had been pregnant and had delivered their child? Other than the weight, her body physically looked the same, devoid of stretch marks, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t tell.



None of that mattered though because he attacked her body like a savage, gripping at her clothes and pulling them off her. She assisted when necessary, but other than that, allowed him to take the lead. When she was down to just her panties, his body covered hers as he delivered kisses down her neck and then her chest.

MyZell's motions became slow and controlled as his lips moved across her skin. It was like he was remembering what they used to be and trying to connect it to what they were now. He wanted to feel something, but the second his lips grazed her stomach and she moaned his name, he froze.

"What the fuck am I doing?" he mumbled under his breath before he stopped cold and stepped back. His hand moved down his face before his eyes moved across Tan's body and stopped at the disappointed stare that she gave him.

"Wha... what's wrong?" Tan could barely get the question out because she knew the answer. Things had changed.

MyZell leaned down and grabbed her clothes, tossing them on the bed. "Get dressed."

"Why? At least tell me why." Tan sat up, fighting hard to hide her disappointment. Not only for the fact that she needed him to still want her, but if she couldn't convince him, then there was no telling what her brother would do to her daughter, their daughter.

"Because things are different. I'm different."

"It's her now, right?"

"I told you that I'm not going to discuss her with you. Get dressed, this ain't working. I'll get you a place until you figure shit out, but you can't be here."

"Figure what out? If you don't want me here, then you already figured it out." Tan grew angry and was now on her feet. She was hurt because she knew it was about Ryan. That hoe had stolen her life and MyZell wasn't even considering giving it back.

"Tanessa, get dressed. I'll set you up at The Setai."

“So that’s it? I lose a year of my life because of you and you just set me up at a hotel. Is that even fair? You owe me more than that, MyZell.”

“How the fuck do I owe you? How do I even know you’re telling the fucking truth, Tan? I mean the shit really don’t add up. You’ve been here for two weeks and ain’t shit changed. Nobody is coming for me or you. So, if they really wanted to come for me, then why haven’t they? Unless they’re using you to do it, so put your fucking clothes on.” MyZell grabbed his shirt off the floor and started toward the bathroom with Tan right behind him. She was desperate and needed him to change his mind about her leaving.

“Do you really think I would do that? That I would lie about all this or that I would help someone hurt you?”

“I don’t know what the hell you would do, and until I’m sure, I need to think. I can’t do that with you walking around here throwing pussy at me. I don’t need that shit.”

She opened her mouth to respond, but he slammed the door in her face.

It took everything he had not to take back what he said, but right now, he wasn’t thinking straight and he knew it. He was fucking up and it was time to fix that. Sleeping with Tan was only going to complicate things even more and he wasn’t even sure he’d wanted to in the first place. He missed Ryan and didn’t trust Tan, but he still needed all the pieces to the puzzle and he couldn’t do that without her.

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“When will you be back?” Tan sat looking like a lost puppy as her eyes moved around the suite she was in. MyZell had made sure it was nice because that was just who he was, but she didn’t want to be there. She wanted to be with him at his house. She also knew that Cutty would take this as a sign that she had fucked up and there was no telling how he would react.

“I don’t know. Just call me if you need anything.”

“How, how am I supposed to call you?”

“You have a phone in the room. Use that shit, my number is still the same, Tan.”

It was because of her that he hadn't changed it. After she'd gone missing on him, every time he thought about doing so, he could never go through with it because he needed her to be able to reach him. After a while, he'd given up, but still never changed it.

“Okay,” she said softly, causing him to break a little. Moving his hand across his head, he looked her way, but she was staring blankly into space.

“Ay, look. I'm trying, okay? Just work with me. I'm not saying that we can fix it, but I'm not saying we can't either,” MyZell lied.

He knew his heart was with Ryan, and even if things with Tan checked out okay, he still couldn't go back. Things had changed. He'd make sure she was good if she wasn't up to any bullshit, but he knew he wouldn't ever be with her like that again. He realized that when things had gotten heated with them before he'd brought her there. The entire time, all he kept thinking about was Ryan.

Tan eventually looked up, and everything in her told her to tell him what was really going on, but she just couldn't get the words out of her mouth. Instead, she nodded slowly.

MyZell kept his eyes on her for a few moments longer before he turned to leave. When he reached the door, he opened it and looked back one last time. “Call me if you need anything, Tan.”

When he left, his first stop was to get two bottles of Crown and then he made his way to his condo. He parked across the street and sat there for hours just watching the place. When he couldn't stand it any longer, he stretched his hooded eyes, trying to see the time before he got out of his car and made his way to the front door. Fumbling with his keys, he managed to get the door open and he frowned at the red lights that flashed on the security system because he knew that it was disarmed.

Ryan was there alone and didn't have the alarm set. If she was with him at his house she wouldn't have to worry about that, but Tan showing up had messed up everything.

After locking the door, he made his way down the hall until he reached her room. The door was open, so leaned against the doorframe just watching her for a while. She seemed to be at peace. Every time he'd seen her recently she had been angry and tense. It was his fault and it made him feel like shit. So, seeing her now, so peaceful, made him smile.

Stepping out of his shoes, he pulled his shirt over his head, unbuckled his jeans, and stepped out of them too. When he was down to his boxers, he carefully pulled the covers away from her body and slid into bed behind her, pulling her into his chest. He was wrong and he knew it, but he just needed to feel her. He'd missed her just that much, however the feeling only lasted for a moment because Ryan's eyes shot open and she snatched away from him, causing them both to sit up.

"Get out of my bed. What are you doing here?" she yelled, pulling the covers up around her body. She was only dressed in a t-shirt and panties, and even though he knew every inch of her body, she wasn't about to share it with him now.

"Ryan, please, just lay with me. I miss you."

"No, hell no. I can't even believe that you thought I would. Please, just leave, MyZell. I'm not doing this with you."

Ryan was angry, but more hurt than anything. All she could think about was the fact that he had another woman in his home, the same woman he used to love. Even though he never really said it, in her eyes he'd made a choice and she wasn't who he chose.

"Ryan, I fucked up. I never should have let her stay, but I know that now. She's gone. Just let me make it right."

He reached for her as she moved further away, taking the comforter with her as she stood. She secured it around her body, causing him to frown.

She moved toward the switch on the wall, and when she flipped on the lights, she finally got a good look at him. His

eyes were red and low and it was a clear that he had been drinking.

“Please, just go. You’re drunk and now is not the time.”

This time, he stood and moved her way. Her heart began to race at the sight of him moving closer in only his boxers. His body was amazing, but as tempting as it was, she couldn’t break.

“I’ve been drinking, but I’m not drunk. I know what the fuck I’m saying, Ryan, so don’t hit me with that bullshit. Just talk to me. I’m telling you I fucked up and I know that, but just talk to me. Tell me what I need to do to fix it because I will.”

“You can’t fix it. She’s back and I accept that. Just go home.”

“Did you hear what I said? She’s not there. I don’t want that. I got sidetracked for a minute, but that’s not my life anymore, Ryan, you are.”

She laughed sarcastically and stared him right in the eyes. “I am? That’s funny because the second she showed up, you got really confused about that. If it was me, then there wouldn’t have been a choice to make. I’m not mad about that because I get it, but you can’t just walk in here like you didn’t make me feel like shit, MyZell. What am I supposed to do with that? I’m not going to be your afterthought.”

Ryan wanted to say more, but she was already struggling to get the words out, so the two of them just stared at each other. Even as he moved closer to her, she kept her eyes on him and didn’t move.

When he was close enough, he backed her against the wall slowly, letting his lips graze her neck with soft kisses, breaking her down with each one. Ryan wanted to stop him, but she knew that she didn’t have the strength to. She missed the way it felt to be close to him.

Realizing that she wasn’t going to stop him, MyZell yanked at the blanket that wrapped around her body until it dropped to the floor. Using his leg to spread hers apart, he

kissed her soft and slow before moving his hand between her legs and caressing her throbbing center.

“You’re not an afterthought, Ryan. I promise you that. I fucked up. Let me fix it. I miss you.” He spoke in a low tone between making contact with her skin and leaning further against her body.

“Please, just...”

“Just what, Ryan? Stop? You know you don’t want me to do that. Let me fix it.”

Using one hand to work her panties down her thighs, he then let his lips crash against hers while he lifted her from the floor. She cooperated, and when he pressed her back against the wall so that he could use one hand to release himself, he dipped a little so that he could enter her slowly. That only lasted for a second before her arms circled his neck and he began to thrust inside her rough and coarse.

Ryan buried her face in his shoulder, enjoying the feel of him inside her, and Myzell made sure to reach as deep as he could go. The energy between them was so intense that they both came within minutes, and MyZell held her against the wall, panting against her neck until she pushed away. He slid out of her warm, slippery center and lowered her to the floor again, but used his body to hold her in place, even when she tried to get away.

“MyZell, please,” Ryan released.

“No, just listen to me Ryan, damn. I’m not gonna keep saying that shit. I know you’re hurt, and I know it’s my fault, but I swear I wasn’t thinking straight. That shit had my head fucked up, but not anymore. I know what I want and Tan is not it. This is what I want. I need you to believe that, Ryan.”

She just stared at him for a minute before she tried again to push him away.

“Ay, stop fucking fighting me. Do you hear what I’m saying?” he growled, taking her chin in his hand so that she was forced to look at him.

“I hear you, but how am I supposed to know that things won’t change again?” Ryan asked. She wanted to believe that he meant it because like it or not, he owned her heart, but she wasn’t about to be a revolving door for him either.

“You just have to trust me. I know that’s asking a lot, but just trust me. I fucked up and I’m sorry.”

He kept saying it repeatedly while he trailed kisses all over her neck and then connected with her lips again before lifting her enough to ease his way back inside her. The way she hugged him from the inside as her legs circled his waist let him know that she agreed, so he backed away from the wall slowly carrying her with him as he made his way to the bed.

Lowering her onto her back, he slid between her legs and entered her again. This time, he didn’t rush. He was low and steady, taking his time to apologize for hurting her. He used his body to show her what his words couldn’t express and she let him. Right now, that was all they had, but it was enough. They’d figure out the rest in the morning.

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## *thirty-three*

THE NEXT MORNING, Ryan woke up with her body feeling weighted down because MyZell had his arms draped across her waist, holding her firmly against his body. His face was nuzzled in her neck and she could feel his breath against her skin. It matched the rhythm of the rise and fall of his chest against her back.

After they had spent most of the night into the early hours of the morning making up for lost time, the two showered and then climbed into her bed. MyZell made a point of keeping her close, almost to the point where Ryan felt suffocated, but she allowed him to hold her because she missed the way it felt to be wrapped in his arms. Now, it was morning and she had no idea what was next.

Even with all the promises he had made to her while pleasing every inch of her body all night, Ryan still had doubts. She didn't like feeling that way, but she couldn't escape the feeling hanging the pit of her stomach. Sighing softly, she peeled his hand away from where it rested on her stomach and she was able to successfully slide away from his body without waking him. After a quick trip to the bathroom where she washed her face and brushed her teeth, Ryan made her way to the kitchen where she used the Keurig, which she had recently purchased, to make herself a cup of coffee.

After she was done, she went into the living room where she filled one corner of the sofa with her body, bringing her legs up until her knees were forced against her chest, and her coffee mug was resting on top of them.



She could feel the effects of the hours spent with MyZell because her body was sore from him being wedged between her legs all night. It gave her mixed emotions because the memories were sweet, but the uncertainty was tugging at her conscience.

“Ay, why didn’t you wake me?” MyZell’s deep husky voice filled the room, causing her to look his way.

Ryan’s eyes danced across his handsome face, and then down his body, which was now partially covered with a pair of navy fleece joggers and his hands were submerged in the pockets as he stood a few feet away from her with a perplexed look on his face.

“I needed to think,” she admitted before her eyes found his.

Moving closer, he stopped and took a seat on the coffee table across from where she sat as Ryan nervously took another sip of her coffee. There was a weird energy in the air and she wasn’t sure how to deal with it. Sex didn’t mean that he belonged to her, and he was drunk when he had shown up, so what if he had come to his senses and they were right back where they started?

“About?”

“Everything.” This time, she spoke with a little more confidence.

MyZell noticed her change in tone and it caused him to release an exaggerated breath. “Look, I know I said a lot of shit last night and we—”

“It’s fine. It doesn’t mean anything. I understand.” Ryan cut him off, not wanting to hear what she assumed he was about to say.

“Why you always do that?”

“Do what?” she asked defensively.

“Cut me off like you know what’s in my head or what I’m about to say.” She noticed that he appeared to be annoyed, which didn’t sit well with her, so she sat up a little.

“Maybe because you’re predictable and I do.”

MyZell’s hand moved down his face and then across his head before he laughed a little. His eyes were on Ryan momentarily before he leaned forward and took the mug she was holding from her hands and placed it on the coffee table next to the sofa. His next move was to take a seat next to her on the sofa and force her into his lap.

“I’m far from predictable, Ryan, but check it. I meant everything I said last night, so nothing changed. I want you, aight. I want us.”

“And what about her? What makes you so sure now? You weren’t when she showed up at your house.”

“You’re right, I wasn’t. Seeing her did something to me. I don’t expect you to understand that, but trust me, I have no doubts about what I want. Let me prove that to you.”

Ryan studied his face and the sincerity in his expression had her convinced that he meant what he was saying, even if it was just right here and right now. How could she go against that?

“No more chances, Zell. It’s all or nothing.”

He chuckled at her placing demands and so called bossing up. She was looking him square in the eyes and her body language showed that she meant business.

“All, then.” He leaned toward her and covered her mouth with his for a kiss that had them both weak. “Now go get dressed. I’m taking you to breakfast.”

Ryan frowned and glanced at the clock that hung on the wall above his console table. “I can’t. I have to work today.”

“Yes, you can. I’ll call Myah and tell her.” MyZell wasn’t trying to hear anything but yes to what he wanted. After last night, he realized that he wanted to spend as much time with Ryan as possible. After being around her so much, when she wasn’t there he missed her.

“No, you’re not doing that. It might not mean anything to you, but it’s a real job to me. I’ve never really had that before,

so I'm not going to bail on her just because you want to go to breakfast. If you want to see me that bad, you can come take me to lunch, but I'm going."

"Lunch?" MyZell said more to himself than to Ryan, but she responded by removing herself from his lap.

"Yes, lunch," she repeated once she was on her feet with some distance between the two of them. She really wanted to agree to spending the day with him, but she was taking the job with Myah serious.

"What time you go to lunch?"

"One."

"It's like eight something, Ryan. The fuck am I supposed to do until then?" MyZell looked up at her with furrowed brows and she blushed at his persistence and annoyance with the fact that she wouldn't just give in.

"Stuff, I don't know. What have you been doing all day?"

MyZell smirked before he stood and closed the space between them. "Honestly, I've been sitting around trying to figure out how to fix this shit and get you back in my bed."

"Really?" Ryan frowned at him.

"Not like that. Don't even take it there. I mean I did miss the way I feel when I'm hitting that shit just right, but it's bigger than that. I missed you. I like being around your goofy ass. Things are different with you, it feels like home and I needed that back."

"Yeah, I bet. Don't think for one minute that I believe that." Ryan slid her arms around his neck and his circled her waist before a smug grin crossed his face and he lowered it enough to let his forehead touch hers.

"How you gon' tell me what I missed, Ryan?" MyZell began a series of kisses that landed in various spots on her face and ended on her lips before he took the bottom one between his and sucked on it and then let it go.

"I'm not, I'm just saying. I know it's not just about you missing me." She slipped her arms from around his neck and

quickly moved away from him, knowing that he would protest. Ryan refused to be late, and if she didn't get a move on things, she wouldn't make it on time.

“I'm not going to argue with you, Ryan, but trust me, you'll see.”

MyZell reached her bedroom just after she entered it. Leaning against the doorframe, he watched her move around the room grabbing the things that she needed to get dressed for work. It was simple things like this that let him know that she was what he needed.

“Ay, promise me something,” MyZell stated randomly, but with a seriousness in his voice that had her turning to face him with the look of concern. He couldn't help but smile. “Why you look like you're being called to the principal's office?”

“Because you look like you're about to expel me.” She grinned and he laughed.

“It's not that serious. I just need you to promise me that you'll ride this out with me. I have my flaws and I own up to that, but I'm man enough to own up when I fuck up, so I'm not selling you a dream because that ain't my style. I'm just me. What I can give you is the best of me, and you will never have to question that, if you promise to ride this out with me.”

Ryan stood before him chewing her bottom lip, with her eyes on his, which had him feeling uncertain and he wasn't used to that. MyZell wasn't the type to ask for anything. He never had to, but with Ryan, things were different. She had him all out of his element. He was already addicted to her, and the idea of not having what they were building, wasn't something that he was willing to accept.

With a slight shrug, her pretty lips turned up at the corners into a smile. MyZell noticed the blush on her face that gave her a sort of innocence.

“I think I can do that,” she released confidently before she glided over to him and pecked his lips.

She didn't bother to let it linger. Instead, she continued to move around getting ready. MyZell watched, knowing that

whether she knew the seriousness of his request or not, he was holding her to it, and for now, that was good enough for him.

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## *thirty-four*

“I SEE NOT MUCH HAS CHANGED.”

Trez’s eyes moved from the vision he had of the top of Sya’s head to his bedroom door in just enough time to see Myah turn and walk away.

“Fuck she doing here?” he mumbled, but instead of stopping what was going on, he began thrusting his pelvis and fucking Sya’s face so that he could get his nut off. He knew Myah well enough to know that she wouldn’t leave without having the chance to voice her opinion about what she had walked in on. Myah was just like that and he knew it.

Trez repeatedly hit the back of Sya’s throat until he felt his nut rising. Seconds before he released it, he grabbed the back of her head and shoved his dick as far down her throat as he could. She accepted like a champ and sucked him dry. When he was done, he slid his softening member out of her mouth and tucked it back into his boxers, then adjusted the jeans that he was wearing.

Sya stood and used the back of her hand to wipe her mouth. “Who is that, Trez? And why is she just walking in your house like she lives here?”

“She’s my people and why she’s here is none of your business. We cool, but we not that damn cool. Finish getting dressed because I need to leave soon.”

Trez kissed Sya on the cheek before grabbing his shirt off the bed and sliding his arms through the sleeves. Then, he left his bedroom to go find Myah.

“What’s up, baby girl? Why you here so early and just walking in my shit like it’s yours.”

Myah looked up from the spot where she sat on the sofa and peered at Trez. Her eyes moved down his exposed chest since his shirt wasn’t buttoned before she glared at his face.

“Why do you and Zell still ask me the same damn questions when you already know the answer? I have keys, so I come in. You gave them to me, so don’t act surprised when I use them.”

Trez chuckled before he locked his arms across his chest and narrowed his eyes at her.

“Those keys are for emergency. You don’t look like you having an emergency.”

“Maybe I am or was, but you were too busy with your dick down that hoe’s throat to notice.”

This time, Trez smiled hard as hell. “You sound more like a jealous girlfriend than a protective sister, Myah. Pick a lane, ma.”

“Neither. I’m not your sister and I damn sure am not your jealous anything. Will you send your little hoe home so that we can talk?”

“You a fucking trip, real shit.”

Trez shook his head then he turned to walk away. He let his hand move across his head before he entered his bedroom.

“Why she worried about your dick being in my mouth if she’s just your people, Trez?” Sya said as she lifted her purse from his dresser and pulled it up over her shoulder. After she had it in place, she stared at him. His chocolate skin seemed to glow from the sunlight that crept through his window.

Ignoring her statement, he looked around his room to make sure his wallet was still on the dresser along with the stack of cash he’d left there. Sya was cool but he didn’t trust any female like that except Korri, but even she’d fucked him by killing his baby.

“You need anything?”

Sya sucked her teeth. “I’m not here because I want your money, Trez. You already know that. I’m good. Handle your people and I’ll see you whenever.”

Trez smirked and took a step toward Sya. “Ay, don’t be like that. I thought we were straight.”

“We are, but that don’t mean I like to be disrespected. I have to go.”

She tried to step around him, but he held her in place with his large hands and kissed her. “I’ll call you soon, aight?”

“I won’t hold my breath,” she said before she left his room.

He followed her just to make sure nothing popped off. He wasn’t worried about Sya, but Myah was a firecracker and he didn’t know how she would react. Thankfully, all she did was roll her eyes at Sya when she passed through and left out his front door.

“Aight, she’s gone. Now talk.”

“What happened to Korri?”

“Nothing happened. We’re having some issues right now, but that ain’t why you’re here, Myah, so tell me what’s up.”

“So y’all having issues and you got that hoe in here topping you off? Did she spend the night? You really ain’t shit, Trez.”

“I ain’t shit?” He laughed sarcastically. “Nah, Korri ain’t shit, Myah. She killed my damn baby and didn’t even give me the courtesy of seeing how I felt about it. So what if I’m trying to move on? Don’t speak on shit you don’t know about, aight? Now what the fuck did you come here for?”

Noticing the look in his eyes, Myah could tell that Korri had really hurt Trez and that made her feel like shit.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“You’re right, you didn’t, but I’m not discussing that with you. Now tell me what’s up?”



Inhaling, Myah said what was on her mind. “Did you know she was back?”

“I just found out. He told you?”

“No, I went by his house and she was there. That ain’t right, Trez. I don’t trust that hoe and Zell shouldn’t either.”

“He don’t, so don’t worry about him, and she ain’t at his house anymore.”

“Since when? I was just there and I saw her.”

“Since last night. He took her to The Setai and spent the night with Ryan.”

“Good, so what now?”

“What do you mean, what now? You take your ass to your shop and we’ll handle it,” Trez said, giving her a firm look that was supposed to mean for her to mind her business.

“No, not this time. Don’t expect me to just sit back and let that hoe weasel her way into his life again.”

“I’m not asking. I’m telling you, and you already know Zell not having that shit either, so stay out of it. I have to finish getting dressed, so if that’s it, I’ll check on you later.”

He waited and Myah just glared at him before she stood and grabbed her purse.

“You can say what you want, but I’m not letting her fuck him again. I know she’s up to something, otherwise she wouldn’t have come back. But that’s just me, though. You and Zell can figure it out.”

Myah pushed past Trez, bumping shoulders with him, but he grabbed her arm and turned her to him.

“Aight, chill with all that damn attitude. You don’t have any reason to be mad.” Trez wasn’t talking about Tan and Zell and Myah knew it.

“I’m not mad,” she said in a low tone before she pulled away and made it to the door. “And for the record, I wouldn’t have killed your baby.”

“You wouldn’t give me one either, so what difference does that make?” Trez said, looking her right in her eyes.

“I didn’t want to complicate things with you and my brother. You know that, some shit just is what it is,” Myah said before she left out his front door.

After Myah was gone, Trez made his way back to his bedroom to finish dressing. He couldn’t help but think about what had gone down and it bugged him a little because they were in an odd place. Truthfully, they had been for years now, but there really wasn’t anything that he could do about it. He had love for her, but she was determined that anything between them would mess up the friendship he had with MyZell. The three of them were damn near family, but that didn’t stop the fact that Myah and Trez had feelings for each other. They just didn’t act on them and mostly because she refused to.

It pissed him off that she always complained about never finding the right guy when he knew that he was that guy. She spent most of her time chasing dudes who weren’t and never would be a good fit for her. Trez felt deep down inside that part of that had to do with the fact that she really wanted to be with him. He thought that was childish because she’d fought so hard to not be with him when the easy thing to do was to give in and be happy.

She had even been the reason he’d ended up with Korri. Myah had set them up on some “she’s a perfect match for you” type shit. He knew better, but he went with it. He and Korri had actually hit it off and were five years in, which had strained things with him and Myah, but that was on her. He refused to sit around wanting something he couldn’t have and not living. If random dudes were what she wanted, then he wasn’t going to stand in the way of that. Well, not in obvious ways.

He did, however, get in MyZell’s ear occasionally about the men that Myah was involved with. Trez knew that MyZell trusted his opinion, so he’d shut a few of the situations she had going on down and she never knew. It was wrong, but he

didn't care. Just because she refused to be with him didn't mean that he wasn't going to have her best interest at heart.

Once he was straight and ready to go, he stripped down his bed and then covered it with clean sheets. It would be late when he got in, and after the day he had planned, he knew all he would want to do was shower and crash.

Twenty minutes later he was in his car and heading to his first stop, which was to make rounds and collect money. Trez didn't mind making rounds because a part of him missed being in the streets. It had been harder for him to let go of them than it had been for MyZell, so when it came to so called managing the people who were now in charge of running things for them, Trez handled it. He let go of his thoughts of Myah and transitioned into business mode. It was time to grind.

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## *thirty-five*

“HEY, EVERYTHING GOOD IN HERE?” Myah asked after she entered her office which basically now belonged to Ryan since Ryan spent most of her time there sitting at her desk in front of her MacBook. Myah didn’t really mind because in just the short time that Ryan had been there, money had increased and things were more organized.

“Yep, about to shut down and head to lunch.” Ryan blushed thinking about the date she had planned with MyZell. He had been a huge distraction to her all morning, texting and calling until she finally shut him down so that she could get some work done.

“You seem happy,” Myah said with raised brows before she took a seat on the opposite side of her desk.

“I am for now, I guess. I just hope it stays that way.”

“Fuck that hoe. Trust me, she’s not going to be around for long,” Myah stated bluntly, which made Ryan laugh.

“I’m really glad that I’m not on your bad side anymore.”

“You never really were on my bad side... technically. I just didn’t know you, but we’re good now.” Myah flashed Ryan a devious smile. “Now that hoe can get hit by a car.”

Ryan laughed again and then closed the MacBook she was sitting behind. “Well, I don’t know much about the situation and I didn’t really care. As long as he’s honest with me then I’m good. I’m not doing that back and forth thing. I did that with Polo and he ended up surprising me with a three year old

kid that he had with another woman. I'm never doing that again."

Myah's expression softened a bit. "He really had a kid while you were together?"

"Yep, and I'm sure he could have had plenty more. He was never faithful. I don't know why I stayed, I guess I just didn't really think that I could survive on my own. I'm sure you don't really understand that, but when your whole life is centered around one person, it's hard to see anything but them. Even if they're not good for you. That's kinda why I'm still hesitant about her coming back. I don't want to wake up one day and feel like my future is repeating my past."

"It's not. He was wrong for letting her back in. I mean, I get why he did, but he was wrong, and I'm sure he knows that. My brother is into you. Really into you, and it's different from how it was with her. I could have slapped the crazy out of him for letting her back in, but at least he came to his senses." Myah rolled her eyes. "Now I just need to figure out my life."

"Your life?" Ryan questioned. "I thought you had the new guy. Like the one your brother was checking out."

"Yeah, I do, and I really like him, but I found out he has a daughter. Not that it really matters, but he didn't tell me. And please don't tell my brother, but I kinda get weird vibes from him sometimes. I don't know if it's just that I'm so used to things not working and that's making me paranoid or if something is really there. But if I tell Zell, he'll just shut it down, and I do really like him."

Myah didn't know why she'd confided in Ryan, but after she'd checked her girl for stealing from her, she hadn't been around and the others had been acting shady too. She hadn't really cared much about that because she knew they were only using her for what she could do for them, but it still hurt a little and she didn't really have anyone else.

"But if you don't trust him, then maybe you shouldn't. Trust me, I learned that the hard way and wasted six years with a guy who really wasn't for me."

“I know, but it’s not that bad, and I don’t want to miss out on something good because I’m in my head. I just want to be happy and I really like him. I’m sure it’s nothing other than me looking for things that aren’t there. I do it all the time.”

Ryan sensed that it was more than Myah being paranoid, but it wasn’t really her place to get involved. She had barely figured out her own situation. “Well, just be careful. I don’t know much, but I know that if anything happens to you, your brother will lose his mind.” She smiled softly before she stood and grabbed her purse, which was sitting on the edge of the desk.

“Trust me, I know.” Myah sighed just thinking about it, but she understood. It was just the two of them, well and Trez, but that was a conversation not worth having right now.

“I should be back in an hour. Do you want me to bring you something?” Ryan asked as she made her way to the door.

“Nope, I’m heading out too, and take your time. I already know from the way my brother’s been blowing up your phone all day that you won’t be back in an hour.” Myah grinned at the fact that every time she came in to see Ryan, she was either on the phone or sending a text to MyZell.

Being that she hadn’t really talked to Cutty all day, it had her in her feelings a bit. That was another issue she had with him. He would just disappear like it was nothing, but she pushed it aside and tried not to let it bother her. Either way, she was happy for her brother, and hoped that Ryan would be what he needed to stay away from Tan.

“One hour. I promise.” Ryan blushed before she glanced at her phone to read a message from MyZell that said he was out front.

“Yep, I won’t hold my breath.”

Ryan could feel MyZell’s eyes on her from the second she walked out the front door. She smiled when he immediately got out and met her before she reached his car. That was one of the things she loved most about him. When they were together, he was a total gentleman and extremely affectionate.

As soon as he was close enough, she was forced into his personal space and his lips found hers. His scent lingered around her even after he let her go and guided her to the passenger side of his car to open the door for her, and it had her stomach fluttering.

“Why you grinning like that?” MyZell asked after he waited for Ryan to slide into his tan leather seat.

“I’m not grinning.” She quickly tried to adjust her expression but it was too late.

MyZell chuckled before he shut her door and rounded the car to get in the driver’s seat.

“You are, but I like it so it’s all good. You trying to front like you didn’t miss me, but I know you did.” MyZell leaned across the seat and pecked her on the cheek before he pulled off.

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise. You’ll see when we get there, and don’t say shit ’cause I promise you’ll like it.” He smirked before his hand moved across the console and rested on her thigh. Ryan smiled and shook her head but didn’t debate him.

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” she lied.

Had he not brought it up, she would have instantly began playing twenty questions. MyZell was street, but he was extremely cultured and forever had her trying all types of different foods. Most of the time she was good, but on occasion, she couldn’t deal with his choices. Like the fact that he loved Indian food. Ryan wasn’t a fan because it was always too spicy and it didn’t sit well with her.

“You’re a damn lie too, but just trust me. I got you.” He gently gripped her thigh before his hand moved up her body.

Ryan’s muscles tightened at the thought of how far he would take it, but he stopped just at her upper thigh and let his hand rest there.

“So, what you been doing all day since you wouldn’t talk to me? Pretending like you were actually doing something.”

Ryan laughed and looked at him, catching his handsome profile because his eyes were on the road and not her.

“I was working, thank you very much. I checked inventory, created staff schedules, and balanced Myah’s accounts. I also made payments to all of her business cards and set up payroll.”

He grinned and glanced at her. “So, if you doing all that, what the fuck is Myah doing? It’s her spot, not yours.”

“She works,” Myah said in defense of Myah, but MyZell burst out laughing.

“Myah does a lot of things, but work is definitely not one of them. I don’t even know how she kept the place open this long, but she did. I guess her bird ass friends were good for something when they weren’t stealing from her. Myah don’t know shit about business, but apparently, you do. You need your own spot.”

Again, he glanced at her to see her reaction. He knew Ryan was dead set on doing her own thing and he was cool with that, but he also wanted to help. If he did, she would somewhat be in debt to him, which meant that she might actually stay around. Not that he would ever hang it over her head because he wasn’t that type of guy, but anything that meant she would stay and not just up and disappear on him was worth investing in.

“Maybe, but I have no idea what I want to do.”

“You like what you’re doing now, right?” MyZell asked, surveying her face while he waited for her answer. The smile she wore was his answer, but then she frowned at him before she answered.

“I do, but technically I’m not really qualified, so there’s no way I can do that,” she said and paused for a moment. Ryan wasn’t quite sure if she wanted him to tell him the truth but decided that it was necessary if they were indeed going to try to build something.

“What do you mean not qualified? You’re doing that shit, right?”



“Yeah, but I probably shouldn’t. I’m just good with numbers, but I never graduated from high school.”

Ryan waited and felt like her stomach was balled up in knots. Not only had she been stupid enough to be with a man who didn’t deserve her, she’d put her entire life on hold while doing so. She knew it was a stupid decision, but she also didn’t want to be judged. That was her past and she had every intention of changing things. Being with MyZell wasn’t going to change that.

When they reached their destination, MyZell parked and shut his car off to focus on Ryan. “Ay, don’t ever be ashamed of who you are. Shit happens. I get that, but it’s just a piece of paper. It doesn’t determine how smart you are or what you know.”

“Maybe not to you, but to other people it does. I have a job because it’s your sister. You think anybody else would hire me or let me run their business?”

He smirked and leaned back against the driver’s door. “First of all, fuck anybody that wouldn’t hire you or let you run their business. Whatever you want I can make it happen and I promise you that. But if it means that much to you, go back to school. You’re smart as shit, Ryan. You have me doubting myself sometimes and I ain’t a dumb muthafucker. But you can do whatever you want.”

“That’s just it, I don’t want you or anybody else making things happen for me. I’m not ungrateful, so don’t think that, but I did that before, and I—”

“Hold up, don’t compare me to that nigga. I don’t even know him, but I know he ain’t shit. Especially not if he treated you anything less than perfect. I know my track record ain’t great, but I can guarantee, it ain’t nowhere near how that muthafucker treated you. I don’t want anything from you, other than for you to be happy. Hopefully, with me.” He smirked. “But even if you decide that’s not what you want, I still got you, real shit. And not in a way that I want to control you. I know you want to do your own thing and I respect that.

I'm never going to get in the way of that. If I can make things easier for you, I will. That's what I'm supposed to do, right?"

"I guess."

"So your man is not supposed to make your life better?"  
He smiled and Ryan blushed.

"My man?"

"Hell yeah, your man. Didn't you agree to give me another chance to get it right?"

"I don't really remember all that," Ryan teased, causing him to narrow his eyes at her.

"Yeah aight, keep playing. You remember and your body does too. If not, I'll be more than happy to hook you up with an instant replay. We can skip lunch and work that out."

Ryan laughed and shook her head. "No, thank you. I'm good and my memory is just fine."

With a slight chuckle, he pulled the handle to open his door. "That's what I thought, now let's go eat. You've been crying about seafood for a while."

Ryan waited for him to open her door, and once she was on her feet, MyZell took her hand in his and led the way to the seafood restaurant on the beach that he had picked for them. Remembering that she loved seafood, he'd called ahead and ordered for them, knowing that their time was limited. But that was cool because they had all night to make up for it and that was exactly what he planned to do.

POLO SAT WATCHING the building that Ryan was in. It took everything in him not to just run up on her and kill them both, but he wasn't home. He didn't know anything about Miami or the people who ran it. On top of that, he was there alone, so he had to plan his moves accordingly.

When Ivey had brought him there earlier after explaining to him that MyZell's sister owned the place, he caught sight of Ryan leaving with a man who Ivey confirmed to be MyZell. Frustrated by the fact that Ryan was with another man, he then had to explain to Ivey that Ryan was his child's mother who'd left their son and fled to Miami to start a new life.

He was convincing enough that she agreed to help him get the information that he needed, which had led them to the nail bar where Ryan worked, only he hadn't known that at the time. He had only found that out when she'd left and then returned two hours later. Now here he was sitting outside the shop waiting for it to close, so that he could get his hands on her.

He sat there for hours, and as soon as they closed, all the employees came out in groups, but there was no sign of Ryan until twenty minutes later. She was walking with another chick, who fucked up his plan. Polo watched as he two of them made their way to the side of the vehicle where Ryan slipped into a BMW which he assumed belonged to MyZell while the other chick disappeared into a Range. He started up his car and waited for them both to pull out and smiled when they went in two different directions with him following Ryan.

She drove for about twenty minutes before she pulled into a neighborhood that he knew she couldn't afford to stay in,

especially not if she was working at the nail shop that she'd just left. As far as he could tell, she didn't take anything from him when she'd left except for clothes and her car. Ryan didn't have access to anything anyway, other than the things he purchased for her, so he knew that she didn't have money. The thing that pissed him off the most was that she looked happy. Whoever this MyZell was had stepped right into his role and that wasn't sitting well with him. Crazy or not, he'd kill them both before he let them be happy together.

Just as Ryan slowed enough to pull up in front of a set of condos, Polo's phone went off with a call. It was Ivey, who he had promised that he would pick up from work and spend time with, mostly at her insistence. She was actually cool and a good distraction, but his plan was to get his hands on Ryan and deal with her, so right now that wasn't happening.

Ignoring the call, he parked across the street from where Ryan had parked and watched as she got out, grabbed her things, and made her way to the door which opened and MyZell stepped out.

Rage quickly flowed through Polo and his hands tightened around the steering wheel as he watched Ryan disappear inside the condo that she was parked in front of. So, when his phone rang again, he answered Ivey's call.

“What?”

“Umm, I thought you were coming to get me?” she said softly, sensing that he wasn't in the best of moods.

Glancing at the closed door that Ryan had just entered, he leaned back and pulled away from where he was parked.

“My bad, I got caught up. You still there?” He relaxed a little. Even though things hadn't gone as planned, he now knew where Ryan was. It was just a matter of time before he would be able to take her home.

“Yeah, but if you're...”

Polo chuckled. “Nah, it's cool. I'm on my way, give me like an hour.”

Ivee smiled, instantly happy. She had been enjoying the time she'd spent with Polo. He could be a little hard sometimes, but he always made up for it. She just assumed that was just who he was.

“Okay, I’ll be waiting.”

“Cool.”

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## *thirty-seven*

“OH MY GOD, let me see her,” Tan begged after her brother walked in carrying her daughter in her cream and pink car seat.

A rush of emotions cycled through her because she'd missed her baby girl so much. Cutty placed the seat on the bed next to Tan and she immediately began unfastening to get her out. She gave little thought to the fact that she was sleeping peacefully because it didn't matter. She needed to feel Zyen's tiny body cuddled in her arms. Tan just wanted to be close to her daughter. It had been weeks since she had even seen her because of her current situation.

Once she had her in her arms, she moved her hand across her daughter's soft curls as she held her firmly against her chest, not caring if she held on too tight, and then kissed her tiny face.

“Thank you for bringing her.” Tan looked up at her brother who was leaning against the dresser across from her peering at both his sister and niece. She knew him well enough to know that him showing up with her daughter had an ulterior motive. It wasn't about her, but she was still grateful.

“What the hell thanking me for? I didn't bring her here to make you happy. I just wanted you to see what you're about to lose because you're fucking up, Tanessa. I sent you there to do one thing and you end up here. What the fuck went wrong?”

“Everything went wrong. This entire plan is wrong. It's not going to work, Carlton.” Tan glanced at her brother before she

looked down at her daughter while holding her close against her body.

Cutty released a devious laugh before he rubbed his chin. “You’re saying that shit like it’s supposed to mean something to me, Tan. So what, the plan is fucked up. You want out? We should just walk away and let this shit go? ’Cause if that’s what you think, then you’re dumber than I thought.”

“Carlton, it—”

“Stop fucking calling me that shit. How many times I got to tell you that ain’t my fucking name?” His voice filled the room and caused her daughter to jump in her arms. Tan looked down at her just before she rubbed her back.

“I’m sorry, but what do you want me to do?”

“I wanted you to give that nigga some pussy and get him to tell you something that will help me take him out, but you couldn’t even handle that.”

“I tried, but he doesn’t trust me, and why should he? I just left and then returned a year later like none of it ever happened. He’s not stupid, Cutty. Did you really think he would believe that? I can’t believe I listened to you. What did you think, he was going to just welcome me back and tell me all of his secrets?” She narrowed her eyes at her brother and waited.

“He would have if you had done what the fuck I asked you. You messed this up by getting pregnant, Tan. We had him right where I needed him to be, but you fell in love with that nigga and fucked it all up. I’m not about to lose this opportunity. Do you know how much power he has? If I take what’s his, they’ll respect me like that? I’m not gonna lose this because you messed up. I suggest you figure out a way to get in that nigga’s good graces again.”

“How, Cutty? How am I supposed to do that? Look around you, I’m here, not at his house. Do you think he’s going to magically change his mind? He doesn’t love me. He moved on. He loves her.”

Tan watched her brother's eyes smile like she'd somehow made him happy. "Then we'll get rid of her. If she's the problem, then we'll eliminate the problem. I need you close to him. I need you to know how he moves and you can't do that from this fucking hotel room."

"He's not even in the streets anymore. He has people doing it for him, so how does that even help you?"

"He might not be getting his hands dirty, but he's still running shit, Tan, and I need to know how. I need to know how it all works, who he deals with. Even if I just kill that nigga, there's no way I can just walk up on his people and start running shit in his place. I need to know things before they trust me and take me serious. Things that only he would know and I can't do that without you. If she's the problem, then I'll get rid of her."

Tan saw at the crazed look in her brother's eyes. She regretted the day that they'd ever come to Miami, and she regretted that fact that she'd overheard the conversation about the man who ran it all. If she had never taken that information to Cutty, then she wouldn't be here now. But then there was the part of her that knew if that had never happened, she wouldn't have her daughter. There was good and bad in everything, but right now she was stuck in the bad. Tan knew that she had no control over her life right now.

"What about his sister? They're close, why can't she help you?"

"Because she don't know shit, Tan. Don't you think I already thought about that? Get your goddamn head right and convince him that you're what he needs. I don't care how you do it, just do that shit. I'll handle the rest."

Tan felt her heart drop to the pit of her stomach. She knew exactly what that meant. Even though Ryan had stepped into the life she used to have, that was no reason for her to die. Taking money and running scams was one thing, but Tan wasn't a murderer. She couldn't handle that guilt.

"What are you going to do to her?" Tan looked up at her brother and spoke barely above a whisper, knowing that he



would be upset about her questioning him.

Instead of responding, he removed his body from where he was leaning against the dresser and moved her way. Tan clutched her daughter tighter and watched him until he was standing over her.

“It’s time for me to go.” His tone was cold and emotionless.

“Can she stay with me for a bit longer? You can come back and get her.”

He grinned and looked down at his sister. “Now why would I do that? I have shit to do and so do you. Let this be motivation for you to fix this shit.”

Tan felt tears filling the corner of her eyes as she lowered her face into her daughter’s soft curls. She kissed the top of her head and then looked up at her brother.

“Put her in her seat, Tan. I don’t have time for this shit.” Tan watched as he reached behind his back and pulled out his gun. He lowered his hand to his side but gripped the handle firmly while he kept his eyes on her.

That was enough to make her do as he’d asked. After she had her daughter secured in her seat, Tan’s heart pounded in her chest as she watched her brother move to the door with her daughter.

“If you love her, you’ll figure this shit out. Make it work and fast.”

Moments later, he was out the door and Tan broke down. She balled up in the center of the king-sized bed and cried uncontrollably. No matter what she did, she knew in her heart that this wasn’t going to end well.

## *thirty-eight*

TREZ WATCHED from his car as Cutty made his way to his car carrying a baby, which set off all type of alarms in his head. The first issue was that this dude was the same guy that Myah was fucking with and he was at the same hotel that MyZell had put Tan up in. Not to mention that he had a baby with him, an infant that they'd had no record of. MyZell had his team do a background check on him, and other than him moving around a lot, there wasn't anything there. Especially not any record of him having an infant.

Shit just wasn't adding up. True enough, it could have been a coincidence that he just happened to be at the same hotel that Tan was staying in, but Trez knew better than to believe in that. He pulled his phone out and snapped a few pictures while he waited for Cutty to place the child in his car, get in, and pull off. He also made sure to get a clear picture of the license plate on the old Honda that Cutty was driving so that he could have his people run it for him.

Once Cutty had pulled out of the parking lot, Trez got out and headed straight for the building. He bypassed the desk and moved to the elevators because he already knew what room. He stepped off the elevator at the fourth floor, found suite four sixteen, pounded on the door, and waited. It took a minute, but the door eventually opened and he was face to face with Tan. It was strange seeing her again after so much time and the fear in her eyes let him know that she wasn't happy to see him.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, gripping the door and pulling it closer to her body to prevent him access.

Trez smirked and placed his hand firmly on the door. Using his strength, he forced it open and moved past her. After he was inside, he turned to face her and made sure to look right in her eyes. “It’s good to see you too, Tan. I mean, damn, can I nigga get a hug or something? You don’t look happy to see me.”

Trez held his arms open, knowing good and well that she wasn’t going to honor his request. Instead, she shut the door and folded her arms across her chest while peering at him with a hateful stare.

“Why would I be happy to see you?”

Trez chuckled. “You look good for someone who was kidnapped and held against their will for a year, Tan. I guess they took care of you, huh? They have you at a resort or some shit like that? ’Cause damn, you really look good, baby girl.”

Tan felt her pulse speeding up because if Trez was questioning her like this, then he obviously knew something.

“I don’t have to answer to you and I’m not going to, so you can just leave,” Tan stated bluntly, which Trez ignored and walked closer to her.

She was afraid but tried to disguise it by staying put and controlling her breathing. Even with him standing inches away and looking down at her, she tried her best to maintain slow and controlled breaths.

“You’re right, you don’t have to answer to me, but the alternative is worse than anything I could ever do to you. Your pussy don’t control my outlook on things, so I’m thinking a little more clearly than Zell, but understand this, he trusts me more than he trusts you. I suggest you start clearing things up with me before I make a phone call that will end your life. I don’t give a fuck why you left or why you came back, but what I do care about is what that means to Zell. You either explain to me or you can explain to Zell after I convince him that something ain’t right. You ain’t shit, ain’t never been shit, but he believed in you so I stepped back. That ain’t an option this time, so if I were you, I’d choose option A and start

fucking talking 'cause if I get in his ear, then he ain't gonna really do much listening after that."

"I already told him everything, which I'm sure he told you. I don't know anything. I don't know who had me. I don't know where I was. All I know is that they made it clear that they'd wanted to hurt him. You don't have to trust me or believe me, but it's the truth. I love him, Trez, why would I hurt him? What would I gain from that?"

Trez smirked and looked her square in the eyes. "Fuck if I know, hoes be on all type of shit." Korri crossed his mind and he quickly pushed the thought back and focused on Tan again.

"Well, I'm not. I was happy. I loved him and he loved me. Why would I jeopardize that? Does that really make sense to you?" Tan held her stare with him as long as she could before she looked away and walked toward the kitchen. He was making her nervous and she needed to get her head together. Lying to Zell was easier because he wanted to believe her and she knew that, but Trez didn't give a fuck one way or another. Unlike MyZell, Trez didn't have anything to gain by believing her.

"None of this shit makes sense, Tan. Niggas don't just kidnap loved ones and then bring them back with no recourse. So, either it's a fucking lie or you're here for a reason. I don't know which one, but neither is gonna work in your favor. See, the problem I have with all this shit is that *if* you're telling the truth and that things really went down like you said, then why would they let you walk away like that? Seems to me like you have to play a role in it one way or another. Maybe they wanted you close to him."

"Why, Trez? What could I do to him?"

He chuckled. "Fuck if I know, but maybe it's not what you can do to him, but what you can get from him. Niggas will use anything they can to get what they want. Not that he would ever let you in, but maybe they feel like you can somehow work him from the inside. Whoever it is ain't too fucking smart because Zell would never tell you shit that could be used

against him. If you don't know anything else about him, I'm sure you know that."

He watched Tan's face, attempting to read her expression, and sure enough, he found the answers that he was looking for.

"I wouldn't hurt him, Trez. You don't have to believe that, but it's true," Tan said, praying that her face wasn't giving away how nervous she really was.

Trez just stared her down for a few moments more before he realized that he didn't need her to know that he had her all figured out. Right now, he needed to know who was behind everything, and killing Tan like he wanted to wasn't going to get him any closer to that answer. So, instead of acting on impulse, he moved to Tan and stopped inches away. He could see her tense up, which fueled his suspicions even more. She was afraid of him, which meant that she had a reason to be.

"Ay, look. I know I came on hard, but you have to respect the fact that I need to look out for my people."

Tan looked up, trying to read him. She was unsure whether he was telling the truth.

"I'm sorry that shit happened to you and I know we haven't always been on good terms. But even with all that, I don't think that you would come for him like that. I just had to be sure, but I believe you." Trez looked at her sincerely, even through his lies.

"You believe me?" Tan was a little thrown by his confession.

"Yeah, I do. You're right, what would you gain by trying to set him up? I'll talk to him for you."

"You don't have to do that." Tan relaxed a little, which Trez noticed.

"I know, but it's the least I can do. It really fucked him up when you left, Tan. He felt like it was his fault and he never really got over that. Maybe there's a way to fix all this."

"I don't think so, he seems happy," she said lowly as Ryan crossed her mind.

“Ay, don’t sweat that. Just let me talk to him, but I have to go, aight? I’ll be back, though. We still need to figure out who’s behind all this shit because none of us are safe until we do.”

Nodding, Tan looked up at Trez with a half-smile. She was praying that he meant what he said.

“Stay here, don’t talk to anyone.”

“Okay.”

After Tan agreed, Trez left her room and headed to the elevator. He pulled out his phone and made a call just as it opened.

“You’re right. She’s lying. What you wanna do?”

“We need to know more. I’ll put some people in place to see who she’s dealing with. I’ll hit you later.”

“Aight, bet.”

Trez ended his call with MyZell and slid into his car. He elected to keep the part about Cutty being there to himself until he had more information. He knew that telling MyZell would only make him react and Cutty had to be involved in this one way or another. Processing what little information he had, Cutty being there with a baby and Tan being gone for a year started to make things a little clearer. Now he just had to prove it so that they could figure out what was next and who else was involved.

“WHAT’S WRONG?”

Ryan noticed the sudden change in MyZell’s mood after he’d ended his call with Trez and joined her again in the living room. He’d stepped away when he answered it and was only gone for a minute or two but now he seemed tense, like he was upset about something.

“Nothing, just business stuff.” He returned to the spot where he had been on the sofa and Ryan lifted her head enough for him to get comfortable before she allowed it to rest in his lap again. She looked up at him, while he looked down at her before MyZell lifted his hand and let his fingers guide through her coarse, curly hair.

“Do you need to leave?” Ryan didn’t know much about what MyZell did, but she did know that his lifestyle was similar to Polo’s so if there was a “business issue,” then that likely meant he needed to go handle it. She didn’t want him feeling obligated to stay there with her.

MyZell smirked before he let his fingers glide down the side of her face. “You want me to leave?”

“No, I’m just saying if you need to, I understand.”

“I appreciate that, but the only thing I need right now is this.” He leaned forward enough to kiss her lips first and then her forehead.

Ryan felt her insides tingle just from that small amount of contact. “So, I’m a need now?”

He chuckled and placed his hand on her stomach, letting his thumb glide across her skin. Just the feel of her skin beneath his had him bricking up, but he was enjoying just being there with her, so he decided not to act on it.

“You’ve always been a need. I was just too stupid to realize it.”

“I won’t disagree with that.” Ryan smiled.

“Alright, smart ass. You really want to go there?” MyZell raised his brow and peered at Ryan, who laughed softly at his expression.

“You said it. I just agreed. You can’t get mad about that,” Ryan said with a slight shrug of her shoulders.

“Your petty ass,” MyZell said, moving his hand further down Ryan’s body until it slipped between her legs.

“You like it, so who cares?”

Ryan puckered her lips and blew him an air kiss that made him chuckle.

“Word, you think so?”

“I know so,” she released with all the confidence in the world. Right now, she believed it.

“You’re sexy as fuck, you know that?” he asked while letting his eyes move down her body.

She watched him watching her as butterflies fluttered in her stomach. Ryan hated herself for falling so fast, but how could she help it? MyZell was perfect to her. His looks, his persona, and aside from the rift they’d had when Tan had shown up, he treated her like she was rare and precious. Well, that was until he was digging in her guts. That brought out an entirely different side to him, which was a mixture of love and aggression. Ryan loved it though because she could feel his emotions in every stroke.

“I know I am,” Ryan spoke confidently again.

She wasn’t one of those women who didn’t know her worth. Even if that was hard to believe because she’d spent so



many years under Polo's thumb, it was true. She hadn't stayed with him because she didn't think she wasn't beautiful or because she had low self-esteem and didn't know her worth. She stayed with him because she really loved him and thought that if she loved him enough, one day he'd realized it and give that back. That was her only mistake, thinking that she had enough love for both of them. That one egregious error had caused her to stay when everything else in her told her that she should leave.

"You know a lot of shit tonight, don't you?" MyZell teased about her last two confirmations. Ryan smiled softly at the smile he wore before his lips found hers again. "So, I was thinking that you could do that online thing. You know if you wanted to finish school. You would have to go there to take the tests, but you could do the classes online like at night since you'll be at the shop during the day."

Ryan watched his face, the seriousness in the expression he held while his eyes focused on hers.

"Why you looking at me like that, baby girl?"

"That was random. You go from telling me that I'm sexy to laying out how I can finish school." Ryan frowned a little, but only because she was trying to connect the dots to his thought process.

"It wasn't random. I've been thinking about it all day."

"Really?" Ryan questioned before she chewed the corner of her lip while looking up at him.

"Yeah, really. I looked it up. I got you something too."

This time she frowned a bit with disappointment. MyZell was very generous and she appreciated that, but she didn't want him constantly buying her things. That wasn't the life she wanted to fall back into.

"You don't have to buy me stuff. I have a job now, anyway. I can buy what I need."

MyZell smirked and then pointed to the corner of the room. "You don't make shit working for Myah and I'll buy you what I want. Don't be trying to control what I do and for

what reasons. I'm not trying to buy you. I don't have to, 'cause your pretty ass is already mine, but this is something you need, especially if you wanna finish school."

Ryan sat up and looked in the direction that he pointed before she was on her feet and moving that way. She had been there for hours and not once had she laid eyes on the Apple bag that sat in the corner.

Once she had it in her hands and returned to the sofa to sit next to him, she smiled and pulled the MacBook that he'd gotten her out of the bag that held it.

"This is for me?" she questioned, unable to hide her smile.

"Yeah, Myah said she wants her shit back, so I got you one of your own. Now let me find out you on there looking and porn and shit and we're gonna have some problems."

"Myah didn't say that and if it's mine, then I should be able to use it however I want, right?"

Ryan placed the MacBook on the sofa next to her before she straddled his lap and slung her arms around his neck.

"Nah, not even. The only porn you're allow to look at is some shit that we make and I'm down if you're down."

"Uhh no, not happening, so you can kill that thought right now." Ryan scrunched up her face, which made him laugh.

"Aight, you can get that. No cameras, but I still want you to perform for me."

"How?" Ryan blushed at his statement and MyZell looked down at his lap. "Now?"

"Hell yeah, now. You got something better to do?"

Ryan moved her head from side to side to tell him no before she slid off his lap and positioned her body onto the floor between his legs. Her small hands unbuckled his jeans before they dipped into his boxers. She removed his member, which she glided her fingers across a few times before she took it into her mouth. She loved pleasing him because he didn't mind returning the favor.

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*forty*

IT WAS after midnight when Trez pulled up at his house, and the fact that he'd had to park behind Myah annoyed him for two reasons. The first that she was even there and the second because she had parked in the middle of his driveway instead of picking one side or the other.

After he parked and shut his engine off, things got progressively worse when he saw headlights pulling in behind him. He reached under his seat and wrapped his hand around the handle of his nine, which he held in his lap until he noticed the shapely frame emerge from the driver's door and move toward his car. He knew every inch of that body, so it being dark didn't take away from that. Releasing a frustrated sigh, he placed his gun under his seat and opened his door until he had enough room to place both of his size thirteen Timbs on the concrete of his driveway.

"What are you doing here?" Trez said when he got out.

"What's she doing here?" Korri's eyes moved to Myah's Range before they fell on Trez's hardened expression.

"Go in and ask her because I have no fucking idea, but she ain't my concern right now. Why you here, Korri?"

"I'm here because we need to talk, and if you don't want to talk, then I need you to at least listen."

"Listen to what, Korri? What the fuck else is there for you to say? You did what you needed to do for you. I'm good on that. I'm not going to keep doing this with you. I can't."

“You can’t or you won’t? You haven’t tried, Trez. You just said fuck it, fuck you, and walked away. Five years. We have five years, and this one thing, this one small thing is enough to walk away from that. We can have another baby—”

“Yeah, we can, but what if I wanted that one? You’re selfish as fuck to just write that shit off like it don’t mean anything, so yeah, I can just walk. That one *huge* fucking thing that you keep saying is small, is enough to make me walk.” By the time he finished talking, Trez was towering over Korri, breathing heavy and labored as his eyes bored into hers with so much hurt and hate that she could feel it radiating from his body onto hers.

“Is it really about the baby or is it about her?” Korri said before she glanced at Myah’s truck again.

Just that one gesture infuriated Trez and he lost it. “Are you fucking kidding me? Of all the shit you’re worried about, you still stuck on that? You had me, Korri, you won. I was with you, I loved you, so are you still bringing that shit up. I made my choice and then you fucked me, so what does it matter?”

“Your choice. I wasn’t your choice, Trez. I was your second option. I didn’t win, I never really had you. She did. You laid with me at night when you wanted to be with her. Do you know how hard that was? It hurt. It fucking hurt because I knew deep down inside that I wasn’t really what you wanted. I was your consolation prize. Maybe that’s why I did it. That *is* why I did it.”

Korri broke down and the tears wouldn’t stop falling. She’d held that for years, knowing that she was second to the person who really had his heart. She knew that he cared for her, and he loved her in his own way, but she wasn’t what he really wanted. Living under that dark cloud was too much and having a baby, his baby, would have trapped her in that life. She couldn’t handle that.

Trez froze. He just stared at her breaking down but couldn’t say anything. What she was saying was true and he knew it. Even if he’d never admitted it to her or himself, she

was right. She was his consolation prize and that wasn't fair to her. A small part of him knew that he owned some responsibility in his loss because he'd pushed her to it.

"Korri, I'm sorry." Pulling her against his body, he held her and she cried. She cried because she knew that what they'd had was over. She also cried because she'd hurt him and couldn't take that back. Even if she was his second choice, he had always been her first.

"Me too." She spoke barely above a whisper, but he heard her.

Stepping back just enough to see her tear-stained face. He kissed her on the forehead and then walked away. There was nothing else for him to say. True enough, she was right, but she had still done something that he would never be able to forgive her for.

When Trez entered his house, it was quiet and dark. After he locked his door, he took a moment and stood in the living room surrounded by darkness, giving himself a moment to regroup. When he was ready, he found his way to his room and laid eyes on Myah, who was stretched out in the center of his bed asleep. She was on her stomach with a pillow balled up under her head.

After he kicked off his shoes, he tossed his phone and keys onto the dresser next to the door and climbed onto the bed with her. Using his body to cover hers, Trez moved Myah's hair out of her face and began planting kisses on her cheek and neck.

Myah's eyes remained closed, but she inhaled his scent and squirmed from the pressure of his body covering hers and the tickle of his lips massaging her skin. In her mind, she had always imagined what it would feel like, but now that she was experiencing it, she was overcome with lust. After years of watching him deliver that type of affection to another woman, she was now the recipient of it and it had her stomach in knots.

"Trez, move please."

“Why, this is what you came for, right?” he said against her neck before his lips connected with it again.

“No, I came to—”

“You came to what, Myah? To pretend like you don’t want this, that you don’t want me? We both know that’s a lie, so own up to that shit and stop fucking playing.”

Trez lifted his body so that he was on his knees straddling her thighs while his large hands slipped under her shirt. He caressed her soft, smooth skin until he reached her bra, which he unhooked and then let his hands glide down her body until they reached the small of her back.

He could feel Myah’s breathing pick up as he leaned down enough to trail kisses down her spine. Neither of them said a word, but the tension between them was intense. She knew it and he knew it. They wanted each other. Tonight, Trez was going to make that happen. He was tired of playing games.

After climbing off her body, he turned her onto her back and they stared at each other. Trez’s eyes never left Myah’s while he unbuttoned her jeans and slipped them down her thighs. Once they hit the floor, she released a breath that she hadn’t realized she was holding.

It didn’t take long for Trez to work his way out of the clothes that he was wearing and wedge his body between her legs.

“We can’t,” she whispered lowly just before he kissed her lips while positioning himself at her opening.

“Who’s gonna stop us, Myah? Do you really want me to stop?”

“What about Korri and—”

“She don’t matter, and before you even say it, that nigga you with is dirty. It’s only a matter of time before I put a bullet in his head, so stop making excuses and tell me what you want, Myah.”

“I want you,” she admitted, moving her hands to the back of his neck and bringing him into another kiss.

At the same time, he entered her slow and easy. Gasping at the feel of him inside her, Trez smirked before he buried his face in her neck and stroked her insides. She gripped him tight, locking her legs around his waist, then she arched her back and pressed her chest toward him. Tonight, he was doing what he had done in his mind a million times before, but now that he physically had her, he planned to prove to her that she belonged to him. And nobody was about to take her from him.

### *A few hours later*

Myah ran her nails up and down the center of Trez's chest while her head lay cradled between his shoulder and right arm. His free hand rested on her thigh, which was draped across his, as the two of them lay in his dark room. To him, everything was right in the world, but he could feel Myah thinking.

“What’s on your mind, baby girl?” His deep, sleep -aced voice vibrated through her body and filled the room.

“This... us. It just feels wrong.”

Trez stayed calm, electing to keep his eyes closed because he knew what it was about. “How, Myah?”

“Because it does. I don’t want to be the reason why things don’t work for you and my brother anymore.”

Trez sighed and moved his hand across her leg, admiring how smooth her skin was. “We’ll be fine. He knows, and he said if it was going to be anybody, he was glad it was me.”

Myah’s head shot up and her body tensed up. “What do you mean he knows?”

“Lay down, man. It means exactly what I said. He knows. After all these years, you don’t think he could tell? If Korri could see it then he could too, and he did. So, when he asked me, I told him the truth. He’s my people, Myah. I wasn’t gonna lie to him. See, that’s how family works. Even if you don’t agree with something, you still want the best for them, and he wants the best for both of us, even if that means you and me being together. Besides, I’m grown, baby girl. If I



wanted it, then there isn't anybody that could stop me. Not even Zell, so don't fucking play me like I'm not. Me and Zell are gonna be fine, question is are you and me goanna be fine?"

After processing Trez's words, Myah lowered her head and let it rest on his shoulder. "But why didn't you tell me?" she spoke so low that he had to struggle to make out what she said.

"Because I wanted it to be your choice, not mine. I knew if I told you, you would be all in, and I didn't want that. I wanted you to be with me because it was what you wanted, and not just because your brother approved and I was with Korri. I knew my heart wasn't in it, but I tried to make it work. I mean I loved her, hell I still do, but not like I love you. It's just different, but if you couldn't make up your mind to be with me, then there was no point in me breaking her heart. So I just kept that shit to myself."

Myah felt bad because after all these years, all she had to do was be true to what she was feeling and she could have been happy.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled.

"Ay, don't be sorry. You did what you thought was right and I respect you for that. But just know, you get one shot. If you can't be all about me and put me first, then I walk. You're grown as fuck, but you run around here acting like a little ass kid because Zell treats you like one. That's my man and he's always gonna be, but if you're with me, then you're my woman, so all that childish shit is out the door. I'll deal with him on that, but he's a man, so he understands that. I know it won't be a problem. I just need you to understand that you get a pass on all that bullshit you been doing. I'm not judging because I know I played a role in how you got down, but that shit is done. The only man you open your legs for now is me, and if you can't handle that, then tell me know."

Myah was in her feelings a bit because she felt like even though he said he wasn't, he was judging her. True enough, she'd had a lot of men in and out of her life, but only because she couldn't have the one she wanted. What else was she supposed to do?

“I understand.” She moved her hand up his chest and let it rest in the center of it.

Trez lifted his head enough to lean down and kiss the top of hers and then smiled. “You’re a fucking brat, and I know that won’t change, but just tone it down some. You can be spoiled, but you won’t be childish, aight?”

Myah laughed at his words. She truly was spoiled and she knew it. She also knew that even though she was the older sibling, MyZell’s dominance and protective nature hadn’t allowed her the ability to act like it. Maybe it was time to grow up.

“Fine,” she said and kissed his shoulder while he pulled her closer against his body.

The two went back to their thoughts as they lay in the darkness that surrounded them. Finally, they both had what they wanted.

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## *forty-one*

“MYAH SPENT the night with me last night,” Trez said randomly as soon as MyZell slipped into the passenger seat of his car. Trez waited while MyZell pulled off his hat and let his hand move across his thick curls.

“And?” He looked over at his best friend with no expression and waited.

“And you already know the rest. I got her, Zell. You know that. Ain’t no question about it.”

The two just stared at each other before Zell smirked. “Don’t fuck my sister over, Trez, or I will shoot your ass. I won’t kill you because you my people, but I will make you suffer.”

Trez burst out laughing and shook his head. “You know that’s fucked up, right?”

“And you know I have no fucks to give about how that sounds or how it makes you feel. That’s my sister, Trez. She’s my heart and she’s all I got.”

“Same, so you already know I got her.”

Placing his hat back on his head, MyZell pulled it down low and glanced at his phone. He smiled when he noticed a text from Ryan, which he ignored to finish his conversation with Trez.

“What about Korri? I know y’all going through it, but you need to really end that shit before you start something with My.”

“Already handled.” Trez looked MyZell square in the eyes and he nodded.

“Aight then.”

He raised a closed fist to Trez, which he met with his, and that was it. As long as Trez took care of Myah, MyZell was good. And as long as MyZell allowed Trez to be number one in Myah’s life, then he was good. It didn’t need to be discussed any further because it was understood.

“So, what you wanna do?” Trez asked, causing MyZell to let his head fall back against the seat before he turned it slightly to look at Trez.

“We need to know what the connection is. It has to be bigger than the two of them.” He paused briefly. “Fuck! How did we miss this shit, man?”

“He was clean. There was no way to know they were connected,” Trez stated about the fact that they hadn’t found anything on Cutty when they’d checked him out. “We both dropped the ball on that one, but we need her to stay with him until we figure that shit out.”

“Hell no.” MyZell cut his eyes at Trez.

“Nigga, calm down. You know I mean supervised. She needs to keep him around long enough for us to figure out what the connection is.” Trez took a moment to get his words right before he delivered the rest of what he left out. “There’s a baby.”

“Fuck you mean a baby? Nigga you got my sister pregnant?”

“Hell no, and so fucking what if I did? You better suck it up and just fucking deal, muthafucker.”

Trez pulled his phone out and scrolled through his pictures.

“Ay, don’t fucking try me. I told your punk ass that I would shoot you over Myah and I mean that, now who the fuck has a baby?”

Trez smirked and tossed his phone to MyZell, who looked at the picture Trez had up. “That’s his baby?” he questioned

without looking up at Trez because he was still focused on the picture.

“Fuck if I know. Hell, it might be hers. She was gone for a year, Zell. What if that’s the reason why? And what if...”

“Nah, hell nah. That ain’t my kid,” MyZell stated confidently because he needed to believe that. Even if a part of him questioned that it could be, he needed to believe that it wasn’t. If she had hidden a baby from him, then he had no idea how he would handle her, but he knew that it would end badly.

“But what if it is, Zell? I know you don’t want to believe that, but you have to consider it.”

MyZell chose to ignore that and moved on. “We got people watching both of them now, so let’s just see what their moves are. I don’t like that shit, but you’re right. Myah needs to keep him close. If he feels like we know what he’s up to, then we’ll never know what the plan was. She needs to know so that she knows how to deal with him. I’ll talk to her.”

Trez chuckled and took his phone from MyZell. “Nah, I’ll talk to her. I can see now this shit is gonna be a problem.”

MyZell cut his eyes at Trez, but then smirked. “She always gonna be my responsibility, Trez. You already know that, but I’ll step back. If you fuck up, that’s your ass and I mean it.”

“Nigga, you saying that like you had a choice. But we good on that,” Trez said before he started his car and pulled off. “Now let’s go handle this money so that I can go talk to Myah.”

\* \* \*

“Hey, what are you doing here?” Ryan asked, surprised by the fact that MyZell was standing in the doorway of the office she was in. His lean, muscular body leaned against one side of the doorframe because he had been standing there for a few moments before she even realized it.

“I came to see this so-called work you claim you be here doing every day.” A smug grin crossed his face before his

tongue glided across his lips, causing Ryan's heart rate to speed up. The mustard-colored ball cap he wore was pulled down low on his head, surrounded by a perimeter of curls that couldn't fit under it.

She could barely see his eyes because they were hidden under the bib of his hat, but she could feel them on her. Once he was upright and moving her way, she watched the natural motion of his stride, the confidence in the way he moved, and smiled at how effortless it was. The muscles in his chest and arms flexed as the mustard colored polo that he wore covered them both perfectly, as if it was custom designed just for his body.

Once he was in her personal space, she felt slightly faded from the scent of his cologne as he leaned down behind her and let his lips graze her neck before he buried his face in it for a minute.

When MyZell was done tasting Ryan's skin, he stepped around her and grabbed her hands to pull her to her feet before he took a seat in her chair and forced her into his lap. After she got situated, he slid one hand between her legs while the other moved under her shirt.

"Why you not using your computer?" he questioned once he realized that the one on her desk wasn't the one he'd purchased for her.

"Because all of her stuff is already set up on hers and that's what I use."

"When you're pretending to do shit, right?" He smiled and Ryan elbowed him in the ribs.

"I guess that makes sense," MyZell admitted.

"You didn't text me back earlier." Ryan tilted her head back enough so that she could see MyZell's face and then pouted a little. She was still a little on the edge about things with them, so small things like a missed text had her questioning things. She didn't like feeling insecure about what they had, but unfortunately she couldn't really help it.

“My bad, I got caught up handling things with Trez. But I’m here now, so what’s up?”

“Nothing, I was just thinking about you.”

He smiled and let his hand slide further between her legs before he removed it and let it move down her thighs. MyZell knew better than to start something that they couldn’t finish, and since Myah was gone with Trez, he assumed that Ryan was in charge of things. Hell, she damn near ran it anyway, from what he could tell.

“You missed me, Ryan?”

“A little.”

“A little?” MyZell chuckled. “I missed you too, more than a little. If I don’t call or text back, it’s because I can’t, not because I don’t want to, aight?”

Blushing, Ryan nodded before MyZell kissed her temple. “Ay, let me ask you something,” he said calmly.

“Is it bad?”

MyZell grinned at the expression she wore. Again, her head was tilted back, so he was looking down at her.

“No, well at least I don’t think it is, but we’ll see in a minute.” He pulled his cap out of habit and placed it on the desk in front of him before his hand moved across his head and then down his face.

“Do you want kids?”

His question caused Ryan to sit up and adjust her body so that she could see his face at a better angle. MyZell waited patiently for her answer.

“I never really put that much thought into it, but yeah, I do. Why?”

“Because I do and I need to know that you want that too.” He elected not to tell her the entire truth until he had it all figured out.

After his conversation with Trez, he couldn’t shake the thought that the baby Cutty had with him belonged to Tan. If

that was the case, her disappearance would make more sense. Especially if she were working with someone to somehow try and fuck with his life. Having a kid from your mark would complicate things, so it would seem viable that she'd left simply to hide that fact.

From the day she'd returned, her story hadn't made sense. But if there was a kid involved, a kid who shared his bloodline, then that would bring clarity to the situation. As fucked up as it was, he had to at least consider the fact that he might have a child with Tan. If that was the case, Ryan would have to accept that child because there was no way he was going to be with someone if they couldn't. Not even her. He wasn't allowed that luxury as a kid, so he swore that if he'd ever had a kid of his own, he was going to be a part of their life.

"With me?" she asked with a seriousness that made him laugh a little.

"Yeah, with you, man. How you gon' ask me some shit like that?" MyZell looked at Ryan like she was crazy and that made her laugh.

"Because I don't know. I didn't want to assume." She shrugged.

"What the fuck ever. I'm not saying we're there yet, but we're heading that way, right?"

"Right," Ryan agreed.

"Remember that shit, though, 'cause if we're in this, there are no outs. I take that to heart, Ryan."

"Me too." She sat up and offered him her best serious expression, which put a smug grin on his face.

"You need to work on that shit 'cause it's weak as fuck." He pointed at her face before he kissed her. "I'll let you get back to work, though. I have some things to take care of. Head to the condo and pack some stuff so that we can stay at my house for a few days since you won't just move in. I don't understand that shit, by the way. You living in my house, but not the house I live in. It's all the same, Ryan."



She grinned at his irritation, but she didn't want to move too quickly and regret it. His condo was hers as long as she wanted it to be. He'd made that very clear but living in his house with him felt like she was losing the small bit of control that she'd had gained over her life after she left Polo and she wasn't ready to lose that yet. She knew that eventually she would have to make that decision, but for now, they were good and didn't need to be under the same roof for that to happen. Ryan knew MyZell didn't really want that, but he respected it and she appreciated that.

"It's not the same and I don't want to ruin things by rushing. You see me whenever you want and it's not like you don't just show up anyway. Even when I'm mad at you and don't want you to."

MyZell chuckled. "Aight, you can get that, and you damn straight. I told you, the first fuck up was on me, but it won't happen again, so I'm keeping you close. Ain't shit that you can do but just accept it."

He nudged Ryan and she stood. Once they were both on their feet, he closed her in his arms while his lips connected with hers.

"Come walk me out."

Taking her hand into his, MyZell led the way back down the hall through the shop. All eyes were on them and a few of the women delivered hateful stares. Some even called his name, offering a seductive hello, which made Ryan smile because aside from a head nod, he hadn't even looked their way or acknowledged them. It was like they didn't exist and she loved that.

Once they reached the front door, MyZell stopped and slid his arms around her once more.

"You get a lot of attention," Ryan said, tucking her lip between her teeth while she looked up at him.

"But if it's not coming from you, then I don't give a fuck." He leaned down enough to press his lips against hers before he slipped his tongue into her mouth, making Ryan feel weak.

Once she had control again, she smiled softly at the grin on his face. “You like that, don’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“Fuck outta here with that. I’m out. Don’t forget, be at my spot tonight, and I’ll call you later.”

He glanced around the shop and a few of the patrons were looking their way with sour looks on their faces. He was used to it, though.

Once he was in his car, he glanced back at the shop and released a frustrated sigh. Ryan had quickly become an important part of his life and he wasn’t willing to give that up. He just hoped that whatever happened with the situation with Tan didn’t fuck that up for him. Whatever the case, he already had his mind made up that Ryan was his.

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“I APPRECIATE YOU SEEING ME. I know this is random as fuck, but I’m a man about mine, so I ask for what I want,” Drex stated while making eye contact with MyZell. He knew that as a man, no other man would take you serious if you couldn’t look them in the eye when you were speaking to them.

“I can respect that, but we both know what the bigger issue is.” MyZell paused and then continued. “How is that supposed to play out?”

Bringing up the issue caused Drex to immediately feel uncomfortable. It made him look weak to be sitting across from the man who he knew at some point had been fucking his woman. Hell, for all he knew, MyZell could have just left her bed, but the way she had been all over him for the past few months led him to believe that she was faithful at the moment.

“I can’t say I like knowing that shit. In fact, it’s anything but pleasant. However, I knew who I was laying down with when I decided to be with her. That’s on me, so I can’t feel any type of way about you. She allowed it to happen.” Drex let go of a nervous laugh because he knew that what he was saying was bullshit.

MyZell looked across the table, not believing what he was hearing. There was no way he would make peace with a man that he knew was fucking his woman, and likely better than he ever could, and then have the balls to ask him to help him eat. Fuck all that. That was a sign of weakness and he couldn’t respect nor tolerate that.

“So, you know I fucked Halle and you still want me to put you on?”

MyZell’s calm, cool nature pissed Drex off. There was an arrogance to him that just didn’t sit well with Drex. MyZell functioned like a man who had no worries, as if life was his for the taking, and that infuriated Drex.

“Like I said, I can’t do shit about that, but money is money. You own everything around here. I can’t do shit without your permission and what little I make ain’t gon’ pay the bills. I figure I might as well be a part of your team, at least then I know I’ll eat.”

“My team, huh?”

“I know you not really in this shit anymore. Hell, everybody knows, but regardless of that, you still own the rights to every dollar that exchanges hands on these streets. I respect that. I just want to get my share and I can’t do that without your blessing, so let me in. Give me my own territory and I’ll do my part.”

MyZell rubbed his chin and then glanced at Drex. Without saying a word, he reached in his pocket to retrieve his phone. Scrolling through his contacts he found Halle’s number, dialed, and then placed the call on speaker before he lowered it to the table.

“Hey, baby. I was starting to think you wouldn’t call me again. It’s been months, Zell. I miss you.”

“You miss me?” MyZell chuckled but kept his eyes on Drex as he spoke. He wanted to see his reaction because he knew that Halle would be more than willing to do whatever he asked without question.

“Yes, baby, I miss you. I need to feel you, so I hope that’s why you called. Can I come see you?”

“Where’s your man at, baby girl?”

“Out. I have a few hours, but even if he was here, I’d find a way to get to you, and you know that.”

“That’s cool ’cause I think I need you to handle some things for me, the way only you know how.”

“You miss that, huh? I can take care of that for you, but you have to take care of me too.”

MyZell smirked at the thought of what that meant and the fact that Drex had rage in his eyes as he listened to his woman offering pleasure to another man. A man that he was holding his hand out to for help.

“I’ll let you ride it, but you know I ain’t with that other shit. Check this, though, let me hit you back and I’ll let you know when I’m ready to see you.”

“Baby, please don’t stand me up. I haven’t been right since you stopped taking my calls. I need that.”

“I got you. Just make sure you answer when I hit you back.”

“Always.”

MyZell ended the call and then looked right at Drex. “So I’m supposed to trust that you can work for me, knowing that anytime I call, she will be there to do whatever I ask.”

Balling up the fist that was placed on the table, Drex clenched his jaw before he answered. “Like I said, I need to eat. Fuck her.”

MyZell chuckled at the double meaning. “I don’t think you being a part of my team is a good idea, but I can promise you this, you don’t have to worry about me fucking your girl anymore. If she’s even still your girl. Y’all work that shit out, but you don’t have to worry about me.” MyZell stood and tossed a twenty on the table to cover his drink and then lifted his phone.

“I’ll make sure you’re eating, just not from my table. I owe you that much,” was the last thing he said before he turned to walk away.

Drex shot daggers through him but didn’t say a word. He had to deal with it. If he went against MyZell, he would lose his life and that wasn’t an option. He was forced to take his

handout. With his bruised ego, Drex accepted his fate. That was all he could do.

Once MyZell was in his car, he blocked Halle's number and deleted it from his contacts. She was of no use to him anymore. He wasn't the type to cheat, and as long as he had Ryan, he didn't need anyone else. He'd always lived by the philosophy that if your woman couldn't satisfy you, then find one who could. Cheating was some fuck shit and he just didn't see the point. Not being committed was one thing but claiming someone and then fucking around wasn't worth the trouble it caused. As long as Ryan was rocking with him, then he would do everything in his power to make her happy. That included being faithful. She would never have to worry about that, even if she didn't truly believe that herself.

After he was on the road, he dialed Trez to update him on what had just gone down.

"Ay, how'd it go?"

"This nigga really asked me to put him on. Like real fucking shit."

"So, he don't know you were hitting Halle?"

MyZell smirked. "That's the fucked up part. He knew, and was on some 'she wasn't shit so that's on me not you, but can you still put me on?'"

"Get the fuck outta here." Trez laughed loud and hard.

"Exactly. That's some weak shit. How the fuck he think I want him on our team with all that?"

"So what'd you do?"

"I called Halle, put that shit on speaker, and asked her to come suck my dick."

"The fuck, Zell? Did you really do that shit? Nah, never mind, I know you did. What he do?"

"He sat there like a pussy and still asked me to put him on. I was like nah, I can't do that, but I won't fuck your girl again."

Trez laughed again. “You ain’t shit. I swear you ain’t shit. He’s probably plotting now how to take your ass out.”

“Nah, he ain’t. I told him we’d let him eat. Give him clearance. Let them know he can make some pocket change. Not too much, though. Make sure our people are watching and listening. If he fucks around and gets any ideas, I’ll handle him.”

“See, that shit right there lets me know you miss it. You know it’s still in you.”

“It’s in me. Always will be, but that ain’t my life anymore,” MyZell answered truthfully.

“I hear you, but Myah sitting here staring me in my goddamn face. Let me go ahead and have this conversation with her and then we can talk later.”

“Aight, bet. I’m heading home and I’ll be in for the night,” he said to Trez before ending the call.

Business was done for the day, so he was about to chill until Ryan got there and then focus all of his attention on her. She was his escape, and with everything going on, he needed that right now.

## *forty-three*

“WHY ARE you looking at me like that?” Trez asked, already knowing the answer.

“Because you just told my brother that you had to have a conversation with me and I wanna know what about.”

She glared at him from where she was lying on one side of his bed. He sat with his back to her on the other, looking over his shoulder so that he could see her face. Myah was only dressed in a bra and panties, which she had put back on while he was on the phone with MyZell.

Trez, however, was still naked with the towel he'd used to clean himself up with covering his manhood, which was growing again at the sight of Myah's exposed body. She was on her side with her head propped up on one hand with the other placed on the bed in front of her.

“I ain't have shit to say to you. I just wanted to get him off my phone.” Trez smirked and Myah balled her face up.

“Trez, don't play with me,” she snapped while sitting up.

He moved his tongue across his lips and nodded to the floor where her clothes were.

“Get dressed first, and then we can talk. I won't be able to concentrate with you dressed like that.”

He stood and tossed the towel he was holding in the hamper, but Myah didn't move. Her eyes were on his body, mainly what was hanging freely between his legs. It caused her to tighten her thighs at the memory of how he had just blessed her with it.



“Ay, stop sweating my shit and put your clothes on. This is important, Myah,” Trez announced when he noticed what she was doing.

Rolling her eyes, she turned and placed her feet on the floor. Trez stepped into his boxers first and then his jeans, but watched as she bent over, giving him a nice view of all of her assets before she lifted the tight ass jeans that he had not too long ago peeled off her. She worked her way back into them and then pulled her shirt over her head. Trez didn't bother with one, but once Myah had her clothes on he led her to his living room so that he wouldn't get sidetracked by what had just gone down in his bed.

“Okay, so what's so serious?”

Myah was now sitting on the sofa with Trez positioned on the coffee table across from her as he admired her pretty face, which was currently balled up.

“That nigga you fucking with got a kid?” he asked, calmly watching her expression. He did that just in case she lied.

“Yeah, why? It doesn't really matter, though, not anymore, right?” she said in reference to the fact that she and Trez were figuring things out.

“You been around it?”

Tilting her head to the side, Myah looked at him like she was up to something, which clearly he was. “No why?”

“I need you to ask him to meet his kid. It's a baby, right?”

“Trez, stop asking me questions and answer mine.”

“I'll tell you what's up in a minute, just answer me.”

“Yes, it's a baby, and I don't know if he'll let me meet her. He's not on good terms with the mother.” Myah frowned.

“So you've met her or at least seen the mom.”

“No, he told me.”

Trez exhaled and then looked at Myah, who was glaring back at him. “Ay, I'm about to tell you something and I don't need you flipping the fuck out or trying to handle shit. I need

you to just hear me out and then do whatever the fuck I ask you to, aight?”

“Oh, hell no. That don’t even sound right. What’s going on? Is something up with Zell? This is about Tan, isn’t it? I knew that hoe was shady.”

“Yo, calm the fuck down and just do what I’m asking you to do. Listen, damn.” Trez ran his hand down his face and Myah grilled him with the most hateful stare. She didn’t like where this was heading, she could already feel it.

“Fine, talk.” She waved her hand in the air, signaling for him to continue.

“So, you know I told you last night that nigga you’re fucking with is dirty. Well, it’s more than that. He knows Tan. I saw him at her hotel and he had a baby with him—”

“Is she his baby mother? You have got to be fucking kidding me. Is that why she left? She had a baby on my brother and now she’s back like it’s nothing. I’m fucking her up. I knew that was a bullshit story she told. It didn’t even sound right.”

Trez watched while Myah went on, raging about Tan. When she was done, and just staring at him, waiting for him to respond, he did.

“First of all, we don’t know shit yet. I don’t know if it’s his baby or not. Hell, it might be Zell’s, but we—

“Oh hell no. It better not be. Does he know? What did he say?”

“He knows. Shut the fuck up and let me finish, man.”

Myah sat back and folded her arms, which made Trez smile. She was spoiled as fuck, and he knew he couldn’t deal with that, but he didn’t have a choice.

“Look, here’s the deal. It might be his kid. We don’t know. What we do know is that Tan knows that muthafucker. We need to know how before we put that heat in him. This entire situation is a goddamn joke, real shit, but it’s happening for a reason, and we need to know that reason. It might be Zell’s

kid. If it is, I don't know what he's going to do. I figured if you could see the kid, you might be able to tell. Hell, babies look like their parents and shit, so I don't know, ask him to meet her and take pictures. But do that shit in a public place 'cause I swear 'fore God if he put his hands on you, I'll fuck him up."

Trez's entire demeanor changed and he got serious as hell, which made Myah smile.

"You're the only man who will put their hands on me," she teased, and Trez wasn't feeling her taking it as a joke.

"Ay, I'm fucking serious."

"I know, damn, calm down."

"Call him ask him to come by your shop with the baby."

"I can't do that, it will be weird."

"Tell him whatever you have to tell him to get him there. I think he needs you, so he'll do it if it means losing you."

Myah frowned at what Trez was insinuating. Yet again, she'd fallen for a man who only wanted to use her. She was a little embarrassed about that, but it didn't change the fact that it was true.

"Ay, don't look like that. Fuck him and whatever he made you believe. This is about Zell, so call him, Myah."

Trez softened his expression a little after picking up on her mood.

Myah stood and left the room. She returned a few moments later with her phone in her hand and dialed Cutty's number. Surprisingly, he answered. The one time she didn't want him to, and he'd answered right away.

"What's up, baby girl. I was just about to hit you up."

Myah glanced at Trez when she could feel him looking at her. She was grateful he didn't ask her to put the call on speaker.

"Am I going to see you today or are you busy? Maybe with your daughter or something."

“Nah, I’m not busy. I can see you whenever.”

“Come to the shop then.”

“Aight, I can do that. Give me a few hours.”

“Okay, I’m at lunch anyway.”

“Damn, you should have hit me up. I would have been through there.”

“It’s fine, it was last minute, but I was thinking—”

“Thinking what, Myah?” She noticed that there was tension in his voice now.

“We’re solid, right?”

“Shit, I hope so, why?”

“Because I haven’t met your daughter yet and I want to. You should bring her with you when you come. At least then I can see her.”

Cutty got quiet. He wasn’t really in the mood to deal with his niece, but he knew it was strange for him not to involve her in Myah’s life if he was playing her off as his own and he was trying to convince Myah that he was serious about her.

“I’ll try. I don’t know what her mother has going on right now. You know she be tripping on a nigga.”

“Fine, but it seems like there’s a reason you don’t want me to meet her. I mean, if you’re not serious about us, I get it. You disappear all the time, you hardly answer my calls, and you’re hiding a kid that you lied about. It’s cool, I’ll—”

“Ay, chill. I said I’ll try. I want you to meet her. It’s just complicated, but I’ll try, aight.”

“Fine. Just come by when you can. I’ll be there until eight.”

“Aight, bet. I’ll see you soon.”

“What he say?” Trez asked as soon as she ended the call.

“He said he’ll try. Something about her being with her mom and that she’s tripping.”

“Finish getting dressed so we can go. I need to make a few calls.”

Myah stared at Trez, who gave her a “don’t challenge me” look before he kissed her on the cheek and then stepped around her to get his phone. He needed to call and find out if anyone had been there to see Tan. If he got word that someone showed up with a baby, that would be his answer as to how she and Cutty knew each other. Either way, shit was starting to come together and it was just a matter of time before they had all the answers.

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## *forty-four*

“BABY,” Polo cooed against Ivey’s ear as he pushed deep inside her. Her eyes were closed as her face contorted with pleasure.

“Mmmm, yes.”

“I need you to do something for me.”

“Fuck, yes, anything.” Her head sank deeper in the pillow as she enjoyed the feel of him inside her. The way he stretched her wide with her leg draped across his strong tatted arms was close to heavenly. So much that Ivey would agree to anything he asked her right now.

“I need you to help me get custody of my son.”

Her eyes popped open as his statement ripped her from her blissful state. Confusion settled in, but he didn’t give her a chance to dwell on it because he pulled out slow and pushed in fast. The sensation was too much for Ivey to take, so she simply nodded. She was about to cum and she needed him to help her do it.

Picking up his pace while Ivey hugged him tight, using her walls to suck in him, Polo felt his nut rising. It was too much to control, so he thrust deeper into Ivey a few more times, and she coated the condom that he was wearing while he filled it.

“Fuck, this pussy is good, baby girl.” He grunted against her neck while he felt himself pulsing inside her.

Once he went totally limp, he pulled out and crawled off the bed en route to the bathroom. Ivey entered just after he finished cleaning up. Polo kissed her on the cheek and exited

so that she could handle her business. When she entered his suite again, Polo was dressed from the waist down, sitting on the edge of the bed, but he summoned her to him instead of allowing her to put her clothes on.

She stood between his legs, enjoying the feel of his lips on her stomach while his hand moved between her legs, which she mindlessly spread, allowing him more access. She loved the way her body felt when he touched her.

Polo was an expert at pleasing women physically. It was all the other shit he couldn't figure out and that was why Ryan had left him. Ivey didn't know that about him, and to her he was perfect, better than any man from her past. As beautiful as she was, she always seemed to be on the losing end of relationships. She was too naive and gullible, a trait that Polo had quickly picked up on. That was why he was keeping her around. Well, that and the fact that she pleased him sexually.

"So, are you gonna help me, ma?" Polo asked before he slipped two fingers into her sweet spot.

Ivey was still a little sore from the amount of sex that they had been having, but she was addicted to his touch. He ignited something in her that she couldn't deny.

"How?" Her head fell back as she tried to control the tingling feeling that moved through her body.

"She'll run if she sees me. I can't have her do that again. I need you to get her to me. Once she signs the papers, she can live her life, but I can't do shit until she does. She had custody of him and I can't do shit for him. He's my own goddamn son and I can't be a father to him until I have it on paper. She ain't shit, Ivey. All she does is chase dicks and dollars," he lied.

PJ wasn't his son and that didn't have shit to do with why he wanted Ivey to help him get close to Ryan. He knew that she would believe him, though, and that was all that mattered. He couldn't risk getting caught up in a situation with MyZell in his city while he was alone, so if Ivey could get Ryan to him, then he could just take her home.

“She doesn’t know me... mmmm, fuck.” Ivey was about to cum again, and her legs were weak, so she placed her hands on his shoulders to brace herself.

“Just go talk to her, be her friend, ma. She don’t know anybody here. Then you can invite her to lunch or some shit like that. All I need is five minutes with her to get her to sign the custody papers, and then she can have her fucking life. I can’t make her be a mother, but she can stop me from being a father if she doesn’t sign that shit.” He worked his fingers in Ivey faster and more aggressively, sensing that she was about to cum.

“Will you do that for me? If you do that, then I’ll have my son, and you and I can figure shit out. You wanna be with me right, Ivey?”

Her body tensed up, and she tightened her walls around his fingers, sucking them in right before she creamed all over them.

He watched her body pulse with a satisfied smirk on his face before he removed his hand nice and slow from between her legs and stuck his fingers in his mouth. Ivey looked down at him, still dazed by her orgasmic high, so Polo stood and closed her in his arms before he delivered a soft meaningful kiss.

“You got me, ma?”

Ivey nodded and smiled. “I’ll try.”

“Nah, don’t try, make that shit happen. You can handle that, right?”

Again, she nodded just as his phone sounded from the nightstand next to the bed. He looked back but pecked her lips before he moved to it. Ivey went back to the bathroom to wash up a second time, but she left the door open to listen.

“Hey, Ma, what’s up?”

“Baby, when are you coming home? This child misses you.”

“Soon, Ma. Is he good? You need anything.”



“No, just you to come home, but he’s fine.”

“I will soon. I told you I have to find Ryan,” he said, glancing over his shoulder when he heard Ivey behind him. He winked at her as she lifted her panties and stepped into them.

“Perry, you can’t keep chasing that woman. If she doesn’t want to be found, then she won’t be found.”

Polo chuckled. “I found her. I just have to get shit straight, but I have someone helping me with that. Don’t worry about all that.”

“Perry...”

“Ma, I’m good. Just take care of my son and tell him I love him. I’ll call tomorrow so that I can talk to him.”

“Baby, you know he’s not yours. I respect that you’re trying to raise him, and if that’s what you’re doing, then fine. But you don’t need Ryan to do that. This is crazy.”

“It’s not crazy and I do need that. Fuck all that you’re talking. He’s my son, just take care of him until I get back, aight.”

He ended the call feeling frustrated. No one understood why he needed Ryan so much. Hell, he didn’t even understand his obsession, but she was like a drug and he had to have her. Maybe it was the fact that she’d finally had enough of his bullshit and left. No other woman had ever done that, but she was his and he was getting her back. Whether it be alive or in a body bag, he was getting her back.

Ivey stepped in front of him adjusting the shirt that she had just put on around her waist. “Your mom?” she questioned, taking in the stressed look on his face.

“Yeah, she has my son. He misses me, so she wants me to come home.”

Hearing him say that made Ivey frown a little. She didn’t want him to leave, but the next thing out of his mouth made her smile.

“You said you want to leave, right?” He gripped the back of her thighs and looked up at her.

“Yes, why?”

“What about New York?”

“What about it?” Ivey asked, trying her best not to show the excitement rising in her.

“Go with me. After all this is done, I’m leaving. I have to get back to my son, but you can go with me. You don’t have shit here, right? I mean that shitty ass job of yours, but you hate that anyway.” He grinned.

“Yeah, but I don’t know anything about New York, and I don’t know anyone there.”

“You know me, and that’s all you need. I got money, Ivey. I can set you up and take care of you until you figure it out. I like this, you and me. Don’t you?”

“Yes but...”

“No buts, just go with me, or at least think about it, okay?”

She nodded, beaming. Polo had no intention of taking her to New York, but he needed her help with Ryan so he needed her to believe that he would.

“Okay,” she said softly.

“Aight, cool. Let’s go eat. You got a nigga starving and shit.” He smirked and she blushed.

Ivey had no idea what she was getting herself into. Polo had her right where he wanted her, and once he’d used her to get what he wanted, he was leaving her ass. There was no way he would even consider taking her to New York. Even if things didn’t work out with Ryan, Ivey wasn’t for him. She was too weak. Even though he had controlled Ryan, she wasn’t weak. She never had been. She knew she was beautiful and she knew her worth. She’d only put up with him because she had a good heart and she loved him. He knew that and he had abused it. So when she’d finally left, he could only blame himself. Now, it was time to fix it and get her back.

Polo kissed a giddy Ivey on the cheek and then moved around her to finish dressing. She sat and watched him like a

lovesick puppy and that irritated him. Yeah, he had to get Ryan back 'cause this shit wasn't for him.

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## *forty-five*

“DO you think this is such a good idea?” Eve looked up from the bag that she had spent the last ten minutes packing for Zyen and peered at Cutty. He had just showered and finished dressing so that he could take his niece to see Myah.

“No, I don’t, but I don’t have a fucking choice. I can’t have her switching gears on me, and she asked to see my daughter, so it is what it is.”

Eve watched as he sprayed cologne on various parts of his body. The scent drifted past her, which sent her further into her feelings. Not only did he look amazing, but he smelled even better, all to go see another woman. No matter how many times he’d reiterated the fact that his situation with Myah was just a means to an end, she still couldn’t help but hate the place that they were in.

“She’s not your daughter, Cutty. You barely even look at her most days, so how do you expect to spend all day with her? You’re bringing her right back?”

Even though she had concern for Zyen being with Cutty for extended periods of time, her underlying concern was about whether or not he was going to spend an extended amount of time with Myah. Eve had been sneaking into Cutty’s phone, checking calls and texts and some of the conversations that he’d had with Myah had her believing that their relationship was far more than he was letting on.

“Yeah, I’m bringing her back, damn. I know she’s not my fucking baby, but you know she’s not yours either.” The

irritated scowl that spread across his face caused Eve to back down a little.

“Yes, I know that. She’s just not used to you, is all. She cries when you have her, Cutty, and if you can’t comfort *your* child then how do you think that will look? I’m trying to help and you always act like I’m doing something wrong.”

Again, her eyes were on his tall, lean frame, admiring the way his clothes fit effortlessly. He was dressed simply in Jordan sweats, matching tee and ball cap, with a pair of Dub Zero Jordans. Even as plain as his appearance was, he still owned it like he owned the world. That was one of the things she loved about him. His confidence was undeniable.

He kept his eyes on her and took the few steps to reach where she was standing. When he was close enough, his large hands moved to her waist and pulled her close. Looking down at her, he offered that sexy smile that had always captivated Eve.

“I know you got me, ma. Trust that, but I’ll be fine. She always sleeps the second I put her in the car. I’m sure Myah knows how to deal with a baby, so even if I can’t do shit with her, she can. I’m just gonna swing by long enough for shorty to see her and then I’ll be back. How about you order us something for later and we can chill tonight.”

“Really?” Eve beamed at the idea of the two of them spending time together. Lately, his nights were spent with Myah while she was stuck there alone with Zyen. She loved Zyen because she was the sweetest baby she’d had ever had the pleasure of being around, but she’d missed Cutty.

He chuckled and delivered a soft kiss. “Really, shorty. Damn you act like a nigga don’t care about you. This shit will be over soon. I appreciate you hanging in here with me, so just know that when it’s all over, I got you. I’ll make all this shit up to you.”

“I’m just ready for it to be us again. If you can promise me that, then I don’t care about any of the rest.”

“Promise,” he said lowly before their lips connected again. He did have feelings for Eve and wanted her to be happy, but in the same right, just like Tan, Eve was a tool. He’d needed her help to get what he wanted and that outweighed anything else. So, if at any point she didn’t understand that, then he would gladly replace her.

Eve stepped away feeling accomplished as she watched Cutty collect the rest of his things from the dresser and fill his pockets. Once he was ready to go, he shot Myah a quick text to let her know that he was on his way and then lifted his niece’s carrier from the bed where she sat buckled in and cooing at nothing in particular. Eve grabbed her baby bag and followed him out of the bedroom they shared to the living room and stopped at the front door.

“I’ll see you in a few hours?” she questioned with a partial smile.

With a crooked grin, he nodded and pecked her cheek before he used his free hand to unlock and open the front door. After Eve handed over the baby bag, he was on his way.

\* \* \*

Myah grinned at the site of Cutty walking through the door of her nail bar. Even knowing that he’d played her, she couldn’t deny how handsome he was. His shiny black hair which was cut into a low fade shone under the lights and blended perfectly with his chocolate skin. She admired the ease in his stride as he approached her because it reminded her of the way he moved in bed pleasing her body. When his tongue glided across his thick, full lips, it made her body tingle.

She quickly shook it off and focused on the reason for him being there. Her eyes moved to the glass storefront of her shop across the parking lot until they landed on Trez’s midnight blue McLaren. The next thing she focused on was the small round face that was in the carrier.

“Damn, shorty, you just gon’ stare at me?” Cutty offered her a handsome grin as he approached her.

Myah chose to focus on the baby. She had to fight hard to keep her composure as she searched the tiny face that resembled her brother's. The second she laid eyes on her, Myah knew without a doubt that this baby was her niece and indeed her brother's child.

Taking a moment to get her thoughts together, she delivered a forced smile just as Ryan's voice flowed from behind her.

"Hey, I have the schedules all worked out, so when you get a minute, you can..."

Ryan looked up from the iPad that she was carrying and her eyes met with Myah's just before Myah's darted to the baby that Cutty was carrying.

Myah knew from Trez that MyZell hadn't filled her in on everything that was going on, but if Ryan paid attention at all, there was no way she wouldn't notice the resemblance to the baby.

"We can go in my office," Myah quickly said, trying to pull Ryan's attention to her, hoping to break the stare that she had on the baby. "Can you give us a few?"

"Uhh, yeah. I'll be out here." Ryan frowned a bit trying to figure out what was going on. Myah had mentioned that Cutty had a child, but there was something too familiar about that baby that was with him.

She couldn't quite put her finger on it, and the weird look that Myah gave her wasn't helping, but she let it go and made her way to the receptionist desk to check the appointments for the day. Not really because she needed to, but to allow Myah the opportunity to have her office. Ryan planned to do some busy work for the time being.

"What's her name?" Myah asked once the two were in her office with the door shut. She realized that he had never once mentioned it in the few conversations that they had about her.

"Zyen," Cutty said against Myah's neck after he allowed his arms to circle her waist from where he stood behind her.

His niece was the furthest thing from his mind after he'd laid eyes on Myah, who was dressed in a pair of athletic leggings and matching zip-up pullover that hugged her body. As his lips connected with her skin, he ran his large hands down her thighs before he attempted to slip one into the waistband of her leggings.

Myah tensed up and immediately shrugged him off, which he didn't appreciate.

"Ay, what's up. I know you missed me."

"Your daughter's here," Myah announced looking down at Zyen.

"She's good, Myah. Just lock that door real quick," he said after pulling her back to his body and trying to slip his hand between her legs.

"Cutty, no. I'm not doing that." Myah pushed him out of her personal space once again and reached for Zyen's carrier. She had no interest in him doing anything to her body because the lies that he'd told were spinning in her head. This was her brother's child that he was claiming as his own. That confused her because it made no sense. As infuriated as she was that Tan had kept MyZell's' child from him, she was even more pissed about what connection Cutty had to Tan, and why he would lie and claim her and MyZell's child as his own.

"What are you doing?" he snapped, irritated by the fact that Myah wasn't reciprocating his advances.

Something was off about her and he couldn't figure it out. That was messing up his plan to have his cake and eat it too. Since he'd promised the evening to Eve, he'd hoped to have a quick round with Myah, and this, in his opinion, was the perfect opportunity. Yet, once again, his niece was standing in the way of him getting something he wanted.

"I want to hold her. How old is she?" Myah asked, quickly lifting Zyen from her carrier before Cutty could object. She didn't want his hands, lips, or anything else on her. Not only because she feared that Trez might pop in on the two of them, but the idea that Cutty lied to her about everything had her



stomach in knots and her pulse racing more and more with every second that she was alone with him.

“Three, no wait, four months,” he muttered out of frustration as he watched Myah hold his niece against her chest.

“So, what did her mother say about you bringing her here? Does she know about me, about us?” Holding the baby in her arms had her emotions all over the place, causing her to go against everything Trez had prepped her for. He’d made her swear not to dig or ask questions that could set him off, but right now she couldn’t process any of that.

“She ain’t say shit ’cause it’s none of her business, Myah. What I do don’t concern her. See, that’s why I didn’t want to bring her around you because I knew you’d be on that shit.”

Myah backed down a little when she noticed the irritation in his tone. “Sorry, I was just curious. You can’t blame me for wanting to know if this would be an issue.” Myah walked around her office with Zyen in her arms. Even with the tension surrounding her and Cutty, she couldn’t help but smile at her pretty face. She could see her brother so clearly that it sent a surge of emotions through her.

“It’s not a fucking issue, Myah,” Cutty growled at her while he stared her down.

He was trying hard not to let his emotions get the best of him, but he was sick of everyone questioning the things that he did. In his eyes, people should just fall in line and do as he asked, Myah included.

“Put her back. I need to get her home. I have some shit to do.”

“Wait, you just got here. Why are you leaving?” Myah wasn’t ready to let her leave. There was a part of her that felt like if she did, she wouldn’t see her niece again.

“The hell you mean, why? I just said I had shit to do.” Cutty moved aggressively toward Myah, but she turned away and rounded her desk on the opposite side. Just that fast, she

felt protective over this baby she didn't know. It was her blood, so how could she not?

“Well, what about later? Stay with me tonight and bring her with you. I want to spend time with her.” Myah tried not to sound too desperate.

“Nah, I can't do that. I have plans. Maybe another time.”

“So, I'm not important enough for you to change your plans?” she released so quickly that it caused a scowl to spread across his face and again he was moving toward her.

Myah glared at Cutty and he calmed down just a little. “Come on, man, I don't want to argue with you. You know better than that. You're important, Myah, I'm just building right now. You got your shit all figured out and I can't be a man if I don't have my shit on point, Myah.”

Hearing him say that further pissed Myah off. Things that she should have paid attention to, she'd let slide because she'd wanted him to be the one so badly that she refused to believe that he wasn't. Now standing there holding her brother's child that Cutty was somehow connected to had her feeling stupid and naive.

“Yeah,” was all she said after she placed her niece back into her carrier and began fastening her into it.

Her chest felt tight at the thought of letting her leave with Cutty, and the only thing that gave her comfort was that she knew that the second Cutty took her, Trez would be right behind them.

After Zyen was secured in her carrier, Cutty approached Myah, but this time she couldn't escape his embrace. His lips found hers. What used to make her heart race, now made her stomach turn and she had to fight to keep it together.

“Ay, how about this? I'll try to handle everything early so that I can swing by there tonight.”

Myah felt her phone vibrate in the pocket of her pullover and she used that as an excuse to step away from Cutty. Glancing at the screen, she felt her body tense up when she read the text from Trez.

***Trez: Get that nigga out of there now or I will. He's been there long enough.***

Myah was almost tempted to let Trez come handle Cutty, but then she looked down at her niece.

“Who the fuck is that?” Cutty snapped, giving Myah a death stare.

“My brother. He needs me to do something for him.”

Cutty watched her for a minute, sensing the hesitation, but decided to let it go.

“Promise me you’ll try to see me later,” Myah said trying to soften him up and move things along.

“I’ll see what I can do but let me get her back to her mother so that I can handle my business.”

He glanced at Zyen who was keeping herself busy with her tiny fist shoved in her mouth. Myah leaned down and kissed Zyen on both of her cheeks. After Cutty tried again to convince her that he would make her a priority later, he was out the door, and Myah felt like she had just made a huge mistake by letting him leave. At this point, all she could do was put her faith in Trez because if anything happened to that baby, she had a feeling that she would somehow find a way to make it his fault.

“DID YOU TELL HIM? He needs to know that’s his baby.”

“Myah, calm down. You flipping the fuck out isn’t going to help the situation. Let me handle this, and then I’ll find him. I’ve been calling, but it’s going straight to voicemail,” Trez stated calmly as he inhaled the blunt that he was holding while watching the apartment that Cutty had gone in.

“Don’t tell me to calm down. My brother has a daughter that he didn’t know about and that hoe kept her from him. I swear she better get right with God, ’cause that’s a wrap for her. If he don’t kill her ass, I’ll pull the trigger myself.”

“Ay, what the fuck did I just say? Don’t make things worse, Myah. It’s not as simple as that. No matter how you feel about it, that’s his baby, and Tan had her. What happens to Tan is Zell’s decision, not yours. Don’t do shit until you hear from me.”

Myah was about to respond but realized that Trez had hung up on her. The next thing she noticed was Ryan standing in the doorway to her office with a confused look on her face.

“That was Zell’s daughter?” Ryan asked, looking right at Myah, who felt like she had just let something out that should have come from her brother, but it was too late.

“He doesn’t know. None of us knew.” Myah began explaining without really answering the question.

“How? I thought that was...”

“He lied. It’s not his kid.”

“Wait, why? So who is he to Tan?”

“I don’t know, but Trez just left to go find out. She looks just like him, Ryan.”

Ryan stood there trying to make sense of the what Myah was telling her. It wasn’t that she really had an issue with MyZell having a daughter, especially if he didn’t know himself. It was before her, so it wasn’t like she had the right to, but kids changed relationships. She knew that from her situation with Polo and that was the part that had her uneasy. They had just fixed things and now this.

“Oh,” was all Ryan managed to get out.

“It doesn’t matter and it doesn’t change anything,” Myah said, moving closer to Ryan. She could see the disappointment all her over Ryan’s face and she felt bad. Myah had grown to like Ryan and in no way had she wanted to make her feel any type of way about the situation. As far as Myah was concerned, Tan wouldn’t be around long enough to help her brother raise the daughter that they had just found out about so if Ryan wanted that position it was hers.

“Not for me, but you can’t speak for him.” Ryan looked right at Myah.

“I *can* speak for him. Fuck her. Do you really think that he’s going to be okay with that? She left and had his daughter. He’s not going to be okay with that, it doesn’t matter what her excuse is. My brother gave her everything, and he would have made sure his daughter had everything, so what reason would that hoe have to keep her from him? That’s some shady shit. She can’t make that right, regardless of how hard she tries, Ryan.”

“I guess.” Ryan had no faith in that, and at this point, all she knew was that MyZell now had a daughter with an ex that he used to love, and then there was her. What’s to say that he wouldn’t give her a chance to fix things.

“Ryan?” Myah said softly, sensing that she wasn’t in the best place with the news that Myah had just delivered to her.

“If you don’t mind, I think I’ll just take the rest of the day off. Everything is done, but if you need anything, I can take care of it in the morning.”

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“You’re not going to walk, are you?” Myah asked, knowing that her brother was likely going to be pissed with her for being the one to tell Ryan. Regardless of the fact that Ryan just happened to walk in when she was discussing it with Trez, Myah knew that MyZell wasn’t going to be happy about how Ryan had found out.

“I just need to go. I’ll see you in the morning.” Ryan started moving around the office that they were in and began collecting her things.

Myah watched without saying a word because she didn’t know what to say. She couldn’t imagine what Ryan was thinking, but she knew it wasn’t good.

“Do you want me to go with you? We could just hang out and talk for a while.”

With a forced smile, Ryan lied. “I’m fine.”

“Ryan, please don’t blame him for something that he couldn’t control.”

“I’m not. I’m fine, Myah.” Ryan wasn’t blaming him, but it hadn’t stopped the what if’s from spinning around in her head. Just when it seemed like they were figuring things out, yet another situation had presented itself that could cause him to have to choose sides. She was starting to think that maybe it wasn’t meant for the two of them to be together and the reason always led right back to Tan.

She left the shop and headed to his car feeling like she had already lost. No matter what he said or what he promised her, Ryan knew that she couldn’t compete with an ex and a baby, nor did she want to. That was the reason why she’d left Polo and she had no intention of being caught up like that again.

“I can’t believe this.” Ryan looked up as a strained voice sounded from beside her just as she hit the remote to unlock her car doors. She noticed the woman who stood looking down at the tires on her car. She had both of her palms pressed against her forehead, and she appeared to be frustrated, which Ryan assumed came from the fact that her tire was flat.

“Hey, are you okay?” she asked, needing a distraction and genuinely wanting to help.

Ivee lowered her hands and looked at her with stress lines across her forehead. This was perfect. She glanced a few feet away to where Polo was in his car waiting before she focused on Ryan again.

“Someone cut my tires. All four and I have to get home. My sitter just called and she had an emergency. My boyfriend is at work and can come fix this when he gets off, but I have to get home. I can’t believe this.” Ivee broke down in tears.

“Oh, please don’t cry. It’s going to be okay.” Ryan quickly moved to Ivee and began rubbing her back. “I can take you if you want. I was just leaving.”

“No, I can’t ask you to do that. I’m sorry. I’m just having a really bad day and then this happened.”

Ryan laughed a little before she offered a warm smile. “I definitely understand having a bad day. I really don’t mind. I don’t know much about Miami, but if you can tell me where you live, I’ll take you. I’m pretty sure I can get back home with GPS after I drop you off.” Ryan wasn’t the type to leave someone stranded. She had a good heart, and if she could help, she would.

“Are you sure? I mean, I could call someone. I just don’t know how long it would take and I really need to get home.” Ivee laid it on thick.

“I’m sure. No one can fix my bad day, but maybe I can help turn yours around.”

“Well, I appreciate it. I’m Ivee.” She pulled her purse up over her shoulder and offered her hand, which Ryan accepted.

“Well, Ivey, let’s get you home to your kid. I’m right here,” Ryan said, pointing to MyZell’s BMW

Ivey looked Polo’s way once more before she slipped into the passenger seat while Ryan got in on the driver’s side.

“This is really nice.” Ivey beamed as she looked around the car.

From what Polo had told her, Ryan was a horrible mother and more concerned with men and what she could get from them. Ivey knew from living in Miami that MyZell had plenty to offer, so Ryan driving this car had further confirmed what Polo had wanted her to believe.

“It is, but it’s not mine,” Ryan admitted before she released an irritated sigh, thinking about MyZell. “So where we going?” she asked after she backed out of the parking spot that she was in.

Ivey smiled and pointed in the direction that would take them to her apartment. She glanced in the sideview mirror to make sure that Polo was behind them, smiling inside that after this, she would soon be on her way to her new life in New York with him.



## *forty-seven*

MYZELL STEPPED off the elevator and ignored the second call from Myah. He needed his head right in order to deal with Tan. Having a conversation with Myah before doing that wasn't going to help this situation. Just as he was about to slide his phone into his pocket, she called again. This time he answered, just to make sure it wasn't anything important.

"I'm busy Myah, what's up?"

"Where are you?" Myah asked a little too aggressively for him.

"Why, what's wrong?"

"I need to talk to you?"

"Can it wait? I'm in the middle of something right now."

"It's about Ryan, well you and Ryan." He stopped dead in his tracks.

"Fuck you mean it's about Ryan? What did you do Myah?"

"I didn't do anything. That hoe Tan did and..."

"Ay, stop fucking rambling and tell me what's up. I told you I'm busy, so I don't have time for this," MyZell yelled, becoming annoyed. He had no idea what Myah thought Tan could have possibly done to Ryan and he and Ryan were good. He knew that for a fact and he was currently ten feet away from Tan's hotel room which he knew she was in because he'd had people watching it to make sure.

"She had a baby, Zell. That hoe had a baby and she didn't tell you."

“Fuck you mean she had a baby? Ryan doesn’t have a kid, Myah.”

It rolled out his mouth so quick that he hadn’t put much thought into it. But the second that he’d let what he’d said process, the idea that Myah might have found out something about Ryan that she’d kept from him crossed his mind. Even if that were the case, he’d have to deal with it later. Tan had to be dealt with and that was his priority right now. Not that he was thrilled about the fact that Ryan could potentially have a kid and had maybe even kept it from him, but it wasn’t a big enough deal to change anything between them.

“Not Ryan, Tan, and it’s your daughter, Zell. I saw her. I even held her and she looks just like you.”

As if someone had knocked the wind out of his chest, he stood there trying to wrap his mind around what his sister was saying because it made no sense.

“My daughter?”

“Yes, that’s why Tan left, well at least part of it. She had your baby, Zell, and hid it from you. Her name is Zyen.”

“How the fuck do you know all this and what does it have to do with Ryan?”

“She heard me talking to Trez about it, so she knows, and when she found out, she left. She said she was fine and just going home, but I know she’s not. You need to go talk to her.”

“Fuck, Myah, I have to go.”

MyZell’s eyes were on the door to Tan’s suite as he hung up on his sister. He slipped his phone into his pocket and replaced it with the gun that was on his hip before he started toward it again. The fact that Ryan had found out about him having a baby was not sitting well with him. He could only imagine what she was thinking about it, about him, or even more about what that meant for what the two of them had. But as much as that bothered him, at the moment, his focus was not on Ryan. It was on the fact that if what Myah had said was really true, he had no idea if Tan would live to see another day.

Using the hotel key he had kept to her room, he entered slowly, shut and locked the door. It was quiet, with only the low hum of the television that hung on the wall. His eyes moved around the room until they stopped on Tan, who was stretched out asleep on the sofa. Chambering his first round, he moved her way and stood so that her head was below where he stopped. He pressed the barrel of his gun against her forehead before his deep voice filled the room.

“Where is she?”

Tan’s eyes immediately popped open at the sound of MyZell’s voice and the coolness of the steel that was pressed against her forehead. She didn’t move for fear that he would surely pull the trigger. She knew him well enough to know that if he had gone so far as to draw his gun, he would not hesitate to use it.

“I don’t know,” she said, barely above a whisper as she looked up at him. The tears were already falling as she inhaled and continued. “My brother has her.”

“So it’s true? I have a daughter?”

Unable to get the words out, Tan nodded against the steel that was pressed against her forehead but kept her eyes on him.

MyZell felt his pulse quicken at her confession and his finger moved a little further back on the trigger.

“Get up,” he growled through clenched teeth and then lifted his gun so that she was able to move.

Tan hesitantly did as he asked, pulling her body to a seated position.

“Is that why you left? You were pregnant and didn’t want me to know I had a goddamn daughter?” MyZell’s voice thundered through the room, causing Tan to jump a little.

“It’s not what you think. I didn’t have a choice.”

MyZell laughed arrogantly before he aimed the gun so that it was positioned in a way that would deliver a bullet right between her eyes if he fired.

“What I think is that you have about thirty seconds to explain that shit to me or I’m about to be a single parent.”

Tan swallowed hard, but it got stuck in her throat. At this point, she had no idea how to save her life and all she could think about was the fact that she was likely never going to see her daughter again. As much as she didn’t want to die, never getting to hold her daughter again hurt more than that. But as she looked into MyZell’s eyes, she had a feeling that she was moments away from taking her last breath anyway.

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## *forty-eight*

“I... I... didn’t have a choice. He made me do all of it.” Tan struggled with the words, but she struggled more with the look in MyZell’s eyes.

He was furious and the hate he felt for her at that moment was so prominent that it took her breath away. She was going to die and he was going to be the one who made it happen.

“He who? Who the fuck is he, Tanessa? And what does that have to do with my goddamn daughter? I can’t even say it out loud without wanting to shoot your ass.”

MyZell’s finger pulled back a little more on the trigger and Tan’s heart felt like it was pounding in her chest.

“Carlton. My brother. This was all his idea.”

It was news to MyZell that Tan had even had a brother. She’d told him that she was an only child, that her parents had died, and she was alone.

“Brother? Did you tell me the truth about anything?” he growled at her, thinking about all the late nights they’d spent sharing details of their lives. It infuriated him even more to know that it was all lies.

“Yes, but I couldn’t tell you about him or...”

“Fuck all that. I don’t even care. It was his idea for you to have my baby and hide it from me? What type of sense does that make? You’re really trying to make me pull this trigger.” MyZell moved closer to Tan and this time he pressed the gun to her forehead.

“Please,” she pleaded. “Please don’t. I’m trying to explain. Carlton thought that he could take over. He wanted you to fall for me so that I could give him information, but I got pregnant. I wanted to tell you, I begged him to let me tell you, but he wouldn’t. I left because I had to. He threatened to kill me and our daughter, so I had to.”

MyZell listened to Tan ramble on, choking over her words as tears fell from her eyes. She was afraid, but he didn’t care. At this point, the only concern of his was the daughter that he hadn’t known he’d had.

“So, you did this to take what I have? That’s what you wanted from the beginning, to take what I have? You let him use your daughter, my daughter, to do that? Tell me why I shouldn’t just shoot your ass right now? You’re a weak, pathetic hoe for that, Tan.”

“I know, and I’m sorry, but you have to understand that he was all I had. I didn’t have anybody else. What was I supposed to do?”

“*You had me!*” MyZell yelled so loud that it felt like the room itself vibrated.

He stepped away from Tan and ran his hand over his head before he approached her again. This time, he grabbed her with one hand by the shirt and pulled her from where she sat, while he gripped his gun with the other hand.

“You think that I wouldn’t have protected you from him? Even if it wasn’t for you, I would have done that for my child. Regardless of what you did, I would have kept you safe to protect my child.”

He held her so close to him that Tan held her breath, afraid to move in the slightest way.

“I didn’t think you would trust me once you found out everything,” she said so low that he barely even heard her.

“I can’t fucking believe you.” MyZell shoved Tan back and she landed on the sofa again. She was afraid to even look up at him, so she kept her head low.

“Tell me everything now, and I swear on everything real you better get right with God, ’cause if anybody harms my daughter, you’ll pay.”

Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he made a call.

“Ay, meet me at The Setai, suite four fourteen, and hurry up.”

“I’m on my way.”

After he ended the call, he walked over to the phone that sat on the desk and snatched it out the wall. He dropped it on the floor and then used the heel of his boot to smash it to pieces.

Tan watched, not moving one inch. She was barely even breathing because she didn’t want to make things worse than they already were. Once he was done, MyZell walked back over to her and placed his gun against her forehead again.

“Where is she?”

“I... I don’t.”

“Think before you speak, ’cause if you say the wrong thing, I’ll pull this trigger. At this point, I don’t really give a fuck.”

“I can tell you where he’s staying, but I don’t know if she’s there.”

“For your sake, she better be.”

“He has a girlfriend. Her name is Eve. I can give you her address. That’s where I was and that’s where all Zyen’s things are. Eve’s been taking care of her.”

MyZell laughed to keep from losing it before he yanked Tan by the neck with one hand and used the other to press the gun further into her forehead.

“She better be okay, Tan, or I promise you will regret the day you ever laid eyes on me.”

He let her go and then headed to the door. Once he was on the other side, he stood there for a minute trying to get his mind right, but that was cut short when Chauncey walked up.

“What’s up, Zell? What you need?”

“Stay here with her. Don’t talk to her, don’t let her out of your sight. If she moves too fast, shoot her ass and I mean it. She’s your responsibility, and if something goes wrong, you deal with me. Are we clear.”

“We clear.” Chauncey pulled out his gun, chambered it, and waited for Zell to use his keycard to let him in. “Don’t open the door for anybody. Any goddamn body.”

Nodding, Chauncey entered the room and closed the door behind him. MyZell was going to get his daughter and would kill anyone who thought they were going to stop him from doing it.

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## *forty-nine*

TREZ PULLED up just in time to see Cutty hand off Zell's baby to some chick, kiss old girl on the cheek, and then head back to his car. At this point, he had to pick his priority, and unfortunately, that wasn't Cutty's bitch ass. Knowing that he had eyes on Zell's daughter meant that it was his responsibility to make sure she was good. He had to do that for him.

Just as he lifted his phone to call Zell and tell him what was going on, Zell was already calling him.

"She had my kid, Trez. She left because she was pregnant. I have a daughter."

"I know, I just found out too. Where you at?"

"The hell you mean you know? You didn't think you needed to tell me that?" MyZell felt like everybody knew shit but him and it was pissing him off even more.

"Calm the fuck down. I just found out and I was calling to tell you. I know where she is. I'm here now."

"You see her? Is she good?" At this point that was MyZell's only concern.

"Yeah, she looked okay. Some chick has her."

"I'm on my way. Make sure they don't leave."

"I got you."

"I mean it, Trez, keep your eyes on my daughter."

MyZell ended the call and Trez got out. He couldn't even be mad about the way MyZell had reacted because the entire

situation was fucked up. He knew that he would have been the same way.

Pulling his gun from his body, he kept it low at his side. He approached the door and looked around before he knocked and waited. It took a minute, but Trez heard a voice from the other side.

“Who is it?” He took a step over so that he couldn’t be seen from the window to the right of him. There wasn’t a peephole on the door, so she would have to open it to see who was knocking.

Trez kept quiet but knocked again. This time, he heard the locks. When the door cracked, he used his shoulder to push it open. Eve’s eyes got wide as hell as she held Zyen against her chest.

“Who are you?” she asked, looking at Trez like she was angry that he had barged in on her.

“Give her to me,” Trez said calmly, holding one hand out for Zyen.

“No, I’m not doing that. You have a gun and I don’t know who you are. Shoot me if you want, but I’m not giving you this baby.”

Trez grew impatient with Eve refusing to hand Zyen over and aimed his gun right at her head.

“If that’s how you want it, I’m cool with that, but I promise I’m a good ass shot. I’ll put one right between your eyes and catch her before your body hits the floor. Now give her to me,” he said again, this time in a way that made Eve comply with his demand.

Once Trez had Zyen secure in his arms, he looked around the room and noticed her seat on the kitchen table.

“Ay, go get that,” he said and nodded toward the seat, but Eve just glared at him.

“You have her, do it your damn self,” she snapped and folded her arms across her chest.

She was pissing him off more and more by the second. It wasn't really his thing to kill women, but she was getting dangerously close to catching one in the dome.

“Look, you really trying my patience right now. I guess you don't think I'm serious, so let me make it real clear that I will end your fucking life. Go get the goddamn seat,” he yelled.

“And I said get it your damn—”

Trez held Zyen against his chest with one arm, so he lifted his gun and fired a shot that passed so close by Eve's head that she literally felt it, causing her to throw her hands over her head and duck.

“What the hell is wrong with you, asshole?” she yelled when she was upright again.

“I told your ass I was a good ass shot, now stop fucking playing and go get her damn seat. Next one won't miss, now try me.”

Eve was trying her best to play hard when she really wasn't. She just didn't think that he would actually shoot at her since he was holding Zyen, but now she was taking him serious.

She backed away with her hands in the air keeping her eyes on him the entire time. Once she had Zyen's seat, she looked at him and waited.

“Put it on the sofa,” he said, motioning to it with his gun.

The entire time this was going on, Zyen had her head laid peacefully on his chest while she sucked her fingers. Trez was grateful that she was calm. The last thing he wanted was for Zell to show up and Zyen be flipping out. He'd walk in and likely lose it, then shoot everybody moving.

Once Eve had the seat on the sofa, she waited to see what he wanted her to do next.

“Go get one of those chairs and set in in the center of the room so that I can keep an eye on you. Sit your ass down and don't fucking move.”

Not wanting to put her life in danger, Eve again did as she was told. Trez then lowered Zyen into her seat. She looked up at him and smiled before he filled the spot next to her on the sofa, turning her seat so that it was facing him.

“Where did he go?”

Eve glanced at the gun that was now propped up on his knee, still aimed in her direction, and then at his face.

“I’m not telling you anything, but if you’re smart, you won’t be here when he gets back.”

Trez chuckled and then glanced at Zyen. He couldn’t believe how much she looked like MyZell.

“Let me make something real clear to you, shorty. I don’t know you and don’t give a fuck about you. In fact, the only reason I’m entertaining your bullshit at all is because I don’t want killing you on my conscience. With that being said, I’m sure that with a bottle of something strong and a fat ass blunt, I’ll be over shooting you in no time, so I’m not one you wanna fuck with. But, trust me, her father is on his way here to see his daughter for the first time, and he’s ready to spill the blood of anyone that kept her from him. That means you, shorty. You’re the only one here right now. I don’t know what dream that muthafucker sold you to make you be a part of this, but right now, he ain’t here and he won’t be breathing for much longer anyway. I’m all you got. I’m the only person who can stop Zell from shooting your ass the second he walks through that door. So, let me ask you one more time, where the fuck did he go?”

Trez looked down at Zyen again while Eve thought about what he was saying. As much as she hated the position that she was in, she knew that he was right.

She didn’t want to die and she believed every word he’d said. Cutty wasn’t there, and if he was, she wondered if he would even fight for her. He was selfish and she knew that.

She just couldn’t help that she’d fallen for him. She couldn’t control who she loved, but right now she needed to think about herself.

“I don’t know where he went. He doesn’t tell me anything. Maybe to see his new girlfriend.” Eve rolled her eyes, feeling disgusted that she was even admitting that.

She felt stupid and naïve, but it was no one’s fault but her own.

“His girlfriend...” Trez said, thinking about Myah.

“Myah. He spends a lot of time with her.”

Trez kept his eyes on Eve and one hand on his gun while he leaned back enough to get his phone. He dialed Myah and she answered immediately.

“How is she, do you have her?”

“Yeah, I do and she’s good, but listen—”

“Where is Zell, did you tell him?”

“Myah, shut up and listen. Close the shop right now. Tell everybody to go home, and you and Ryan head to my spot. We’ll be there as soon as we can but do it now. I think he might be heading your way, so pay attention and be careful. You strapped?”

He kept his eyes on Eve while he waited.

“Yes, but I can’t do that, and Ryan’s not here.”

“Fuck you mean she’s not there? She works there, don’t she? Shut down, Myah, and go to my house. Do it now.”

“Okay, but Ryan left like an hour ago. She’s probably at the condo.”

“Aight, then call her or go get her. Take her with you to my house. I have to go.”

Trez hung up before Myah could question him again.

“So, you knew he was fucking somebody else and you still here with this nigga? The fuck wrong with you? I mean, it ain’t like you ugly or no shit like that, but you let that nigga treat you like that? I don’t understand that shit.”

Eve felt stupid hearing him say it and even worse when he continued.

“Ay, but don’t think I’m checking for your ass or anything. You’re weak and I can’t fuck with that,” he said with the most serious expression.

“My life is none of your business,” Eve said and then looked away.

He was right. She was weak and stupid. She had no defense for that. She looked back at the past few months, trying to figure out how she’d ended up here. When she’d met Cutty, she was in college, working and doing her thing. How she’d managed to go from that to being his flunky, she had no idea. It made her stomach turn just thinking about it, but it was too late. The damage was done.

“Fuck you crying for?” Trez asked when he noticed the tears streaming down her face. He had no sympathy for her, but he wasn’t a total asshole.

“I took care of her, I really did. I know you don’t care about that, but I love Zyen, and I made sure she was safe. Maybe I shouldn’t have been a part of this, and I don’t expect you to understand that, but I took care of her.”

“Ay, I don’t give a fuck about all that. You did some dumb shit. You need to take responsibility for that,” Trez said, looking down at his phone just as it went off.

“Ay, just come in. Shit is clear and I got your baby girl.” Trez glanced at Eve before his eyes moved to the door.

“I suggest you start praying now, shorty.”

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*fifty*

“IT’S RIGHT UP HERE,” Ivey said as she directed Ryan to a parking space. She had been texting Polo the entire time that she was in the car with her to let him know where they were and when to expect them.

As Ryan pulled into the spot that Ivey had pointed out for her, Ivey looked around and quickly noticed Polo’s car and him getting out the driver’s side.

“I appreciate it. I swear I don’t know what I would have done without you,” Ivey said, stalling and trying to keep Ryan’s attention focused on her. But when Ivey saw Polo’s image in the rearview mirror, she pulled the handle and prepared to get out.

“No worries. Just glad that I could help,” Ryan said and offered a smile, but it dropped the second her door was pulled open and she was face to face with the devil again.

“Damn, it’s been a minute. You still look good, though, baby girl.”

“What’s going on?” She looked at Ivey but only for a second because Polo grabbed her arm and forced her out of the car.

“The hell you mean what’s going on? I’m here to take your ass home. You been gone for months, Ryan, and I should fuck you up over that, but I’m a fair person. I know it was partly my fault, so you get a pass.”

“How did you even find me?” Ryan felt like she couldn’t breathe. She was face to face with her worst nightmare and

there wasn't anything that she could do about it.

“That’s the least of your worries, baby girl, now let’s go. Yo, shut that car off and get her shit,” Polo barked, looking at Ivey, who nodded and began doing as she was instructed.

She reached inside and grabbed Ryan’s phone, which she slipped into her back pocket before she slid into the driver’s seat to shut the car off and take the key fob from the center console.

“Aight, let’s go.” Polo still had a firm grip on Ryan’s arm as he tried to move and take her with him, but she struggled.

“Please, just let me go,” she pleaded, looking from Ivey to Polo.

He simply smirked. “Why would I do that? You belong to me, Ryan. I need you, baby girl.”

“Yeah, just sign the papers and you can go on with your life,” Ivey said, feeling insecure about the fact that Polo said that he was there to take Ryan home and that he needed her. That wasn’t the plan.

He’d promised her that this was about his son. He’d only needed Ryan to sign custody papers so that he could take care of his son.

“Papers, what papers?” Ryan snatched away from Polo, but he grabbed her again, this time more forcefully and with both hands. He began moving her toward Ivey’s apartment door, which they were only a few feet away from.

“Ay, stop damn talking. Grab her shit and open the goddamn door,” he yelled at Ivey, who glared at him but did as he asked.

“Don’t do that. Why are you helping him? You have no idea who this man is.”

Ryan pleaded with Ivey, hoping that she wasn’t as naïve as she appeared, but Ryan knew Polo. She knew the ability he had to make women feel like he loved them and in return they would do anything for him. That was why she had stayed so



long and the reason she knew that Ivey would help him with whatever plans he had for her.

Once they were inside, he shoved Ryan onto the sofa, but she jumped back up and came at him with everything she had. She wasn't going to let him do whatever he'd planned on doing. Rushing him she smacked him hard across his face and began raining blows one by one until he grabbed her arms and turned her against his body so that he could control her.

“Ay, calm the fuck down, Ryan. If anybody should be mad, it should be me. I gave your ass everything and you just bailed on a nigga. Then, to make matters worse, you running around here with some other muthafucker like you don't have a man at home. The fuck wrong with you? You're ungrateful as fuck, yo. I'm trying my best not to just shoot your ass and keep it fucking moving.”

Ryan glared at Ivey, who watched the entire exchange looking like a damn lovesick puppy. She was confused about how she was watching all this and still wanted to help him.

“You should be mad? Are you fucking kidding me? You moved your girlfriend and three-year-old son into our house and told me to get over it. You cheated on me from the day we got together. When I'd had enough and decided that I wanted more, you show up here like you deserve the right to have a say in my life. Fuck you and this weak ass hoe for helping you.”

Ryan pulled away from Polo and charged Ivey. She started raining blows on her one after another so fast that Ivey didn't have a chance to defend herself. Ryan wasn't a fighter. She had never been, but the fear of being taken by Polo and the anger for Ivey playing her to help him had her on one hundred.

“Get her off of me!” Ivey yelled, ducking her head between her arms as she tried to shield herself.

By this time, Polo was pissed and needed to get Ryan under control. He pulled his gun out and grabbed her from behind, pressing his forearm across her neck to hold her against his chest and placing the barrel of his gun to her temple.

“Don’t make me end this now, Ryan. I swear to God I will pull this fucking trigger. It’s up to you,” he snarled against her ear, causing Ryan to freeze. Tears streamed down her cheeks from the rage she was feeling, but fear quickly settled in. She didn’t want to die and she knew he was just crazy enough to pull the trigger. She always knew that about him, but witnessing it now had her heart pounding in her chest.

“Fine, I’m calm,” she said slowly before her eyes landed on Ivey, who was still trying to get herself together after the beating that Ryan had just given her.

“Just make her sign the damn papers. You don’t need her,” Ivey pleaded desperately.

“Ay, shut the fuck up and let me handle this,” Polo yelled, trying to stop Ivey from talking. His lies were going to catch up to him if she kept running her mouth and that was the last thing he needed.

He knew that Ryan was not going to go with him willingly, so he had to convince her that it was what she wanted, that he was what she wanted. He had done that for years, but he knew that if Ivey’s stupid ass kept running her mouth that it wasn’t going to help the situation.

At this point, he had no idea how to get rid of Ivey short of shooting her, but he knew that would really turn Ryan against him and he would likely have to kill her too. He wasn’t opposed to that, but what he really wanted was his life back. He wanted Ryan to be who she used to be and not the person who was moving on without him.

Ivey knew that Polo had been lying to her, she could see it in his eyes. The way he looked at Ryan was nothing like the way he’d looked at her. She felt stupid for trusting him, but what was she supposed to do now?

“Let’s go.” He backed up, still holding the gun to Ryan’s head and moving down the short hall that led to Ivey’s room.

Ivey followed, not wanting him to be alone with Ryan.

“Ay, what are you doing?” Polo snarled at her, still holding tight to Ryan.

“Why do you need to take her in there? I thought...”

Polo held tight to Ryan but moved his gun so that it was aimed at Ivey.

“Ay, give me a minute to deal with her. You said you’re down for me, right?”

Nodding, Ivey glanced at the gun.

“He can’t shoot both of us. Do you really want to be a part of this?” Ryan desperately asked Ivey.

Ivey looked at her with sympathetic eyes. “Just do what he asks and then you can go.”

Ryan laughed nervously, knowing that Ivey was too stupid to understand what was happening.

“You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“Ay, I’m not gon’ tell you again. Go wait out there. I just need to holla at her for a minute to get things straight,” Polo demanded.

Ivey glanced at Ryan again and then the gun that Polo had in his hand before she turned to walk away.

“Ivey, please... please, just listen.” Ryan begged, but Ivey kept going.

Ivey heard her bedroom door shut and her heart sank with it.

She paced back and forth in her living room, trying to decide what to do. When she couldn’t decide, she called Kim. Ivey didn’t have many friends, but Kim was the one she always relied on when she needed a voice of reason.

“Oh, so you’re still alive?”

“I need to ask you something.”

“Okay, what’s wrong? You sound upset.”

Ivey looked toward her bedroom and started to whisper like Polo could actually hear her.

“I think I messed up.”

“Messed up how, Ivey? What’s wrong?”

“Polo. He asked me to help him do something and I think he lied.”

“Do what, Ivey? Is it illegal? I knew that man had some shit with him. Don’t do it, just leave his ass and lose his number.”

“It’s kinda too late.”

“What do you mean it’s too late.”

“It’s too late. I helped him kidnap somebody if you can even call it that. I mean, she did drive herself here, but he has her now. It’s his baby mom and—”

“Ivey! Are you crazy? You can go to jail for that.”

“I know but he lied, he said he just needed her to sign some custody papers for their son, and now—”

“Please tell me you’re not that stupid. Ivey, really? Where is he, where are you?”

“At my apartment. He has her here.”

“Call the cops. Hell, I’ll call the cops.”

“No! You can’t do that. I’ll go to jail, you just said that.”

“Then leave, you don’t want any parts of that.”

“I can’t do that either. What if he does something to her? She didn’t want to be here. She’s scared of him, and honestly, so am I.”

“Oh my God. I can’t believe you let him talk you into that.”

“I have her phone. She dates MyZell, should I call him?”

“MyZell Abrams?” Kim yelled. “Oh, Ivey, you really fucked up. If MyZell finds out you were a part of that, then you’re really screwed. You do know who that man is, I mean his reputation. Where is he now?”

“In my room with her. I’m in the living room. I don’t know what to do, Kim.”

“What you don’t want to do is tell MyZell Abrams that you helped kidnap his girl. That’s definitely not only a way for that stupid ass nigga to die, but you too.”

“Then what should I do?”

“You better get the fuck out of there and fast. You don’t want any parts of that, trust me.”

Ivee pulled Ryan’s phone from her back pocket and stared at it. She had no idea what she should do, but she wasn’t a murderer. She wasn’t going to play a part in someone losing their life. Polo didn’t seem like all he wanted was for her to sign some papers. In fact, she now believed that was a lie anyway.

At this point, she had to make a decision that could cost her life or one that might cost Ryan hers. Her heart was racing and she felt like she couldn’t breathe, but she had to make a decision, and fast.

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“AY, what you wanna do with her?”

MyZell looked down at his daughter before he focused on Trez.

“Take her to the hotel and keep her there with Tan. We need her to find that muthafucker.”

Trez watched MyZell’s expression transition as he looked down at his daughter again. As pissed as he was, everything about him had changed when he’d made contact with her tiny little face. Trez was about to speak again but was stopped when MyZell’s phone went off.

“What’s up, My, you at Trez’s spot yet?”

“Yes, but Ryan’s not. Is she with you?”

“Fuck you mean is she with me? No, you were supposed to be taking her with you.”

MyZell’s voiced raised and his daughter frowned, so he stepped away from the car where she was positioned in the back.

“I told Trez she left. After Trez called, I went by the condo and then your house. I called, but she hasn’t answered. I thought maybe you got to her first.”

“How the fuck was I supposed to do that? You knew I was dealing with this shit. You mean to tell me that muthafucker is out there and Ryan is nowhere to be found. Fuck, Myah. I have to go.”

“Don’t yell at me. It’s—”

MyZell hung up on her and then looked right at Trez. “She can’t find Ryan and she’s not answering her phone.”

“Ay, don’t even think that shit. She’s good, Zell. He don’t have no reason to come for her,” Trez said, not really knowing if it was true. They didn’t know shit about Cutty other than what Tan had told MyZell, which was that he wanted his life. That could have easily included Ryan, and right now, they didn’t know where either of them were.

“Muthafucker! Can this shit get any worse?” MyZell’s fist landed hard on the hood of his car before he got it together and dialed Ryan. It rang several times and then went to voicemail. He tried again and this time someone picked up but it wasn’t Ryan.

“Hello.”

“Who the fuck is this?”

“I can’t tell you that, but I can tell you where to find her. You just have to get here fast.”

MyZell looked up at Trez.”

“Give me your keys and take her to Myah.”

“What?” the girl said, confused by his statement.

“Not you, tell me where she is,” he said and moved to Trez who looked at him strange but dug into his pocket for his keys. Once he had them he handed them over to MyZell.

“Fifteen ninety NE one hundred twenty-seventh street. It’s Coral Trace Apartments, please hurry. He has a gun and I don’t know what he wants from her. He said that he needed her to sign some papers for their son, but I don’t think that’s the case. I didn’t mean—”

“Ay stop fucking rambling. The hell you mean sign some papers and he who? Cutty?” MyZell was annoyed and whoever the fuck was on Ryan’s phone was saying shit that didn’t make sense.

“No, Polo, and custody papers for their son.”

“Son? Ryan don’t have a fucking son.” MyZell was now fuming.

He was here saving his daughter while Ryan’s ex had her. How the hell was he supposed to explain that to Ryan? There wasn’t even a choice to be made about the two because he loved them both, yet he felt responsible and knew that he’d made a choice without even realizing that he had. He’d promised Ryan that he would keep her safe and one priority had overshadowed the other.

“Ay, don’t fucking leave. I’m on my way, and I swear to God if anything happens to her, I’m killing you and that nigga.”

“The fuck is going on, Zell?”

“Her ex is here. I don’t know what that hoe had to do with it, but she helped him get his hands on Ryan. Fuck. Take her to Myah. I have to go.”

MyZell pulled open his back door and kissed his daughter several times on the cheek and forehead before he took off toward Trez’s car.

Even though there was no way he could have prevented it, he still felt like it was his fault. Ryan was in a messed up situation because of him. Tan and her brother had totally fucked up everything good in his life and they had both better pray that nothing happened to Ryan or they’d pay with their lives.

When he arrived at the address that the girl had given him, he jumped out the car so fast that he left it open and didn’t care. It was just a car, and he could buy ten more if he wanted to, but Ryan was a different story.

Even if he couldn’t have seen it coming, it was his fault that she was in danger. Had he not entertained any of Tan’s bullshit, then Ryan would be with him and not where she was now.

As soon as he walked in the door, the girl jumped up from where she sat on the sofa waiting and without saying a word, she nervously pointed to her bedroom door.



MyZell's eyes moved to the door and it was then that he heard Ryan's voice. It was muffled but strained and his grip tightened on his gun.

He moved that way and stood outside the door listening for a second, piecing together what he assumed was going on. With no other choice, he made his move. He would have to think quickly and get off one shot, praying that Ryan wasn't compromised in the process.

MyZell was skilled and could shoot with precision, but he had no idea what he would find when he opened the door.

Taking a deep breath, he placed his hand on the knob and held his gun firmly with the other hand.

As soon as he entered the room, Polo spoke without turning his way. He had Ryan pinned down up under him and her eyes locked on MyZell's with a certain fear that had him enraged.

"Ivee, get the fuck out and shut the damn door."

"I'm not Ivee, and I can't do that, muthafucker." MyZell fired one shot through the back of Polo's head. The bullet passed through and hit the bed just next to where Ryan's head rested. Polo's body collapsed onto Ryan and she screamed.

Right after, she scrambled, trying her best to get from up under him but couldn't actually move until MyZell grabbed her arm and pulled her from the bed. He held her against him while she cried.

"How did you know I was—"

"It don't matter. I messed up by letting him get to you, but I'm here now." MyZell looked around and located Ryan's jeans on the floor. He stepped around her and snatched them up, then handed them over.

"Get dressed, we have to go." His expression softened when he looked down into Ryan's face and she nodded and took her jeans from him.

After she stepped into them she grabbed her Nikes and looked down at the bed. Polo was dead, blood was

everywhere, including on her. She couldn't stop her hands from shaking and felt like she was in a dream state.

“Don't look at him, look at me. Come on, let's go.”

MyZell took her hand and stepped into the hallway, taking Ryan with him. When they entered, Ivey stood in the center of the room looking lost.

“Is he—”

At that moment, Ryan snapped out of her haze and lost it. She dropped her shoes and rushed Ivey with so much force that they both hit the floor. Ryan was swinging wildly but making contact more than enough times to get her aggression out.

“You stupid hoe. He was gonna rape and kill me. You helped him do that. Why would you help him do that?” Ryan yelled as she continued raining blows on Ivey, who was so caught off guard that she couldn't defend herself, so all she could do was take it.

MyZell had plans of his own for Ivey, and Ryan had been through enough, so he snatched her up by the waist to pull her away. Ryan had a fistful of Ivey's hair, so Ivey came up with them.

“Ryan, let her go. I'll take care of it. Just let her go. I need to get you out of here.”

“No, fuck her. She deserves to have her ass beat. I could have died.”

“And she will, so let her go,” MyZell said firmly, which caused Ryan to do as he said. She knew he meant it and that was good enough.

Once she was on her feet again, he let her go and grabbed her shoes. “My car is outside, go get in it. I'll be there in a minute.”

Ryan nodded and did as he asked. At this point, she didn't care what happened to Ivey because she could have lost her life because of her.

She was seriously considering asking MyZell to let her be the one to do it, but, instead, she left the two of them there and went straight to MyZell's car. She slid into the passenger seat and nervously looked around, not knowing what else to do. He came out a few minutes later and joined her with his phone in his hand.

“Ay, meet me at Coral Trace Apartments. Bring the crew. There's two bodies you need to get rid of.”

Ryan felt her chest tighten a little when he said that there were two bodies, but as much as she should have cared, she didn't. Ivey had gotten what she deserved.

After MyZell ended the call, he looked over at Ryan. Physically, she appeared okay, but he could see the distress in her expression and in her eyes.

“Did he—”

“No.” Ryan clasped her hands together before she released them, letting them move down the length of her thighs. She looked everywhere but at MyZell because she felt stupid for even letting herself get caught up in a situation like that.

“I need to wait for my guys and then we can go,” he said as he watched her avoiding him. When she didn't respond, he called her name and she looked his way.

“Ryan?”

They stared at each other without any words between them before MyZell leaned across the seat, placed his hand behind her neck, and brought his forehead to hers.

“I'm sorry,” he said lowly before he kissed her gently on the lips.

Pulling back, Ryan looked at him confused. “For what? This isn't your fault.”

He laughed sarcastically before he leaned back, letting his head hit the seat. His hand moved down his face before he spoke again.

“Yeah, it is. If I had been on my shit, you wouldn't have ended up here.”

“You didn’t make me offer her a ride. That was on me. I was stupid for being so trusting. I knew he was out there somewhere, but I got comfortable. I felt like I was actually safe and I shouldn’t have.”

“That’s on me and not you. I promised you that you would be,” MyZell said. Before Ryan could respond, he pulled the handle to open his door. She watched as a van pulled up next to his car. “Stay here, I’ll be right back.”

He got out and Ryan watched as four men exited the van with oversized bags. They were all dressed in black, and as soon as MyZell was near them, he pointed and the four of them, along with MyZell headed back into the apartment that they had just left out of.

Ryan’s hands nervously moved down her thighs again while she waited. She had no idea what was next, but she knew that Polo and Ivey were both gone. At this point she didn’t care, she was just grateful that she was still alive.

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RYAN SAT in the tub with her eyes closed. She had scrubbed every inch of her body, trying her best to erase every memory that she had of Polo being near her and touching her. Every time she closed her eyes, she could literally feel his body pressed against hers, and it made her want to throw up.

After they left Ivey's apartment, they drove to Trez's place. Neither of them really said much to each other the entire time. She stayed in the car while MyZell went in and got his daughter. The three of them went to his house and Ryan went straight to the bathroom where she still was, soaking in the tub.

She knew that MyZell felt bad about the situation with Polo and the fact that he now had to introduce his daughter into their lives, but Ryan wasn't upset about any of that. It wasn't his fault. Neither of the situations were. It didn't mean that she knew what would happen between them, but she wasn't about to blame him for things that he couldn't control. Polo or his daughter.

Ryan gathered her thoughts and leaned forward enough to release the drain before she exhaled and stood, grabbing the towel that she'd placed on the floor next to her. Once she had it wrapped around her body, she stepped out and dried off enough to leave the bathroom. Her eyes moved around the master bedroom when she entered, and MyZell was nowhere to be found, so she dressed and decided to go find him.

The house was quiet, so she assumed that Zyen had to be asleep. Sure enough, when she entered the living room she found him leaning back on the sofa with Zyen balled up on his

chest. She was enclosed in one of his arms while the other was propped up on the arm of the sofa with his head resting on a closed fist.

Ryan stood watching the two of them for a minute before she walked over and stood in front of him. Sensing her in the room, MyZell opened his eyes and looked up at her before he patted the sofa next to where he sat, signaling for her to join him. It took her a minute, but she did.

“She looks just like you,” Ryan said softly, studying Zyen’s face as she slept on her father’s chest.

MyZell smiled at the thought as he looked down at his daughter.

“This doesn’t change anything, Ryan.” He adjusted Zyen on his chest and then let his free hand rest on Ryan’s leg.

“It changes everything, but not with me, with you. What about her mother?”

MyZell felt the veins in his neck pulse at the mention of Tan.

“What about her? She don’t matter and she should be grateful that she’s still breathing.”

His words were so ice cold that it made Ryan uncomfortable. With everything going on, she just wanted a minute to feel normal. Polo and Ivey, and now Tan, it was like everything was happening all at once and had her head spinning.

“That’s her mother, Zell—”

“And I’m her goddamn father. Do you think that shit mattered to Tan when she kept her from me? Hell no it didn’t. Why should I care now?”

“This is too much.” Ryan stood and looked down at the two of them. “Maybe I should—”

“Ay hold on.” MyZell carefully lifted Zyen from his chest and placed her back into her carrier, which was at his feet. He covered her with a blanket and watched her squirm for a few moments to adjust to her new position. When he was satisfied

that she was fast asleep again, he grabbed Ryan's hand, pulling her toward the kitchen, but stopped at an angle where he could still keep an eye on Zyen.

"No maybe anything. It don't change shit, Ryan. I have a daughter, but it doesn't affect this thing with us. Not unless you allow it to. I'll do what I need to do for her. I don't know shit about taking care of a kid, but that's my daughter so I'll figure it out. It's not like I'm asking you to be her mother, 'cause I know that's not fair to you. But being with me means that she comes with that."

"I know that. That's why I say it changes things. I also know that I can't just turn off what I feel. I still want this. That's your daughter, Zell. I wouldn't ever expect you not to be there for her."

For the first time in hours, MyZell smiled.

"What?" Ryan asked, confused about why he was smiling.

"You," he said before he gripped the back of her neck and pulled her into a kiss. It was deep and hungry before it turned into light pecks.

"This entire day has been all types of messed up, but I don't even give a shit about any of it. All that matters is this right here." He pressed his forehead against hers before he pulled her further into his personal space. "I need you to forgive me for not being there," he said against her neck.

"It wasn't your fault," Ryan said, knowing that he meant the situation with Polo.

"Even if you don't think so, I feel like it is, so I need you to forgive me for that, Ryan."

"I do."

He tightened his hold on her and kept her close for a few moments more before he pulled away enough to see her face.

"It won't happen again. I put my life on that."

Ryan nodded to agree because she knew that he needed that. For now, that was good enough. They didn't have to have it all figured out right now.

\* \* \*

Ryan woke up the next morning to the sound of a baby cooing next to her. When she opened her eyes, she found Zyen on her back grasping at her tiny feet. The sight of her there made her smile.

“Hey you. Where’s your daddy?” Ryan asked before she sat up and lifted Zyen into her arms.

Zyen frowned slightly before shoving her tiny hand toward Ryan’s face but bypassed it and grabbed a fistful of her hair. Ryan spent the next few minutes trying to unleash her grasp, and when she finally did, she placed Zyen on the bed again and secured her hair into a ponytail folding the end into a bun behind her head.

“You are not going to play nice, I see.” Ryan pointed at Zyen, who smiled and then began grabbing the covers that were near her. Ryan surrounded her with pillows before she dipped into the bathroom, quickly layered her toothbrush with toothpaste, and then stood in the doorway to brush while keeping an eye on Zyen.

She had no idea where MyZell was, but she assumed that he was home. She couldn’t imagine that he would leave her there with his daughter without at least asking her first.

After a quick dash back into the bathroom to rinse, Ryan ran a washcloth over her face before she shut off the light, grabbed Zyen, and went to go find MyZell. His voice was the first thing she heard as soon as she hit the stairs, carrying Zyen in her arms

“Hell no, not until we find him. I don’t really give a fuck about that right now. She’s with me and that’s where she’s staying.”

The second Ryan entered the room carrying his daughter, MyZell’s eyes lit up. He couldn’t help but smile at the sight of the two of them.



“Ay, Trez, Ryan’s up. Let me hit you back,” he said into his phone.

“Aight, bet, but we need to figure this shit out, Zell. We can’t just be holding them hostage and shit.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll call you back.”

MyZell placed his phone on the counter and walked over to Ryan, meeting her halfway as she approached him. He reached for Zyen and Ryan handed her over.

“Sorry, she was sleep and I didn’t want to wake her.”

“Don’t be sorry. It’s not a big deal,” Ryan admitted. She didn’t mind waking up with Zyen.

“I know, but I don’t want you to feel like you have to take care of her.”

Ryan watched as MyZell stared at his daughter, smiling while she pulled at his beard. Ryan was in love with him being in love with his daughter already.

“She needs to eat. Do you have anything for her?” Ryan asked, looking round.

“Just the stuff in her bag. Myah said she’d get what she needs today. I really don’t know shit about taking care of a kid. I don’t think I’ve ever even held a baby before her,” MyZell said with his eyes still on his daughter.

“I have a nephew,” Ryan said, thinking about her sister for the first time in a long time.

Hearing that caused MyZell to actually look away from his daughter and actually study Ryan’s face. He knew that she had a sister from previous conversations, but Ryan had never said much about her family other than they existed because she changed the subject every time it came up.

“Your sister’s child?”

“Yeah, I’ve only seen him once.”

“Why are you not close?”

“We used to be and then she left,” Ryan admitted before she slipped past him and pulled the door to the refrigerator.

“Where is she?”

“I don’t know.” Ryan sighed and then changed the subject. She’d had a weak moment and was over it, so she moved on. “We don’t know what she likes, but she’s little so we can’t give her much. Maybe we should get some baby food. I’ll go get some stuff and we can just try things to see what she likes.”

Ryan glanced at MyZell. He wanted to talk more about her sister, but he was quickly learning Ryan’s habits. The way she changed the subject was her way of letting him know that she was done discussing it, so he let it go for now. He planned to bring it up again later, but right now, he chose to let her have her way.

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## *fifty-three*

“SO, are you just going to make me stay here?” Myah asked from the end of the sofa that she was sitting on. Trez occupied the other side. She had her feet tucked under her butt while she studied him.

His hand was under his shirt resting between his chest and his abs, which had them slightly exposed. His eyes were focused on the TV while his other hand was wrapped around the remote which rested on his leg.

“I’m not making you do shit, Myah.” His deep voice filled the room, causing Myah to smile at him, but he still hadn’t looked her way.

“You’re not letting me leave, so that means you’re making me stay.”

This time, he looked her way with a smug grin. “You want to leave, then leave.”

“You’ll let me?”

“You’re grown. I can’t really stop you, but wherever you go, I’m going too. I’m comfortable as fuck right now and I already know my day is about to be long as hell as soon as I hear from Zell. We don’t know where that fuck boy is and until we find him I won’t rest. You can leave if you want, but that means you’re complicating my situation and that ain’t really what I need right now.”

“So, I’m an obligation?” she questioned with a slight pout.

“Why you asking me dumb shit, Myah? You know what you are.” Trez smiled at her and she blushed before she

crawled over to him and positioned herself on his lap.

“What am I?”

“You’re spoiled as fuck, annoying as hell, and a big ass headache.” Trez dropped the remote and let both his hands grip her sides firmly before his eyes moved from her lower half up her body until he was focused on her face.

“I hope you don’t think that was a compliment.”

With a light chuckle, he pulled her to him and kissed her neck. “Compliment or not, it was the truth. But even with all that, you’re mine, so yes, you’re my obligation, but only because I want you to be.”

“Maybe I want to be more than just an obligation,” Myah said before she kissed him this time.

“And maybe you should already know that you are more than that.”

“I do,” Myah admitted before tucking her lip between her teeth.

“You sure ’bout that?” Trez asked, but Myah simply nodded because his phone went off.

“You ready?” Zell asked as soon as he answered.

“Yeah, where?”

“Meet me at my spot and bring Myah with you. I don’t want to leave Ryan here with Zyen by herself.”

“Aight, bet. Is she good, though?”

“Yeah, she’s straight. I just don’t want to put that on her.”

“Aight, cool. Give us an hour and we’ll be there.”

Trez looked at Myah and she stared at him, waiting. After he ended the call, she frowned.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, get dressed. I’m taking you to your brother’s house. We have some shit to do and he wants you to come.”

“He wants me to come?” Myah tilted her head to the side and peered at him.

“Not with us, but to be at the house to help Ryan with Zyen.”

“Help her? Does she have a problem with my niece? Because—”

“Ay, chill the fuck out. Stop always reading into shit. Ryan don’t have a problem with anything. Zell just don’t want to put all that on her at once. Now get dressed so that we can go.”

Myah climbed off Trez’s lap and watched as he stood and started toward the bedroom.

She decided to keep her thoughts to herself because she knew better than to try and argue a point about anything with Trez that he already had his mind made up about. It was pointless and he would just shut her out and ignore her all together.

She wasn’t in the mood for that, so she figured that she would just check things out when she got there. She liked Ryan, but she loved her niece. She had just met her, but she loved her already. Anyone that didn’t share the same sentiment didn’t need to be around Zyen as far as Myah was concerned. Ryan included.

An hour later, they pulled into MyZell’s driveway and Myah hopped out immediately. She was excited about seeing Zyen. The second she entered the house, she was on a search for her and ran right into MyZell, who rounded the corner at the same time.

“Damn, My, slow the fuck down,” Zell said, catching her arms so that she didn’t fall.

“Where is she?” Myah asked with a frown, looking behind him toward the stairs.

“She’s upstairs with Ryan. She’s asleep and don’t go up their fucking with her. Ryan just got her down. Where’s the stuff I asked you to get?”

“I got it right here,” Trez said after he entered, carrying multiple bags which he set on the floor in the hallway, and then left out again.

“You wanted me here to help, so why can’t I see her?”

“You can, just not right now,” MyZell said, giving Myah a look that let her know not to try him on it.

“Fine, so what’s the deal with Ryan? She okay?”

They hadn’t really talked since she found out about the whole situation with Ivey and Polo. Trez had filled her in when he got home, but his explanation was vague.

“She’s good,” MyZell said, just as Trez stepped through the door carrying more bags.

“Even about Zyen?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I don’t know, I’m just curious. She seemed real upset when she found out you had a daughter.” My shrugged.

“Nah, your ass is just nosy,” Trez said, pointing at Myah before he approached MyZell and the two men dapped.

“Why wouldn’t she be? And you need to learn how to mind your fucking business in the first place. If she found out about Zyen from anybody it should have been me, not you.”

“That’s not my fault, Zell. She heard me telling Trez, I didn’t tell her.” Myah rolled her eyes and headed to the living room, leaving the two of them there. She wasn’t about to take the blame for that. In fact, if anyone was at fault it was Tan. She’d started all of this.

“So, what’s the move?” Trez asked, glancing in the direction that Myah had gone in to make sure she wasn’t hanging back to listen.

“We need to go see Tan. If anyone knows how to find him she does. Her or that dumb hoe he was fucking with.”

“Chauncey still with them?”

“Yeah. I just talked to him.”

“And then what. What you gonna do about her?”

MyZell let his hand move across his head as he stared at the floor for a minute and then looked at Trez. “Honestly, I don’t know. Every time I look at her dumb ass I have to try hard not to just choke the life out of her, but that’s Zyen’s mother. As messed up as it is, I can’t.”

“I feel you. I don’t know what the fuck I would do either but at least she kept it. That right there is enough reason for you to let her live. She ain’t shit, don’t get me wrong, but can you really look your daughter in the face one day and have to lie to her about what happened to her mother?”

MyZell had already considered that and knew that he wasn’t prepared for that. He had done a lot of messed up things in his life but taking the life of his child’s mother was something he didn’t know if he could actually go through with. “Let’s just go see what she knows and I’ll figure out the rest later.”

Trez nodded and the two headed to the door before MyZell called out to Myah.

“Ay, we’re leaving. Don’t go up there fucking with her, Myah, I mean it. Let her sleep.”

“Alright, damn. You act like I can’t understand simple instruction.” Myah rolled her eyes before she turned to walk away. The three of them knew that she was going to do what she wanted to do anyway.

“Oh, your ass understands. You just do what the hell you wanna do anyway,” Zell said just before he opened the door.

Myah didn’t bother turning around, she just held her hand up and shot him a bird, causing both him and Trez to laugh as they left the house.

“So, you not gonna do shit to Tan right now, but you still need to figure out what to do with that Eve chick. She’s loyal to that fuck nigga, so, she’s not gonna be help, just be a problem.”

“True, she don’t know shit anyway. Let’s just get there and see how it goes. We’ll deal with her if we have to.”

“So, how is Ryan for real? I mean, it’s a lot. You killed dude right there in front of her. Shit, he was on her, and now it’s like ‘hey, here’s my kid’. I’m sure she’s processing, but I can’t imagine it’s easy.”

MyZell let his head fall back before he looked at Trez. “She hasn’t really said much. I tried to talk to her about it and she keeps saying she’s fine. She’s good with Zyen. On the outside looking in, you’d think it was her kid. I just don’t want her to wake up one day and be like ‘fuck all this’ and just jet.”

“She ain’t Tan, Zell. She wouldn’t do that,” Trez said sincerely.

He had his reservations about Ryan and that was expected, but she had proven more than enough times that she had no hidden motives. She just genuinely cared about MyZell and everyone could see it. That was enough for Trez to be in her corner.

“She damn sure ain’t Tan, but that don’t mean she wants a life that’s connected to all my bullshit either,” MyZell said before he pulled the handle to get out.

He wasn’t really prepared for that conversation, so it wasn’t one he wanted to have. As far as he was concerned, if he didn’t talk about Ryan leaving, then she wouldn’t. For now, they had to go deal with Tan. She was the first of his issues that needed to be dealt with. It was just the how part that he wasn’t sure about.



“SHE’S SO PERFECT,” Myah said, looking down at her niece as she slept peacefully in the center of her brother’s king-sized bed. She was on one side of her while Ryan was on the other.

The second the she knew the coast was clear, she did exactly what Zell had told her not to do and went right up to his room. She found a sleeping Zyen and Ryan sitting beside her watching her sleep.

“She is. She looks just like him,” Ryan admitted, letting her hand move across Zyen’s soft curls.

“And you’re okay with all this?” Myah asked with raised brows.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be? He didn’t know. It’s not like he lied to me, and even if he had, she’s just a baby. I wouldn’t take it out on her. Now her mother is a completely different story,” Ryan said, feeling infuriated at the thought of Tan.

She had no clue how a mother could be so selfish. She knew MyZell well enough to know that had Tan just been honest, he would have protected her from her brother without question.

He’d killed Polo for her, and she and MyZell only had half of what he’d had with Tan, so Ryan knew for sure that MyZell would have taken lives to make sure Tan and his daughter were good.

“You don’t like her,” Myah said with a grin.

“I don’t know her, but what I do know, she’s not one of my favorite people. Regardless of how I feel, she had his baby. I know that means something.”

Ryan felt insecure for a minute, but quickly shook the thought.

“Maybe it does, but not in a way that will ever affect what you are to him. He’ll never want her again like that,” My said confidently. Even if she didn’t know if her statement was true, she planned to make it true.

“He loves you, you love him, and if you love Zyen, then that’s all that matters. Tan is not a factor, even if she thinks she is. Even if he lets her be around, she’s still not a factor, so don’t think that. You’re good for him. Are you okay, though? If you don’t want to talk about it, it’s fine, but I know it had to be scary.”

“To be honest, it all happened so fast. I just kinda blocked it out. I’m thankful that he got there because it could have been worse. I hate myself for being so dumb about it, and I hate Ivey for helping him, but I’m glad it happened. He’s gone now, and I feel like I can breathe. A part of me always felt like I had to look over my shoulder even when I was with Zell. Now, I just feel relieved.”

Myah nodded. She could somewhat understand the feeling because she had the same tightness in her chest knowing that Cutty was out there. Trez and MyZell would both give their lives to keep her safe, but it didn’t mean that they would always be there. That was the part that she didn’t like.

“I’m sorry.” Myah looked right at Ryan, who returned a confused stare.

“Sorry for what?”

“If you hadn’t heard me talking about Zyen then you wouldn’t have left.”

“And if I hadn’t offered Ivey a ride, I wouldn’t have ended up where I was. It’s not your fault. Don’t carry that.”

Myah appreciated Ryan’s sincerity, but she still felt bad. “Yeah, well Trez thinks I need to mind my own business.”

Ryan laughed and looked right at her. “Yeah, you do, but this time you get a pass. It wasn’t like you came to me with anything. Just bad timing.”

“Well, damn, tell me how you really feel,” Myah said and sucked her teeth.

“We’re family, right?” Ryan smirked and Myah laughed.

“I guess so.”

“I’m so in love with her already,” Myah said, looking down at Zyen.

“Look at her, how could you not be?”

“Trez wants a baby,” Myah said randomly.

Ryan looked at her strangely, not sure how to respond. “He does?”

“He hasn’t really said it outright, but every time I ask him about protection, he’s always like, ‘we’re good. We don’t need to worry about that’. He knows I’m not on the pill, and he has yet to use protection.”

“Is that good or bad?” Ryan released after thinking on it for a minute.

“Good, I guess.”

“Doesn’t sound like it.” Ryan offered up a grin.

Myah sighed. “His ex was pregnant. She was in medical school, though, and she wasn’t ready for kids, so she had an abortion. It just happened not too long ago and he was pissed and hurt. The whole nine. I guess I wonder if it’s really about me or if he’s trying to replace that baby.”

“I’m sure it’s about you. Most guys aren’t really like that, and it’s not like you guys don’t have history. You said the two of you have been faking the funk for a long time now, right? Like him wanting you and you wanting him, but neither of you manning up to make a move?”

“It wasn’t that simple. It was more about messing up things with him and my brother. I didn’t want to be the reason why they fell out. Zell is not really big on people, so Trez is all

he has. If things didn't work with us, then where would that leave them?"

"I get that, but they're grown, and their friendship had to be stronger and mean more than anything you could have damaged by being with or not being with Trez. I mean, they're cool with it now, so it makes sense."

Myah laughed and shook her head. "You're right, but I'm stubborn and so is he. It's all good, though. Things happened like they're supposed to and I'm happy."

"You damn sure are. You've been smiling since you got here," Ryan teased.

"Shut up. I'm smiling because of her." Myah looked down at Zyen, causing Ryan to do the same.

"The lies you tell." Ryan smirked and so did Myah.

"What about you? Do you want kids?"

Ryan knew that accepting Zyen was one thing but having kids of her own was another. She knew that MyZell wanted that.

"I'd never really thought about it. I guess if you're not around kids you don't really know if you want that or not, but I think I do," Ryan admitted.

Taking care of Zyen had her playing with the idea of having a baby of her own, and every time the thought surfaced, MyZell was the one who she wanted that with.

"Good, because I know my brother does, and that means you need to." Myah smiled, feeling a bit relieved.

"And that right there is why they keep telling you to mind your business," Ryan said and tossed a pillow at Myah, who burst out laughing.

She couldn't say anything because she knew Ryan spoke the truth. It didn't matter, though, nor would it change things. Myah was always going to look out for her baby brother whether he liked it or not.

## *fifty-five*

TAN SAT across the room looking down at the floor. Eve was on one side of her and Trez sat near them at the desk, leaning back in the leather chair with his gun resting on his knee.

“So, you don’t know shit about where he would be?” MyZell asked calmly.

“No.”

“I was with you, well, until you brought me here. He didn’t trust me to know anything about his plans because he was afraid that I would tell you. All I knew was that he was with Eve.”

MyZell laughed sarcastically. “Why would he think you would tell me? You kept our daughter from me like that shit didn’t mean anything to you.” He shot Tan an icy glare before he focused on Eve. “And let me guess, you don’t know shit either?”

“No, he just left. He didn’t tell me where he was going.”

“You fucking him, and you were getting fucked by him, but neither of you know shit about his moves? I really find that hard to believe,” MyZell said angrily.

He was annoyed and ready to get his hands on Cutty. Knowing he was lurking in the shadows pissed him off, especially knowing that he was supposedly the driving force behind him being separated from his daughter. That was reason enough for his life to be taken. Add in the fact that

Cutty was foolish enough to think that he could take what MyZell had.

Tan frowned at what MyZell said.

“So, what you wanna do, Zell?” Trez was just as anxious to get things over with. He had his own reasons for wanting to take Cutty’s life.

“Take her back. Put some people inside and watch the place. He’ll come back. He don’t have shit else here.”

“What about her?” Trez nodded at Tan and she looked right at MyZell.

“I’ll deal with her.” His words accompanied by the look he gave her had Tan praying the Trez wouldn’t leave them alone.

Trez let his eyes move from Tan to MyZell before he stood and returned his gun to his body, walked over to the door, and looked back at Eve, who didn’t move.

“The hell you sitting there for? Let’s go!” he yelled, causing her to jump a little before she got up and quickly moved to the door. “If he’s there now?” Trez had no issues at all taking Cutty’s life, but out of respect for the situation, he was going to allow MyZell to make the call.

“It’s whatever,” MyZell stated, but kept his eyes on Tan.

Trez nodded and left the two of them there. He knew that MyZell’s focus was somewhere else right now.

As soon as the door was closed, Tan began fumbling with her hands before trying to ease the tension that surrounded them both. She was afraid to even look his way because she couldn’t stand the way he looked at her. There was so much hate and disgust in his eyes that it caused her chest to tighten.

“Is she okay?” Tan’s voice was low, barely audible, but MyZell still heard her and felt the veins in his neck pulse from her asking.

“You care?”

“She’s my daughter. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Aside from the obvious, your dumb ass left her, Tan. You expect me to think you give a shit about her?”

She jumped up from where she was sitting and aggressively took a step toward him but made sure to leave enough distance between them to give herself an escape. “You don’t have to believe that, but it’s true. I did what I did because I care. He would have killed us both if I hadn’t. You don’t have to understand it, but you have no idea what I had to deal with.”

Laughing arrogantly, MyZell leaned forward and placed his forearms on his legs and interlocked his fingers. He looked up at her, his demeanor calm and composed.

“You’re right, I don’t have to understand shit, but what I know is I missed my daughter being born. I missed her first smile and a bunch of shit in-between. Nothing you went through means shit to me, but that does, and you wanna know why?”

Tan stood there looked at him until his voice roared through the room.

“Do you wanna know why?!” This time, he yelled, and she felt the tears building in her eyes as she nodded.

“Because it was all choices. You chose to help that muthafucker. You chose to keep her from me, you chose to leave her. I didn’t have a fucking choice because you made it for me.”

“But, I—”

“Fuck all that bullshit, Tan. You know me. I would have handled that shit.”

“Even after you found out why I was with you in the first place?”

“Even if I didn’t give a fuck about you, I would have protected you to protect my child, but you didn’t give me that option.”

“Are you going to kill me?” She could feel his thoughts even if he wasn’t saying them.

Again, he laughed, but only because he needed the strength to stay focused.

“I should, and trust me, you deserve to die, but what I won’t do is lie to my daughter. If I kill you, one day she’ll want to know about you, and I’m not going to tell her that I took your life. So, you owe her.”

He stared at Tan, who felt the hate radiating from him.

“Get your shit and let’s go.”

“Where... where are we going?”

MyZell didn’t say a word, he just looked at her in a way that let her know that it wasn’t the time.

Tan was grateful. She moved quickly through the room, packing what little she had. When she was done, she followed him to the door.

An hour later they were at his condo and she sat in the kitchen while he moved through his condo collecting all of Ryan’s things. He hadn’t bothered to ask Ryan if she even wanted to stay with him, but he was making the decision for her. He needed the condo to keep Tan close.

When he was done cleaning out everything that belonged to Ryan, he placed the bags at the door and then stood in the doorway of the kitchen.

“You can stay here,” he said before he turned to walk away.

“Can I see her?”

MyZell didn’t bother to respond. He knew at some point he would deal with Tan because he would have to, but now wasn’t the time.

“There’s a car in the garage and I left money for you. If you need anything, go get it.”

He really wasn’t concerned about her leaving because it didn’t matter to him one way or another. He had his daughter and no issues whatsoever raising her alone.



“I need to see Zyen. I know you’re mad, and you have every right to be, but will you at least let me see her?” Tan pleaded. When he didn’t respond, she kept talking. “Do you think you’re going to keep her from me? Is that your plan? Why bring me here if you don’t want to fix things? She’s my daughter, MyZell, mine and yours, and you can’t just take her like that.”

MyZell laughed arrogantly before he turned to walk away. Tan watched as he made his way to the door, lifted the bags next to it, and then opened it.

“MyZell, please!”

Again, he ignored her and walked out, slamming the door behind him. She stood there feeling like he had just ripped her heart out of her chest, but she knew she couldn’t do anything about it.

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“SIR, IS MS. BARNES WITH YOU?” The clerk looked up at Cutty hesitantly, not really wanting to decline the transaction but he also didn’t want to get in trouble for allowing him to use a card that clearly didn’t belong to him.

“Nah, she asked me to get the room for us. That’s my girlfriend,” Cutty said, looking him right in his eyes.

He knew he was fucked by trying to use Eve’s card to get a room, but he really didn’t want to use the little cash he had. Cutty had been hiding out for the past two weeks after he’d returned to her apartment and found out that Eve was gone. He was afraid to call for fear that MyZell actually had Eve and could somehow track him. The room that MyZell had Tan in was now empty and Cutty was starting to feel panicked.

“We’ll need her to come in to confirm the charge, but we accept cash and all other credit cards. Would you like to pay another way?”

“What I’d like is for you to take this damn card. There are cameras all up in here. Do you think I would be using this shit if I didn’t have permission to? Fuck I look like?”

“Sir, I understand, but policy states—”

“Fuck you and your policy,” Cutty mumbled, pulling cash from his pocket. He placed enough down to cover the room and then waited for his change.

The attendant handed it over when he was done, along with a plastic keycard.

“Elevators are to the left and breakfast is—”

Cutty shot him a nasty glance before he walked off while the clerk was in mid-sentence. He was annoyed and not in the mood. At this point, he had no clue what his next move was going to be, so right now he was headed to the room to try and get his thoughts together.

After he entered the room, he grabbed his backpack, tossed it on the bed, and looked around. The room was decent, but not like he wanted. He knew better than to try one of the nicer places because he knew for sure that they wouldn't let him use Eve's card to pay.

"Fuck!" he yelled out to the empty room before he sat down on the bed and leaned back, covering his face with his folded arms.

Tan was missing, which meant that MyZell had either killed her or was protecting her. Either way, that meant that MyZell knew what Cutty was up to, and he knew that Tan was weak. Cutty was sure that the second she was faced with telling the truth or dying, she'd give him up in a heartbeat. The only leverage he had was gone, and that was her daughter.

The one person he thought for sure would never turn on him was missing, along with Zyen. That was the only insurance Cutty had and now they were both gone.

Removing his gun from his waist band he chambered it and placed it to his temple with a devious smirk before he broke into a fit of laughter. He was consumed with the idea of killing MyZell and imagining how it would feel to have his gun pressed to MyZell's head.

After a few seconds, he got it together and sat up, placing the gun on the nightstand before he pulled his phone out and sent Eve a text. He needed her and was hoping that she would eventually show up. There was a slight chance that she'd ran and MyZell didn't have her. He had to believe in that. There was no way she would turn her back on him. No way.

\* \* \*

“He’s not going to come back. How long are you going to make me sit here?”

Eve cut her eyes at Chauncey, who was in charge of watching her this shift. Or rather babysitting her. All they did was sit there and watch TV while making sure she didn’t leave, touch her phone, or do anything other than eat or sleep.

“You sit here until Zell and Trez tell me otherwise. You got a problem with that? I’ll call them and you can tell them. Otherwise, don’t say shit to me because your voice is annoying as hell. Why the hell you gotta whine when you talk, shorty?”

“Fuck you,” Eve said, growing annoyed by his rude and harsh demeanor. As if it wasn’t bad enough that she was mixed up in this in the first place, the person behind it all left her cold and hadn’t so much as thought about how he had messed up her life.

Chauncey smirked and then licked his lips. “I would, but you like them crazy niggas. I can’t fuck with that, but you sexy, though. Too bad I don’t like dumb hoes.”

Eve’s expression grew hard as she glared at him. This was what her life had come to. Falling for the wrong man had put her here and there wasn’t anything she could do about it but wait and pray that MyZell found him and killed him soon.

Cutty dying was her ticket to freedom and she knew that was her only way out. She just prayed that she had an out, that he’d keep his promise and let her go once he’d handled Cutty.

“Don’t look like that, baby girl. I’m just fucking with you. I mean, I meant that shit about dumb hoes because it’s true, but don’t let that get you down. You’re young, you’ll figure it out, if you live long enough to.” Chauncey winked at her and then focused on the TV again.

His statement about her living long enough to figure things out caused a tightening in Eve’s chest that had her feeling like she couldn’t breathe. The only thing that eased it was her phone vibrating on the table in front of where Chauncey was sitting.

He glanced at her before he lifted it and read the message. She moved closer and held her hand out.

“Can I have my phone please?”

He dropped her phone in his lap, smirked, and leaned back to reach in his pocket to get his own.

“Nah, you know the rules. The hell you asking me that for?”

“It’s my phone. Can you at least tell me if it’s him?”

“Why? You miss that nigga? He the reason why you in this shit, shorty.”

“Do you have to be such an asshole? I get it, I’m dumb, I made a mistake. You don’t have to keep throwing that in my face,” Eve snapped, causing him to chuckle, but not respond to her. Instead, he made a call.

His loyalty was to the men that paid him, MyZell and Trez. Eve’s tantrum didn’t move him one way or another. In fact, it only annoyed him.

“Ay, she just got a text. I think it’s him,” he said after he got MyZell on the line.

“What it say?”

“Where are you? I’m worried.”

Chauncey waited for MyZell to answer, but kept his eyes on Eve, who was glaring at him.

“Sit tight, we’ll be there soon.”

“Aight, bet.”

Chauncey ended the call and tossed his phone on the sofa next to him before he focused on the TV again. He could feel Eve’s eyes on him, but he didn’t bother to look her way.

“Well, what did he say? Should I reply? If I reply, we can —”

“Ay, shut the fuck up. We got this shit covered. Go find something to do, ’cause you bugging the fuck outta me.”

Knowing that she had no say in anything that was going on and that she was simply a means to an end, Eve gave up and left the room.

She had no idea what the outcome was going to be; she simply prayed that she lived through it.

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## *fifty-seven*

“WHAT’S THAT ABOUT?” Ryan asked after MyZell had ended his call. She knew something was wrong because his entire mood had changed within a matter of minutes.

“Nothing, but I have to head out. You good with her or you want me to take her to Myah?”

Frowning, Myah adjusted Zyen in her lap. “Why do you always do that?”

“Do what, Ryan?”

“Act like it’s a problem for me to be with her.”

“I’m not acting like it’s a problem, but I’m also very aware that she’s my responsibility. I don’t ever want to assume shit, so I ask,” MyZell said calmly, but with no expression.

Since the three of them had been living under the same roof, things were good, but they were all still adjusting. Ryan had jumped right into the role of caring for Zyen, but that didn’t mean that MyZell was going to assume that he had the right to put the responsibility of raising Zyen on Ryan.

MyZell took care of his daughter every chance he got and never asked Ryan to do much of anything. In the same right, he didn’t have to because she always stepped up. He appreciated that, but he didn’t want to expect anything.

“But if it bothered me then I wouldn’t be here.”

MyZell exhaled slowly before he walked over and sat down next to Ryan. He lifted Zyen from her lap and couldn’t

stop the smile forming as her tiny face focused on his. She smiled big before she reached for his beard.

Looking at her was like looking in a mirror for him and he loved it. She was his heart already, and over the past two weeks, he had fallen in love with his daughter over and over again every time he laid eyes on her or held her in his arms.

“Don’t make it a thing, Ry, I’m glad you’re here. I need you with me. She needs you, but I just don’t want it to be too much. We’re just figuring shit out with us, and now she’s here. I’m just trying to be fair.”

MyZell looked across his shoulder at Ryan, who was staring at Zyen before she looked up at him.

“We’re a family, right?” Ryan smiled again before her eyes fell on Zyen, who was trying her best to grab her father’s low, neatly trimmed beard.

MyZell chuckled and looked at Ryan. “Family? Oh, we’re a family?”

Holding her head back slightly, she tilted it to the side just a bit and gave him a knowing look. “We better be.”

He kissed her on the cheek before he delivered several to Zyen and then handed her back to Ryan. MyZell stood and Ryan stood also. She followed him to the bedroom, where she watched him finish dressing while she held Zyen on her hip.

“I’m not her mother. I know she has one, but...”

MyZell cut her sentence short with a look. The same look he’d given her anytime she brought up Tan. It had been two weeks and he hadn’t so much as even considered taking Zyen to see her. He hadn’t even been by there to see if she was good, which bothered Ryan. She didn’t care about Tan one way or another, but she was like unfinished business. Tan was living at MyZell’s condo, and like it or not, she was Zyen’s mother, so they had to deal with her at some point.

“Not now,” he said coldly before he disappeared into the closet and returned carrying a pair of all gray Huaraches.



“Then when? You can’t just keep pretending like she doesn’t exist,” Ryan said, treading lightly. She knew it was a touchy subject.

Her words caused him to release a sarcastic laugh before he looked at his daughter and then Ryan.

“Why the hell not? Isn’t that exactly what she did to me?” he said before he stood and stepped around Ryan, who was blocking his path to the dresser where his keys and wallet were.

“MyZell!”

“Ay, I have to go. We’ll talk later, aight?” He moved closer to her and let their lips connect before he looked down at his daughter who was reaching for him.

“Be good, baby girl. I’ll be back,” he said to her before he ran his hand across her thick curls and then started toward the bedroom door.

Ryan followed him into the hall and then down the stairs. When he reached the front door, she watched as he disarmed the system and then unlocked the door.

“Lock up, I’ll call you when I can,” was the last thing he said before he left out the door.

As soon as he was in his car, he dialed Trez and waited for him to pick up.

MyZell was still pissed about the situation with Tan and hadn’t been calm enough to deal with her yet. He knew for a fact that she was still at his place because he drove by there at least once a day to make sure, but he wasn’t ready to deal with her about Zyen yet.

“What’s up, Zell?”

“Met me at Eve’s place in like twenty minutes. He texted, so we need to try and draw that nigga out. I’m ready to get this shit over with.”

“Aight, bet. You good?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Shit, I’m just asking. You sound stressed as a muthafucker. I’ve been trying to give your ass space, but Myah been bugging the fuck outta me trying to get to you. I’m just making sure you good, fam.”

MyZell smirked at the fact that he hadn’t really seen or talked to Myah in almost a week. He knew that’d had something to do with Trez, but he was so wrapped up in trying to adjust to life with Ryan and Zyen that he hadn’t really put much thought into it.

He knew his sister and he knew she was about to die from having to stay away. That wasn’t like them at all. Then, he also had the situation with Cutty, who was still hiding out. He was just ready to put an end to that so that he could move on.

“I’m good. Like I said, just ready to get this shit over with so I can try to figure out the rest.”

“Tan?”

“Yeah.” MyZell’s hand moved across his hair down the side of his face.

“You talked to her?”

“Nah, I’m afraid to. I really don’t think I can be calm about this shit. Every time I look at my daughter and think about what I missed, I really want to just fuck Tan up.”

Trez chuckled. “Nah, you can’t do that, but I can. Just say the word.”

Neither MyZell nor Trez were the type to put their hands on women, but Trez knew that Zell was in a bad headspace, so he was just trying to ease the tension.

Trez wasn’t about to fuck with Tan unless it was necessary, but he also needed Zell to know that if need be, he would support whatever decision he made.

MyZell smiled and shook his head. “You either, fam. This is my mess and I’ll fix it. I’ll deal with her. I just need a minute. But I’m leaving now. I’ll see you there.”

“Aight bet, I’m on my way.”

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“WHY DID YOU RUN, EVE?”

She glanced at MyZell, who was standing next to her with his gun at his side. She knew that it was loaded because she had watched him chamber it before she made the call.

“You left and you didn’t come back. What did you expect me to do?”

“Wait for me, damn, Eve. Why was that shit so hard to understand?”

She flinched at the irritation in his voice. “They came here looking for you. I was scared, Cutty. They threatened me because of you, so the second they left, I took Zyen and ran. I couldn’t find you and I didn’t know how to get in touch with Tan. What else was I supposed to do?”

“So, they just threatened you and then left? What about the baby? They didn’t say shit about her or ask you any questions?”

“No, they didn’t see her. She was asleep, so I hid her in the closet. I told you I would keep her safe.”

“Fuck that damn baby. She’s the reason why shit is all messed up right now, anyway. Tan is on some bullshit, and I bet she done teamed up with that nigga and got him after me. I need you, Eve. I need to know that you still got me.”

MyZell felt his pulse racing at the comments Cutty had made about his daughter. It took all the restraint he had to keep his mouth closed, which Trez sensed, so he placed his hand on MyZell’s shoulder to keep him calm.

“I am, but you left me. I’m scared Cutty. I don’t have anywhere to go. I can’t show up at my parents’ house with a baby that doesn’t belong to me.”

“Ay, calm down. I got you and we’ll figure this shit out together. We’re still together, right?”

“Yes, but I don’t know what to do from here. I need you to tell me.”

“I just have to find a way to get to him before he gets to me. Tell me where you are and I’ll come to you.”

“What if they’re watching me?” Eve said, looking up at MyZell. They had drilled her for hours with questions and scenarios to get Cutty to agree to meet her.

It was all a game of chance, but they made it clear that she had to gain his trust. Her life depended on it and she wasn’t about to die for him.

“Let me worry about that. I’ll come tonight. Late tonight. Tell me where you are?”

“I’m at the Super Eight out in Midtown, room one twenty-two.”

“Aight, bet. Just stay there. Don’t leave the room and don’t talk to anybody. I’ll be there tonight. I got you, Eve, just don’t fucking play me,” he said harshly.

“Play you? How? I’m alone, I have your niece, and you’re all I have. Why would I do anything to mess that up?”

“Just remember what I said, Eve. Don’t fuckin play me.” Cutty hung up the phone and Eve looked right at MyZell.

“There, are you happy?” she said before her eyes moved down his body to where he was holding his gun.

“Not yet, but the second I put a bullet in that muthafucker I will be,” MyZell said before he stepped away from her and took her phone from the table.

“You think he’ll show up? He don’t sound like he got much faith in her ass.” Trez nodded toward Eve before he focused on MyZell again.

“I don’t know, but she better hope he does.”

“I can’t control that. Why are you putting this on me?” Eve got nervous about his statement.

“Cause I don’t trust you any more than he does. Shit, your ass might have said some slick shit to let him know you was still down. You were riding for his crazy ass.” MyZell glanced at Eve and the look of disgust that he gave her made her feel like shit.

“What could I have possibly said to him? You were standing right next to me with a gun in your hand. Do you really think I’m that stupid?”

“Yeah, we do, now take your ass on so we can talk,” Trez said, pointing to the back of her apartment.

Feeling defeated, Eve did as she was told with Chauncey following her.

“You don’t have to follow me. There isn’t anything I can do.”

“You got a window in your room. You might try to climb through that shit or something.” Chauncey smirked and Trez chuckled.

“Aight, so we already got shit set up. If he shows, we kill his ass and keep it moving. If not, then what?”

“Then we light up the entire city until we find his ass. I’m about to head home for a few.” MyZell pointed at the other two guys that were with them.

“Take her out there to the hotel. Stay with her until we get there. Don’t let her ass breathe without keeping your eyes on her. If you fuck that up, then I fuck you up.”

\* \* \*

“Is everything okay?” Myah asked as soon as Trez walked in the door.

He ignored her and focused on the text he had from Sya. She had been trying to get in touch with him over the past few days and he needed to let her know what was up, but he had been so wrapped up in everything that he hadn't bothered responding to her.

"What the hell is texting you, Trez?" Myah balled up her face and snatched his phone out of his hand. She scrolled through the text and then held it up in the air. "This what we're doing now?" she snapped.

Trez wasn't the type to argue, so he didn't respond. He just walked past her and headed to the kitchen, which pissed her off even more. Myah knew the name and remembered the day that she'd walked in on her giving him head.

After opening the refrigerator and getting a beer, Trez leaned against the counter and looked at Myah while he twisted the cap off and then turned the beer up.

"So, you don't have anything to say about this?"

Holding his beer low and crossing his hands in front of his body just below the waist, he looked right at her and spoke calmly. "About what?"

"You still dealing with her?" Myah asked, holding up his phone again.

"You read the text, you tell me."

"Just because you didn't reply doesn't mean that you didn't call or go see her. Plus, you have another phone, Trez, I'm not stupid."

He turned up his beer again and then placed it on the counter before reaching into his pocket. Once he had his other phone in his hand, he held it out to her and waited.

"Take it, it ain't locked. I'm grown as fuck, Myah, and I do what the fuck I want, so I don't have to hide anything."

"You probably deleted it already," she mumbled.

"Why the hell are you so insecure? Did I say shit when you was running around with that crazy muthafucker? Hell no, I let you do you, right? We been together for a hot ass minute,

My. And not only that, look at all the shit that's gone down in the past couple weeks. So, forgive me if I didn't have a chance to tell her ass to back the fuck off."

"You could have, you just didn't," Myah said, rolling her eyes.

Trez chuckled and then lifted his beer. He wasn't the type to do that back and forth, especially over dumb shit like another female. That wasn't his thing and it wasn't about to be his thing.

"If it means that much to you, reply. Say whatever the hell you want to say. Hell, call her if you want to. That shit don't matter to me one way or another. I got more important shit to worry about like keeping your ass safe from your last bad decision, but I'm not judging you over that shit, nor am I concerned about you being with anybody but me."

He placed his empty beer bottle on the counter and then walked off.

Myah stood there for a minute, confused by his reaction. She knew Trez and knew him well. They had a lot of history, but she was quickly learning that the Trez she had come to know was quite different from the one she was now intimate with. He didn't argue, didn't allow her to get away with the tantrums that she usually threw, and never gave in to her insecurities.

"Why not?" she asked after she'd joined him in the bedroom where he was now lying back on the bed with his arms folded across his face.

"Why aren't you worried about me being with anyone else?"

"Because I can't make you do anything you don't want to do. If your heart's not in it then there ain't shit I can do to change that. What's the point in stressing over that shit?" he said, lifting one arm to look at her while he spoke and then lowering it again when he was done.

"So, you won't fight for me?"



He chuckled and lifted his arms then lowered them onto his chest. “Hell yeah, I’ll fight for you. The fuck you think I’m doing now by running around the city trying to kill Cutty’s pussy ass. But that don’t mean I don’t understand that you will only be where you want to be. You need to understand that too, Myah. You can go through my phone right now and find ten women who will do anything just for five minutes of my time, but that ain’t what I want. I’m here with you. If you don’t know that, then I’m not gonna argue the point with you. The shit is pointless. Be more concerned about what I do and not what I say. That nigga probably sold you a fucking dream just like every other nigga that wanted something from you, but how did that work out?”

Myah didn’t answer because she knew he was being funny about it.

“Exactly, so if you want to worry about some stupid ass text that I didn’t respond to then go for it, but I can think of much better things that you could be doing with your time, shorty.”

Trez traced Myah’s body with his eyes and she rolled her eyes before she smiled, knowing exactly what he meant.

“I thought you had things to do?”

“Later, so what’s up?”

“So, I’m just supposed to be over this?” she said, holding up both of his phones.

“You can do what you wanna do.” Trez lifted his arms from where they rested on his chest and folded them under his head.

“I hate you.”

“Yep, now bring your ass over here and stop acting like an insecure brat.”

“I’m not insecure because I want to make sure my man isn’t fucking around.”

“Nah, you’re right, but you’re insecure because you know I’m not, but you’re still entertaining that shit. I waited for

years, Myah. Why would I mess that up now?”

“Because men are stupid,” she said, standing between his legs after she’d placed his phones on the dresser behind her.

“Don’t put me in a category. I damn sure ain’t like everybody else and you know that or you wouldn’t be here.”

Trez watched as Myah leaned down and unbuckled his jeans and then slid her hands inside them. He was already standing at attention, which made her smile as she released him and then worked her way out of the jeans she was wearing. Her next move was to climb on the bed to join him. Straddling his lap, she used both hands to secure him in place before she lifted herself enough to ease down his length.

Trez watched with a pleased grin as Myah grinded against his pelvis.

She was a handful, but she was worth it.

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## *fifty-nine*

MYZELL ENTERED the house and got suspicious because it was too quiet. He headed straight for the bedroom, which was dark and the empty. His house wasn't overly big, but it was possible to be in one part of it and not be heard from another, so he moved from room to room looking for Ryan and his daughter. He ended up in the kitchen and dialed her number while he pulled up the security footage and ran it back.

Relief hit him while he watched Ryan backing out of the garage and then pulling off the property, but her call went straight to voicemail, which sent him into panic mode. Based on the video, it was two hours ago that Ryan had left and she hadn't checked in with him.

Cutty was still lurking around, and even though they had a meet set up for later that night, they still didn't have eyes on him. The thought of anything happening to Ryan or his daughter at the hands of Cutty or anyone for that matter had him seeing red.

Dialing again, he waited, but ended the call as soon as he caught sight of her vehicle pulling back onto the property.

He moved to the door so quick, he had no memory of how it opened or him rushing to her car. Seeing that Ryan was okay aside from the frown on her face, his first move after she stopped was to pull the back door open and inspect Zyen, who was sleeping peacefully in her car seat. He then waited for Ryan to open her door and get out.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were leaving?” His tone was a little more aggressive than he’d intended, but it couldn’t be helped.

With everything going on in his life right now, Ryan and Zyen’s safety were his main priority. For her to be out of reach, even when he didn’t know that she was, had him on edge. Until that moment, he hadn’t realized just how protective he had become over the two of them.

“You weren’t here and I was just running to the store. It was nice out and I was tired of sitting in the house, so I took Zyen to the park.”

Ryan searched his face, trying to figure out what was going on, why he was so upset. She didn’t know if it was her leaving with Zyen or if something else was going on.

“She’s too little for that. She can’t do shit at the park. What you take her there for and you don’t know shit about Miami? What fucking park?” he asked with a scowl on his face.

He wasn’t upset about the fact that Ryan had taken Zyen to the park, he was more in his feelings about the fact that they were alone without him and the idea of anyone having access to them.

“There’s one around the corner from here. We’ve passed it a million times, Zell. I was tired of being in the house, and I didn’t want to just walk around the mall or a store, so I took her to the park. We just sat there watching the other kids play. What is wrong with you?” she asked, not feeling his tone or the aggression behind his mood.

Sensing her aggravation with him, he moved his hand down his face to calm himself. They were both fine and there was no need for him to be upset.

Ryan had no idea what was going on with Cutty or that he was still in his feelings about the situation with Polo, so it wasn’t her fault and he knew it. He couldn’t expect her to understand his anxiety about things that she had no knowledge of. Exhaling, he kissed her on the cheek, but didn’t say a word. He just got Zyen out the back and grabbed her bag from the

seat next to her, then waited for Ryan to take the lead as the two of them headed into the house.

MyZell took Zyen straight to the living room and set her on the sofa, leaving her buckled in her seat. After she was stationary, he kissed her several times on the cheek and then went to find Ryan, who was in the kitchen.

He walked in just in time to see her slip a box from the bag she had in her hand into her purse. He knew exactly what it was and that split second changed his entire mood.

When Ryan heard him behind her, she turned and focused on his eyes. She noticed that his features were now softer and more relaxed, but she was still annoyed by his reaction.

“Are you upset because I took Zyen out without asking you?”

“No.” His answer was confident, which Ryan noticed.

“Then what’s wrong? Is there something going on?”

MyZell didn’t answer. Instead, he glanced at her purse and then walked over to it. He slipped his hand inside and pulled out the navy and white box.

“Is there?” he questioned, holding it up. His expression was unreadable and that made Ryan uneasy.

“No.” Ryan moved forward enough to snatch the box from his hand and then tried to move past him to exit the kitchen, but he made it his business to step in front of her.

“Why you buy that then? You don’t just buy a pregnancy test unless you think you need it.”

As much truth as there was to his statement, Ryan hadn’t wanted to discuss it with him until she knew for sure. She was almost convinced that she was pregnant because of the changes her body was going through, but that could have been a number of things.

With MyZell finding out about Zyen and the two of them only being months into whatever they had, she just didn’t want to create any issues that didn’t need to exist. Her plan was to take the test alone, and if it was negative, he would never

know. If it were positive, she would figure out her next move after thinking it through and weighing all the options. Now, she was face to face with the issue and had no way of excluding him from a positive or negative result, and she knew it.

“I thought maybe, so I just got it. I’ll take it whenever and —”

He smirked and walked past her but caught her hand and pulled her with him.

“Nah, you can take it now. We need to know,” he said as he pulled her with him toward the hallway.

He stopped at the half bath that was just outside the kitchen and pushed the door open. Ryan looked at him first and then at the door leading to the bathroom.

“We can wait.”

“We could, but we’re not going to,” he said.

The smirk he’d worn only seconds before was now gone, and once again, Ryan couldn’t read his expression. Knowing that there was no argument that she could use to prolong the inevitable, she gave in and entered the bathroom.

After flipping on the switch, she slammed the door and stood there for a moment with her head back before she ripped open the box.

MyZell stayed put a few feet away from the door. He didn’t move, but he could feel anxiety building in his body. He had played around with the idea of Ryan being pregnant, but not in a way like it could actually happen. They weren’t always the best with protection and a few late nights and early mornings had compromised their situation.

It wasn’t that he didn’t believe it was totally possible that she could get pregnant, he just didn’t let the idea consume him to where he obsessed over it. Standing outside the door waiting, MyZell felt like an eternity had passed before he heard the toilet flush and then water running in the sink. Unable to hold still any longer, he took a step forward, but the door opened before he was able to get to it.

“Well?”

Ryan stood frozen, barely having processed the information herself.

“I’m pregnant,” she mumbled as she left the bathroom.

MyZell stepped inside, needing to see the results for himself. He didn’t know why, but he needed to be attached to every step. He assumed that it had something to do with missing out on the process with Zyen.

A smile formed on his face as he scammed the tiny plastic stick which housed confirmation. He hadn’t even known until that moment that he wanted a baby with Ryan, but as history would repeat itself, he hadn’t known that he’d wanted Zyen either until he’d laid eyes on her and held her in his arms.

The difference being that he loved Ryan and didn’t just want to love their child, like his situation with Tan. He wanted to love Ryan through the process and build something with her.

“Ay, what’s wrong?” he questioned as soon as he joined Ryan in the living room where she sat next to Zyen. Ryan had her hands resting in her lap and was just staring blankly at Zyen.

“So, what now?” Ryan sounded almost disappointed and that annoyed MyZell. Why wasn’t she happy? She was happy with him, or so he’d thought.

“Shit, I don’t know. I’ve never done this before,” MyZell said jokingly, but Ryan’s expression caused his to harden a little.

“What about Zyen?” Ryan asked, not meaning Zyen in general, but the situation itself.

“Fuck you mean what about Zyen? She’s my daughter, and that don’t have shit to do with you being pregnant, Ryan. Why the hell you asking about her?”

“Don’t yell at me, MyZell. How could I not ask about her? You just found out about your daughter. Her mother is living at

your condo and you won't even talk to her. I'm pregnant. Do you not see how all those things are connected?"

"No, I fucking don't. Tan don't have shit to do with you and me or Zyen for that matter. Fuck her. That baby you're carrying right there, that's got everything to do with us, though. You trying to tell me you don't want it because I have Zyen?"

"Yes, I want my baby?"

"My?" MyZell questioned. "You didn't make that baby by yourself, Ryan."

"This baby, our baby. What difference does it make how I say it?"

"A lot of fucking difference," Myzell said, looking her right in the eyes.

They were both quiet. MyZell looking at Ryan, and her looking down at her hands, which were still in her lap. He was the first one to speak again.

"Ryan, listen." He paused for a minute to get his thoughts together. He knew that he needed to say exactly the right thing. "I love Zyen in a way that I didn't even know I could, and yeah, shit is crazy with her mother right now. I'm not there yet, but that's on me. You're not her and you know that, so what's going on with that situation don't have shit to do with us and never will. You about to give me something I didn't know I wanted. Not just a baby, but everything that comes with it."

MyZell tugged at the waist of his jeans before he bent to a squatting position so that he was eye level with Ryan. He used one hand to lift her chin to where she was focused on him, and he smiled at her pretty face. The first thought that flowed through his mind was a son or daughter who looked just like her.

"You're not gonna leave me, are you?" His question surprised Ryan and she frowned but answered quickly.

"No, I wouldn't do that."



The intensity behind her response deepened the smile he already wore. “So, you gonna give me a son then?”

Ryan smiled and shook her head. “I have no control over that?”

“You right, ’cause I been wearing your ass out, which means that I had control. We already know I make girls, but that’s cool. Y’all about to have me out numbered up in here,” MyZell teased, trying to lighten the mood. He wanted Ryan to be happy, but more than anything, he didn’t want her to run. He couldn’t handle that.

“Are you sure this is what you want? We barely even have us figured out.” She looked down at Zyen, who was still sleeping peacefully, looking like her father’s twin.

MyZell did the same before he stood and then pulled Ryan to her feet, forcing her into his personal space.

“I want you and everything that comes with that. The way you look at me when I annoy the fuck out of you, the way you smile when I enter the room, the way you whisper my name at night when I hold you close and kiss your neck, but more than that, I want this.” He worked his hand between them and placed it on her stomach, bringing a smile to her face, which she tried her best to contain.

“I love my daughter, Ryan. I swear on everything real I do, but the way she got here, and who she’s connected to, that shit ain’t how it should be. I want it the right way, so yeah, I want this baby.”

Ryan nodded, and that was that. She and MyZell were having a baby.

## LATER THAT NIGHT

“Damn, how your ass go from no kids to two in the blink of a fucking eye?” Trez asked with a smirk before he inhaled from the blunt that he was holding.

“It be’s like that sometimes, but don’t you be getting no ideas. Myah ain’t having no goddamn kids, Trez. I mean that shit.”

Trez chuckled and spoke through the smoke he was exhaling. “I guess your ass ain’t get the memo then. I just put one in her before I came here. Shit, if I’m lucky, I put two up in her ass. You know I got twins in my family and shit. Both my parents and two of my cousins.”

“Nigga, I know that, but why are you saying that shit to me like I really wanna hear that shit?” MyZell frowned, not wanting to have any thoughts about his sister having sex with anybody, and especially not his best friend.

It made him think about conversations that the two of them had about women that they had fucked with in the past and that wasn’t cool.

Passing off the blunt that he was holding, Trez shrugged. “You brought that shit up, so that’s on you, Zell. I’m just saying, you might have a niece, nephew, or both soon.”

“You ain’t shit, but you still my peoples.”

MyZell’s statement made Trez laugh. He knew the meaning behind it and respected the importance of it.

“So, what we doing? You laying hands on this nigga or you just taking his life?”

MyZell let his head fall back against the seat as his high settled in. “I won’t know until it happens.”

Handing over his blunt, Trez inhaled and nodded. It made perfect sense to him. Trez wanted to fuck him up first, but he was letting MyZell take the lead.

Cutty keeping his daughter from him outweighed the fact that Cutty tried to fuck Myah over to get to them.

“I don’t know what the fuck to do,” MyZell said randomly with his eyes closed. For some reason, Ryan was on his mind, which made him think about Tan. It was like one thought couldn’t exist without the other.

“Bout what?”

“Tan.”

Trez looked at his friend for a brief moment and could see the tension in his expression.

“You already said you can’t kill her, so you already know what you gonna do. You gonna figure out a way to make that shit work.”

MyZell chuckled because the way Trez said it made it all sound so simple and matter of fact, but what was he supposed to do with the fact that he wanted to kill her every time he looked at her, and the fact that he didn’t want his daughter anywhere near her.

He damn sure didn’t want to leave Zyen with alone with her, but he knew that he couldn’t avoid it. He had to trust Tan with the most precious thing that he owned and knowing that she’d fucked him over more than once made that impossible for him to do.

“I wish it was that easy.”

“It is. You either do or you don’t. There ain’t no in-between with shit like that. At least you got a kid to argue over,” Trez said, slipping into his feelings briefly about Korri aborting his child.

Nothing else needed to be said about the situation, so they both left it at that.

MyZell noticed movement out the corner of his eye and pointed.

“That him?” he asked as he watched a dark figure moving toward the hotel.

They had purposely picked one that had first floor rooms with a street entrance. Eve also didn't have shit, so it didn't make sense for her to be somewhere nice. Cutty wasn't too bright, but they didn't want to chance it.

“Gotta be. Same build that nigga got, but he got that hood on,” Trez said, checking out the person moving toward Eve's room.

“Yeah, that's him. Look...”

MyZell nodded at the door that led to Eve's room. They had two guys inside just in case, but they wanted to be outside to see him when he approached.

“Let's go end this shit so I can get home for round two,” Trez said with a smirk as he reached under his seat for his gun, which already had a silencer affixed to it.

“Yo, don't make me shoot your dumb ass. You really trying me with that shit, Trez,” MyZell said as he followed Trez's motion and retrieved his gun from under the passenger seat.

Trez just chuckled and got out. He'd really only said that to fuck with MyZell, but trust, he was heading straight home to fuck Myah when he they were done. He had made that very clear to her as well before he'd left.

When the two reached the room, they found Eve sitting in a chair in the corner while Cutty was on his knees with his hands above his head. He had a scowl on his face as soon as he realized Trez and MyZell were in the room with him.

“Damn, nigga, I really didn't think your ass would fall for this shit. How the fuck you gonna take over our shit, but you fall for some okie doke shit like this? ‘Meet me at a room and

come alone.' You ain't too bright, are you?" MyZell grinned as he scanned the room. It was old and dingy. The comforter was full of stains and peeling wallpaper lined the bathroom walls.

"Nah, I knew, but I'm a man, so I showed anyway. Your pussy ass is the one with guns everywhere 'cause you too afraid to face me alone."

Trez smirked. "This nigga here must be a fucking lunatic. How you on your knees with heat aimed at you and you still talking shit? Damn, I like yo' ass a little bit. Too bad you 'bout to die, though."

MyZell held his hand up to signal for his guys to lower their guns. They did just that and then looked right at him.

"What you want us to do with her?"

"Keep her until this shit is cleaned up and she don't have anything to talk about that can be proven. After that, I don't give a fuck what you do with her."

MyZell looked right at Eve and the ice in his stare made her flinch. He didn't have to worry about her ever again. If she lived through tonight, she would never so much as speak his name again. That was a promise she'd made herself when all this began.

"Aight, we out. Let us know when they need to clean this shit up."

One of the guys grabbed Eve by the arm, yanking her from the chair. She went willingly as he guided her to the door. She refused to put up any type of resistance. If it meant living, she would do whatever they asked her to.

After they cleared the room, MyZell handed over his gun to Trez and then lifted the one that was placed on the bed. He assumed it belonged to Cutty and his guys had taken it from him.

"So my pussy ass is the one with guns everywhere because I'm afraid to be alone with you?" MyZell wore no expression as he repeated the statement that Cutty had delivered to him.

“Hell yeah and—”

Thinking of his daughter and the fact that Cutty was the main reason why he had missed the first few months of her life, MyZell swung so hard that when his fist made contact with Cutty, he heard Cutty’s neck crack as his head jerked back.

When Cutty’s body slumped to the floor, MyZell waited for him to come for him, but it never happened. Cutty never moved.

“The fuck, Zell? Did you just hit that fool so hard that you snapped his neck?” Trez leaned over Cutty and used his foot to kick at Cutty’s lifeless body.

“No, muthafucker, he ain’t dead, but I knocked his ass out.”

“So, what now, that’s it?” Trez asked with a smirk.

MyZell held his hand out and Trez placed his gun in it. MyZell wanted a fight, but as long as Cutty was dead and this situation was over, he was good. He had more important shit to worry about, like the fact that Ryan was pregnant and figuring out what his next move with Tan was going to be.

He stood over Cutty and fired two shots to the head. It was messy, but he needed to make sure he was dead. Once he was satisfied, he moved to the door, but Trez stood there looking down at Cutty.

“The fuck wrong with you? Let’s go, so they can get this shit cleaned up,” MyZell said

Trez chambered his gun and emptied the clip in Cutty and then stepped away.

“Aight, let’s roll,” he said like he hadn’t just emptied his clip into a body that was already dead.

“You good now?” Zell asked with a smirk before the two exited the room. Trez shooting Cutty was personal.

“Hell yeah. I’ll be even better when I get home and put this baby up in Myah.”

“Ay, my clip ain’t empty, nigga. Chill the fuck out,” MyZell said as he pulled out his phone.

Trez laughed and leaned against the car while he waited.

“It’s done, hurry the fuck up,” was all he said before he ended the call.

“So, just to be clear, Ryan don’t have any twisted ass family members that are coming for us, do she?”

MyZell had no idea why he found that so funny, but he burst out laughing. Maybe it was the serious look on Trez’s face or the relief from knowing that for now, things were handled. Either way, he’d found it funny as hell.

“Nah, not that I know of, but I’ll make sure I run that by her when I get home.”

“Yeah, you do that. If it ain’t making me money or making me happy, then I don’t need that shit in my life,” Trez said before he pulled the door to get into his car.

MyZell shook his head and followed. Hopefully, they didn’t have to worry about any more situations like this, but if they did, it would be handled.

“YOU DON’T SEEM PREGNANT,” Myah said before she took a bite of the burger that she had in front of her. She and Ryan were sharing lunch that they had ordered in.

It had been a few days since the situation with Cutty and they were all trying to get back on track with their lives. Which meant Ryan and Myah getting back to the shop which had been running for a week without the two of them.

“What should I seem like?” Ryan frowned before shoving a few fries into her mouth.

“Hell, I don’t know. I’ve never been pregnant, but shouldn’t you be throwing up or eating weird shit?”

“I guess, but I’m not. Maybe it’s different for different people. The only thing that’s different is I want to sleep twenty-four seven. Like I wake up in the morning and feel like I just closed my eyes. After I finish this food, I’m probably going to take a nap,” Ryan said, meaning it, but knowing that it wasn’t going to happen.

She and Myah were faced with a mess when they got back. Or rather she was because Myah had no motivation to actually run a business. She liked the idea of it, but the day-to-day duties were not a priority to her, which meant that Ryan picked up the slack.

“You can’t do that. We have a lot of work to do around here,” Myah pouted. She knew just how valuable Ryan was and ever since she’d started working there things had changed. Myah might not have known a lot about business, but she damn sure knew that Ryan was good at it.



“We?” Ryan peered at Myah, who laughed.

“Girl, you know what I mean. But seriously, though, if you really need to, just do it.”

“I’ll survive,” Ryan said with a grin.

“So, how are things, like with Tan?” Myah asked with raised brows combined with a sour look on her face.

“I don’t know. He still won’t talk to her.”

“Good, fuck that hoe, and he needs to put her out of his condo.” Myah rolled her eyes hard. There was no shortage of hate when it came to how she felt about Tan. She didn’t understand why she was even still breathing.

“I feel the same way and I don’t even know her. I really can’t understand how she did that to him, but it’s not really about her. It’s about Zyen. He has to figure it out for her. I haven’t even met my baby yet and I can’t imagine someone not letting me see her.”

“Her?”

Ryan grinned. “He swears it’s a boy, but I want it to be a girl. I’m trying to speak it into existence.”

Myah smiled at the thought, but since they had Zyen, she was with her brother and was voting for a boy.

“You would never do what she did, so it’s hard for you to think like that. She kept Zyen from him, so what if he keeps her from that hoe? She doesn’t deserve to be with her anyway. Ole trifling ass.”

Ryan left it alone. Everyone’s minds were made up about the situation and Tan. Maybe she should have felt the same, but she wasn’t a part of the situation like they were. She hated Tan for hurting MyZell, but her feelings were neutral about anything else. Technically, Tan had never done anything to her, so she was able to think clearly about the two of them both being parents to Zyen. Now if Tan thought for one second that she was going to rekindle anything with MyZell, then all bets were off.

Other than that, she had no major issues with her being a mother to her child. Maybe it was the fact that she was pregnant, or the fact that she knew so many negative things had happened recently, such as feeling the bullet pass her head after it'd passed though Polo, or the fact that she knew that Ivey and Cutty were dead. Either way she just wanted something in her life to feel normal.

All of the things happening lately weren't things that she was used to, and although it was a part of MyZell's life, she didn't want it to be a part of hers. She just wanted them to live and be happy. It was childish and naïve, but it was normal and she needed that.

They both sat quietly eating until Myah spoke again. "You love him, don't you?"

Thrown a little by her question Ryan stared blankly for a minute before she answered. "Yes, why?"

"Because, if anything happened between the two of you it would break him, and I don't want that. He's happy again, and a different kind of happy. Our parents didn't know how to be parents. They were selfish and cruel. He was young, so he doesn't remember, but it didn't make him miss having them any less. Being with our grandmother was the best thing that our parents ever did for us, and they didn't even mean for that to happen. They just left and she took over."

"Zell never really opened up to people. He loved me and he loved her. He took it hard when she died, and I never understood what that did to him, but I saw it when he fell for Tan. My grandma always told us to be better than our parents to get right what they got wrong. She wanted us to be happy and fall in love and have kids. I don't know why that mattered to her so much, but he took that to heart. I think that was why he fell for Tan so hard. She made him believe that she would give him those things."

"Women love my brother. I'm sure you know that, but they always wanted something from him because of who he was. That hoe knew that, so she was the total opposite of that or at least she pretended to be. She promised him that life, and he

fell for it because he wanted it so much. So, when she left, it broke him. And then to find out why and about Zyen... just don't break him, Ryan. My brother doesn't love easily, but when he does, he loves hard. Do you know how many have tried and he never gave them anything more than a few nights and never returned their calls? It's different with you, so don't break him, okay?"

"I won't," was all Ryan said.

She heard everything that Myah said and had no intention of doing anything but loving him. She didn't know if she would be perfect or always get things right because she had her own issues, but she definitely wouldn't break him, at least not intentionally.

\* \* \*

When Ryan got to the house after stopping to pick up food for the two of them, she struggled with her keys, but the door opened and she was faced with MyZell holding Zyen in his arms.

Zyen had her head resting on his shoulder, so he adjusted her body, positioning her in one arm before he grabbed the bag holding their food from Ryan. Once they were inside and everything was on the kitchen counter, Ryan took Zyen from him and kissed her face.

Zyen laid her head on Ryan's shoulder same as she had been with MyZell.

"Thai food? You trying to get on my good side?" he said with a smirk after digging through the bag to see what Ryan had picked up.

"I better always be on your good side," she said, cutting her eyes at him which forced a smile onto his face before he moved behind her and pressed his body against hers. He had been chilling with his daughter all day and had missed Ryan. The sight of her holding Zyen and being pregnant with their child had him horny for some reason. It was sexy to him. His

situation with Ryan was bringing things out of him that he'd never expected to feel.

“Shit, you are. You already know that.” He kissed her neck a few times before he looked down over her shoulder at his daughter.

“She’s tired, what did you do to her?”

He chuckled and kissed Ryan’s cheek before stepping around her.

“I didn’t do shit, she’s a lightweight. We watched the game, played for a while, and that was it. How old does she have to be before she can walk?” he questioned, not looking up at Ryan because he was pulling the lid off one of the containers to inspect the food. “This mine?” he asked before lifting one of the shrimp and shoving it into his mouth.

“It is now.” Ryan frowned. She hated for people to pick over her food. Even him.

He smiled and leaned against the counter, staring at her.

“I don’t know, it depends. Why?” she asked in reference to his question about Zyen walking.

“I think she’s gonna be walking soon. Every time I put her down, she was crawling all over the place, but weird like on her hands and feet. And then she was pulling up on shit all day. I think she’s ready to walk.”

Ryan watched his face light up as he talked about Zyen. He was so in love with her, which was evident by the way he was constantly watching over her. When she was asleep in her pack and play or crib, he would stand over her, just admiring her. He never went long without wanting to hold her in his arms, and his phone was full of pictures of Zyen. She loved the way he loved his daughter.

“I don’t think she’s ready yet. She’s barely eight months, but soon, maybe.”

“Hell yeah, soon. She’s smart, Ry, just like her daddy.” He looked down at Zyen, who still had her head on Ryan’s

shoulder and was drifting. “You’re smart like me, aren’t you, baby girl?”

Zyen reacted to her father’s voice with a lazy smile, which made him smile.

“Ay, let me take her and I’ll get her down,” he said, reaching for Zyen, but Ryan turned away from him.

“I got her. I missed her today. I’ll give her a bath and then lay her down, then we can eat.”

“Then you can eat. I’m hungry as hell.” MyZell winked at her then grabbed his container and a fork before stepping around her. He delivered a kiss to both Ryan and his daughter before leaving the kitchen.

“I’m about to go finish this game until you’re done,” he said over his shoulder with a mouthful of food.

“I guess it’s just you and me, baby girl,” Ryan said, burying her face in Zyen’s curls. She always smelled so good and Ryan loved that.

After Ryan got Zyen bathed and dressed for bed, she laid down with her to make sure she was fully asleep before she left her. She had every intention in the world of getting up again, but as soon as her head hit the pillow with her arm secured around Zyen, she was out.

MYZELL SMILED at the sight of Ryan curled up in bed with Zyen tucked on the side of her body. The first thing he did was pull his phone out of his pocket and snap a few pictures of the two of them.

After sliding his phone back into his pocket, he lifted Ryan's arm and scooped his daughter up into his arms. He walked her over to her pack and play and lowered her into it. After watching her for a few minutes to make sure she stayed down, he then climbed into bed with Ryan so that they were lying face to face.

MyZell delivered a few soft kisses to various spots on her face, causing Ryan to frown at him and open her eyes.

"You alright?" he asked before his arm slid across her body and he pulled her closer.

"Yeah, sorry, just tired," she mumbled, snuggling closer to him.

"My son is kicking your ass." MyZell grinned and pecked her lips again.

"You're going to be real upset if this baby comes out to be a girl." Ryan frowned at him and he smiled harder.

"Nah, I won't. I'm good with whatever. I just don't want to be outnumbered."

MyZell lifted his body and started working the buckle to Ryan's belt. She turned a little so that she was on her back, giving him better access. Once he had her jeans open, he started working them down her hips.

“When is your appointment?” he asked while he focused on undressing her.

“Next week, but you know it’s just a checkup and to get the official word that I’m pregnant. They won’t tell us what we’re having. It’s too early for that.”

He chuckled. “They don’t have to tell me shit. You’re carrying my son.”

MyZell’s hands moved across the soft skin of her legs up her waist to her stomach and then back down her thighs.

“What are you doing?” she asked, already knowing what was coming. The two of them had sex every day, sometimes multiple times a day. She had escaped his attempts this morning because she didn’t want to be late.

Instead of answering, MyZell helped her out of the panties that she was wearing and tossed them on the floor where he had just sent her jeans, and then spread her thighs as wide as he could.

“I missed you today,” he said before planting kisses along her inner thighs.

He was addicted to Ryan’s body, every inch of it. Her skin was always so soft and she smelled sweet. Even now after having been gone all day, he could still smell the faint scent of something sweet on her skin. He loved that about her. It was probably just the lotion or body spray that she used all the time, but it still turned him on.

“I missed you too,” Ryan said softly as her fingers dug into the curls on his head while he tucked it between her legs and let his tongue move across her center.

“How you wet already, Ry, and I haven’t even touched you?” He lifted his eyes enough to glance at her before he gently began sucking her clit.

“I just said I missed you.” Ryan’s voice was still low as she squirmed a bit from the feeling of his tongue and lips working their magic.

Sliding his hands under her butt and pulling her closer to gain more leverage, MyZell feasted on Ryan, making sure to reach every spot that he knew she loved.

“Shiiiiittt,” Ryan moaned and arched her back, trying to release some of the tension that was building in her body. She was about to cum and very hard.

“You good, Ry?” he asked before sending his tongue as far as it would go into her center.

“Mmmhmmm,” she answered before her teeth sank into her lip. She balled her fist when she could no longer take it, and MyZell enjoyed the warm, creamy eruption that she released.

He circled his tongue in it before lifting his hand and running his fingers across her lower lips and then forcing two inside of her. Ryan’s body shivered from the sensation because it was still sensitive down there.

Pulling back enough to slide out of his shorts and boxers, MyZell then wedged his body between her legs and Ryan’s body jerked a little from the feel of his head circling her slippery opening before he pushed inside her.

Her jaw clenched from the feeling; that was the best part, the first time he penetrated her sent waves through her body that picked up and intensified with every stroke he delivered. MyZell’s sex game was amazing. He took his time and pleased her, even when he was rough and aggressive. It didn’t matter, Ryan always felt like it was more about her than him because he made sure of that.

“I’m sore,” Ryan pouted as she crawled across the bed to get in her spot. They had both showered and dressed and were now exhausted and ready for bed. Well, at least she was. MyZell was standing over Zyen with his arms folded, watching her sleep. After the session they had just enjoyed, all Ryan wanted was to close her eyes and go to sleep.

“Good, then I did that shit right,” MyZell said proudly without taking his eyes off his daughter.



He loved to watch her sleep. She looked so peaceful and that made him happy. It also made him angry that he hadn't been able to do that from the time she was born.

“You're arrogant.”

“Hell yeah, I am,” he said, this time looking up before he started toward the bed. He climbed in and pulled her to him, her back against his chest while he sent one hand between her legs rubbing softly, and the other across her stomach. “I know what I'm working with. Trust me, I'm very arrogant about the way I fuck you.”

“Your mouth is terrible,” Ryan admitted, snuggling closer to him before she let her body relax completely against his.

“So, you like it.”

“Mmhmm,” she said, too tired to reply.

“Ay, what about your family? I know you don't fuck with them too tough, but what about your sister? You ever think about finding her?”

Ryan shrugged. “Not really, for what?”

“I don't know, I guess it's just you. That's all, I worry about that.”

“Why? I have you, and Myah, and Trez.”

“Yeah, you do, and that won't change, but I was just thinking about it.”

MyZell couldn't imagine being without Myah. They fought and hated each other sometimes, but he would miss her if she wasn't around.

He didn't ever want Ryan to feel like she had to be alone. Not that she ever would be because she had him, but family was different. Her having a baby might change how she felt about not having family around.

“Well don't, I have you and I'm fine.”

MyZell kissed Ryan's neck and closed his eyes. He hadn't really done shit all day but spend time with Zyen, but that had him beat. With his body wrapped around Ryan, things just felt

right, so he was at peace. Nights used to be complicated for him; he never used to rest much, but that had changed when Ryan entered his life. He just prayed it stayed that way.

\* \* \*

The next morning Ryan fed a happy Zyen who was seated in her high chair while MyZell got dressed. He had a few things to take care of, so Ryan was taking Zyen to the shop with her. She figured between her and Myah, the two could work and still keep an eye on her.

“Your daddy was mean to me last night, Zyen. I’m still sore,” Ryan said, adjusting the way she sat in the chair.

Zyen clapped and smiled at her, having no clue what Ryan was saying.

“Ay, why you telling her shit like that?” MyZell’s voice caught Ryan off guard.

She hadn’t seen him enter the kitchen. She smiled at the sight of him. He was dressed in all black, a Nike t-shirt with the words printed on the front in white, matching sweatpants and all black Air Maxes. As always, he had a hat on pulled down low on his head with curls sprouting from the perimeter. He was overdue for a cut, so the curly mass that covered his head was longer than usual.

Ryan smiled at his appearance. Everything about him turned her on, and even though she was still feeling the effects of him being between her legs last night, she found herself craving him.

“Because it’s true. You were mean to me.”

He smirked before he walked over and kissed Zyen on the face. She smiled and clapped her hands before grabbing a few Cheerios off her high chair and shoving them and her fist in her mouth.

“Then why you looking at me like you want to take it there right now?” MyZell winked at Ryan before he lifted the plate that he knew belonged to him and joined them at the table.

After saying a quick grace, he lifted a piece of bacon and took half of it into his mouth.

“I’m just looking at you,” Ryan said, hiding her smile.

“Don’t worry. I got you later. Ay, but you sure you good with taking her? And before you start going in, I don’t mean like you can’t handle her. I’m just asking ’cause you claim you really be working and shit,” he said before shoving a forkful of eggs in his mouth.

“Yeah, she’ll be in the office with me. I’ll take her pack and play so she can nap and Myah has a swing and toys there already.”

“For what? She ain’t never been there,” he said, thinking about how Myah was always overdoing it.

“But she knew she would, so she made a play area there for her in the office.”

MyZell reached across the table and grabbed the glass of juice that was next to Ryan’s plate and finished it off.

“So, what about school? You still gonna do that?” he asked randomly.

They’d had a lot of things going on lately, but he didn’t want her to forget about it. She seemed excited about finishing and he wanted that for her.

“I guess so. I’ll look into it today.”

“No guess, do that shit, Ry,” he said, just before the doorbell sounded.

They both frowned, not expecting guests, but MyZell was more suspicious than anything. No one knew where he lived, but he was still extra cautious, especially now with Zyen and Ryan both there. He immediately got up and moved to the monitor before he spoke.

“Fuck she doing here?” he spat angrily.

“Who?” Ryan asked, concerned because of his mood.

“Stay here,” he said, giving her a stern look.

Ryan stood and grabbed a wipe from the container she had on the table and cleaned Zyen's hands and mouth before she lifted the top, unbuckled her, and lifted her into her arms. She then moved to the entrance of the kitchen just in time to see MyZell pull the door open and growl at whoever was on the other side, which she couldn't see from where she stood.

"The fuck you doing here?"

"I want to see my daughter, Zell," Tan yelled back at him from where she stood on the porch.

"Nah, not today. You'll see her when I say you can, and as far as I'm concerned, I'm not in any rush for that. Shit, you might be lucky to see her in another six months from now. That's how long you kept her from me, right?"

The icy stare combined with MyZell's harsh tone cut Tan deep. She knew he had every right to be mad, but she missed her daughter. How long was he going to punish her for making bad decisions? Decisions that she didn't feel like she'd had any other choice to make. Even though she knew now that she should have handled things differently, it was too late to change any of it.

"You won't keep my daughter from me for six months, MyZell. In fact, you better let me see her or I'll go to the cops. As far as the law is concerned, she's not yours. The line that says father is blank on her birth certificate."

He moved to her so fast that she stumbled backward to avoid him and landed on her butt.

"Are you fucking threatening me? You really want to take it there, Tanessa?" MyZell said, leaning down over her with so much hate in his eyes that she felt like she couldn't breathe.

"No, but what choice do I have? I want to see her, Zell. You can't keep her from me."

He laughed so sadistically that it sent chills through her body.

"I can do whatever the fuck I want and I'm sure you already know that."

“MyZell.”

Hearing Ryan call his name caused MyZell and Tan both to look toward the door where she stood with Zyen in her arms.

Tan felt tears building as she looked at her daughter. Not only did she miss her, but Zyen looked happy being in the arms of someone other than her.

“Take your ass home, and if you come here again, it’s gonna be a problem.” MyZell looked Tan right in her eyes before he turned to walk away.

“Please, just let me see her.”

“You just did, now get the fuck on,” he yelled before he grabbed Ryan by the arm, pulling her inside and slamming the door behind them.

He shot her the nastiest look before he stormed off, leaving her standing there. She didn’t say a word because she didn’t know what to say. Things were totally out of control, and something had to change, and fast.

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## *sixty-three*

“AY, stop eating my shit, Myah. You got what you wanted.” Trez said pulling his plate closer to him so that Myah couldn’t reach it. Ever since their food had arrived she had been mostly eating his shrimp instead of the pasta she’d ordered.

“But yours is better,” she whined before sending her fork toward his plate again.

“Don’t make me embarrass you up in here. If you wanted shrimp you should have ordered shrimp. I’m really not playing with your ass right now, Myah. You already ate half my shit.”

“That’s not fair, I didn’t know what I wanted.”

“You want me to call her back over here so that you can order this? ’Cause you’re not about to eat mine.”

“No.” She leaned back in her chair and poked her lips out. Trez smirked not bothered by it at all.

“You think I care about you sitting over there with your lips poked out? You’re grown as fuck, Myah. Act like it and eat your damn food. Fuck you gonna do when we have kids and you act like one?”

“Kids?” That made her forget all about the food and got her full attention.

“Yeah, kids, man. I want kids, baby girl, and soon.”

“Soon?” She frowned at him. “What’s soon?”

“Soon, like I hope your ass is pregnant now,” he said casually before popping a shrimp into his mouth like what he’d said hadn’t meant anything.

“Why so soon? We just got together, and—”

“And what? I’ve known your ass most of your life, Myah. I’ve been in love with you for half that time. This...” He pointed at her and then himself. “...ain’t new.”

“I know it’s not new, but how do you even know you want that?”

“I’ve always known. Your ass is the one that was in denial. I’m gonna marry you and we’re gonna have kids.”

Myah smiled at the confidence in his answer. She wanted that too, and if she was being truthful, she wanted it with him. After he’d gotten with Korri she just didn’t think it would happen because they’d seemed to be so good together.

“Did you want a baby with Korri? I mean, if she had kept it, would you have stayed with her?” Myah asked.

“I didn’t know I wanted a baby with her until I found out she was pregnant, so I guess you can say I did.” He shrugged and Myah got quiet, which he noticed and leaned back in his chair and just stared at her.

“It’s different with you, Myah, so don’t let that shit fuck with your head. I know you don’t expect me to say that I didn’t want a baby that I helped create. You know me better than that. But, like I said, I wanted it after it existed. With you, I been wanted that shit. I could imagine a son or daughter that looked just like you, and you carrying it, pregnant and shit, looking sexy as ever. But that was in my head, and all I could do was want it because you were on some other shit. With Korri, it happened and I wanted it. It wasn’t like I was sitting around dreaming that shit up like I did when I thought about you.”

Myah smiled from his confirmation and she felt better. “I guess I can live with that.”

“Shit, you better, ’cause you don’t have no choice. Now let’s go so we can work on making that happen.” He lifted the last two shrimp from his plate and shoved them in his mouth before he lifted his beer to finish it off.

After Myah was done, he stood and pulled three twenties out of his pocket and tossed them on the table. At this point, all he could think about was getting between Myah's legs.

\* \* \*

"What's he doing here?" Myah asked as soon as she and Trez pulled into his driveway.

"I don't know. I haven't talked to him today."

They both got out and made their way to the door. Upon entering, they got hit with the smell of kush. It was coming from the living room where they found MyZell on the sofa, remote in one hand, blunt in another.

"What's wrong, Zell?" Myah asked, sensing his mood and worrying about her brother.

"Nothing, I'm good. Where y'all coming from?" he asked without looking their way.

"You're not good or you wouldn't be here, so what's up?" Myah asked after walking to him, snatching the remote and standing directly in front of him so that she was blocking his view of the TV.

"Ay, move, man. I'm not in the mood, My," MyZell said calmly before he inhaled from the blunt he was holding.

Sucking her teeth and planting both hands on her hips, she peered at him. "Whatever. Are you and Ryan fighting? Where's my niece? She better not be with Tan's dumb ass or \_\_\_"

MyZell stood and looked down at his sister. They were inches apart as he glared at her. "Or what? You ain't gon' do shit because it ain't your business."

They held a long stare in silence before Trez spoke up.

"Ay, let me holla at your brother real quick. I'll be in there in a minute," Trez said calmly, trying to defuse the situation. He wasn't about to let them argue over dumb shit on his watch and the situation was cutting into his plans.



“Nah, I’m good. I’m heading out anyway.” MyZell shot his sister a nasty look before moving past her first and then Trez, heading to the front door.

“MyZell?” Myah called after her brother, but Trez stopped her.

“I got it. Go get naked.” He smirked and kissed her on the cheek, but she didn’t budge.

“Ay, I said I got it,” Trez said firmly, causing Myah to roll her eyes and walk off mumbling.

“Ole rude asses.” She didn’t like being at odds with her brother, but she also knew that he wouldn’t do anything that he didn’t want to and talking to her right now wasn’t something he’d planned to do. It’d hurt her feelings a little, but she let it go.

“Yo, what’s up?” Trez caught MyZell just before he was about to get in his car.

“Nothing, I’m straight. Go deal with her bratty ass. I know she in there calling me all kind of muthafuckers.” MyZell smirked, thinking about how spoiled Myah was. He loved his sister but she worked his nerves, always trying to be in his business.

“I got her, but what’s up with you, though? She’s right about one thing, you wouldn’t be here if you didn’t need to get some shit off your chest.”

MyZell leaned against the side of his car and looked off into the night. It was dark as hell because like him, Trez lived out in the middle of nowhere, and his house sat on about two acres, so there wasn’t anything around it. They liked it that way because you could see anybody coming before they had a chance to get to you.

“I don’t get how things can be so good and so bad at the same fucking time. Things with Ryan are good, but then I have this shit with Tan, and that’s fucking with what I have with Ryan. I’m trying my best to let that shit go, but I just can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Shit, both probably,” MyZell admitted.

“Yo, it’s not about you anymore. I keep telling you that shit. It’s about Zyen. She’s stuck in the middle of all this and you gotta be bigger than that. Ain’t nobody making this shit complicated but you, Zell.”

MyZell felt his temple pulsing but he knew that Trez was speaking the truth.

“So if it was you, you would just let that shit go and keep it moving?”

Trez smirked and then looked him right in the eyes. “Hell nah, I would have shot her dumb ass and then kept it moving. You’re gonna do whatever it takes for your daughter, right?”

“Hell yeah. You know better than to even ask me some shit like that?”

The two men stared at each other before Trez continued. “You’re better than that, Zell. Always have been. Shit that don’t matter to me, matters to you, and I respect that. The fact that she’s still breathing is proof of that. What she did was messed up, and truth be told, I feel like the easiest answer is to just get rid of her and call that shit a muthafucking day. But you’re gonna do what’s best for your daughter, and that means allowing her to have both her parents. Tan was on some fuck shit, but is she a bad parent? You already made the decision, so you stuck with it now.”

MyZell looked down at the ground before his hand moved across his head and then he looked up at Trez.

“I’m out. Tell Myah I’ll holla at her tomorrow.” MyZell extended a hand to Trez and the two pulled into a brief hug before Trez nodded and MyZell got in his car to leave.

He had made up his mind about what was next, but for now he was heading home to Ryan to fix things with her.

“YOU WAITING UP FOR ME?” MyZell asked when he entered the bedroom and found Ryan up, staring at the TV.

“Yes, we need to talk.”

He stopped at the foot of the bed, folded his arms, and stared at her. Her hair was down, flowing around her face and shoulders in its natural curls, and she was wearing one of his V-necks, which swallowed her small frame. She was covered from waist down with the sheets and comforter, which she peeled back, revealing her bare legs.

He watched as she walked over to the dresser, lifted Zyen’s monitor and then peeked into her sleeper before heading to the door. She didn’t say a word, but he knew to follow her.

Once they reached the living room, Ryan stood in the center of the room, waiting for MyZell. When he entered after her, he grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the sofa with him. He sat first and she diverted her body from falling into his lap and sat next to him instead. They were still close because the weight of his body forced her to lean his way.

Fidgeting with the monitor, Ryan began. “I think maybe you need some time to deal with whatever the two of you have going on.”

MyZell let his head fall back briefly, already not feeling what Ryan had to say. After he got his thoughts together, he looked at her, admiring her features. His first thought was their child.

“And if I need time to deal with what’s going on, what’s that mean for us?” he asked, trying to keep his tone neutral, when he was actually pissed.

“It means we figure things out after you deal with that situation.”

MyZell laughed sarcastically before his tongue moved across his bottom lip. “Nah, I don’t need time. I have it figured out.”

“No, you don’t. After what happened today, it’s clear that you don’t.”

“I apologize for that and I shouldn’t have snapped on you. Time won’t fix shit with that situation. I’m good and we’ll be good.”

“How? She threatened to send the cops here because of Zyen. Is that what you consider good? She’s a baby, Zell, but she still knows when things aren’t right. She cried for an hour after you left. Babies pick up on energy. You two can act crazy all you want, but not around her. I’m not going to let you do that.”

MyZell smiled at Ryan being protective of Zyen. That was one of the things he loved most about her. Her priority was Zyen, not him or anything else, just his daughter.

“You’re not gonna let me?”

“No,” she said firmly, looking him right in the eyes.

He laughed and grabbed at her waist enough to pull her across his body. “Don’t worry about all that. She won’t call the cops. I’ll fix it.”

“You’re going to let her see Zyen?”

“Yeah, something like that, but on my terms.”

“What if she doesn’t agree to that?”

“She will.”

“How do you—”

“I don’t want to talk about all that right now. Zyen is straight and always will be. I don’t need you stressing over that bullshit while you carrying my son. I said I’ll fix it and I will. Right now, I just want to focus on you. Can I get that?”

Ryan smiled and relaxed a little. Her day had been long because she was worried about him. They hadn’t communicated all day and she’d missed him. Things felt off when they weren’t on good terms and she hated how that made her feel.

“Yes, but one more thing.”

After letting his head fall back again annoyed, MyZell then lifted it and looked at her. “What, man?”

“Make it legal. She’s yours, there’s no denying that, but get the test done.”

“I will. We done now?”

“Yes, oh and promise me that we’ll never be like that. Promise me that you’ll love this baby enough to do what’s right, even if we can’t make things work.”

MyZell felt his jaw clench at Ryan even considering them not working out, but he understood why. Neither of them had the best luck with past relationships.

“I promise, but we’re gonna be fine. You’re not going anywhere and neither am I, so we don’t have to worry about that.” He looked her right in the eyes so that she understood just how much he meant that.

Instead of speaking on it, Ryan leaned into his body and placed her lips against his for a soft, gentle kiss, but he gripped the back of her neck and made it more intense. No matter what she said, he wasn’t letting her go, so whatever they were faced with, they would just have to figure it out and work through it. That was the only promise that he was making.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Ryan left to head to the shop while MyZell buckled Zyen in his car to go deal with Tan. He had no idea how things would work out, but he knew for sure that they had to figure something out.

When he got to his condo, he walked in with Zyen in his arms and instantly got annoyed. The place was dark and it smelled. With Ryan, things were always on point. He'd thought in the beginning that it was just her way of paying back his generosity for allowing her to be there, but after living with her, he realized it was just how she was. Ryan was meticulous about keeping things clean and smelling good. She went overboard with plug-ins and candles. Things that he'd never thought about, but after having them, he noticed when he didn't.

"Tanessa?" MyZell yelled from the foyer after flipping on the lights and then heading to the kitchen.

When he entered it, he realized what the smell was. There were dishes in the sink and a few empty food containers on the counter. The trash was also full. Things weren't nasty, just unkempt and it bothered him.

"What are..." Tan paused when she noticed that he was holding Zyen, but she kept her distance.

"Can I hold her?" she asked, praying that he was there to let her visit with her daughter.

Zyen noticed her mother and began squirming in MyZell's arms and reaching for her.

"Why do you got it so dark in here? And it's dirty as fuck, Tan. You need to clean this shit up."

"Sorry, I know, but I've been having a hard time. Can I please hold my daughter?" she said anxiously.

He searched her appearance and then frowned. She was in a robe, that was opened and not tied, with just her bra and panties on.

"Nah, go put some clothes on first. You look like shit, man," he said frowning again at her hair all over her head.

She looked like she had just climbed out of bed.

“And clean yourself up too, ’cause I know you haven’t done that shit today,” he said before he walked past her, heading to the living room.

Tan knew that she had to play nice, so as much as she hated him ordering her around, she did as he asked and returned shortly after, dressed in leggings and a t-shirt. She’d made sure to comb her hair, wash her face, and brush her teeth.

“Can I please hold her now?” she asked softly, standing in front of where he sat holding Zyen in his lap.

MyZell was in the middle of a text checking in with Ryan, so he didn’t respond right away. Tan noticed what he was doing and instantly got in her feelings but kept it together.

When he was done, MyZell stood, kissed Zyen several times on the cheek, causing her to smile big before he handed her over to Tan. He watched as she hugged her daughter tight, kissed her all over her face, and moved her hand across her soft curls.

“Thank you,” she said, half smiling at him before she sat down across from where he had been sitting to check out her daughter. It felt like forever since she had smelled her scent or felt her tiny body against hers, and she missed that.

“We need to get some shit straight,” MyZell said, watching the two of them.

“Yes, we do,” Tan said sharply, unable to hold back.

“Ay, don’t even,” MyZell warned. “I’ll call and make an appointment to get a paternity test done and—”

“Really, you can’t look at her and tell that she’s yours? Let me guess, she wants you to do that?” Tan snapped, cutting him off.

“Yo, calm the fuck down. I know she’s mine, but I need that to get custody. And, yes, she wants me to do that because she cares about Zyen.”

“She cares about her?” Tan shot him a nasty glance. “She’s not her mother, Zell.”

“You’re right, but she acts like one. More than you,” he shot back.

“I love my daughter, so don’t act like I don’t.”

“And she loves Zyen too. I bet she loves her enough not to leave her with some crazy ass muthafucker who didn’t give two fucks about her like you did.” MyZell looked right at Tan with a hard stare and she knew she that she couldn’t refute that.

“I didn’t have a choice,” she said lowly.

“What the fuck ever,” MyZell said, waving her off. “I’m not gonna discuss that because I’m trying to let it go, so here’s how things are going to work. Zyen will live with me and Ryan. I’ll let you see her, but on my terms until you prove to me that I can trust you. For all I know, your dumb ass might try and run of with my daughter again, and you only get one pass, which you used.”

“I wouldn’t—”

“Don’t waste your time. You can’t say shit to convince me, but I will let you try to show me. Until then, she lives with me. If you got a problem with that, I don’t know what to tell you, but that’s the only way it’s going to go. As for Ryan, you respect her and don’t start that slick shit. You and me, ain’t shit there and never will be, but if you try to complicate things for Ryan, all bets are off.”

Tan listened to him talking and felt her heart breaking and her anger rising at the same time. How dare he tell her how she could fit into her own daughter’s life?

“You can’t make me like some hoe you’re trying to replace me with.”

MyZell shot Tan a deadly look that forced a lump into her throat.

“First of all, call her a hoe again, and you can cancel this shit now. I don’t give a fuck if you like her, but you will



respect her. That's not up for debate.”

“And what makes you think I'll agree to that?”

He chuckled and then looked at Zyen. “You will.”

“You really think it's that simple?”

MyZell stood. “I know it is. I have to go, though.”

“But you just got here. Can I just have her for a little while? You can come back and—”

“Hell no. Did you not just hear me? I don't trust you. I'm not leaving her here with you until I can. What I need you to do is clean this place up. I'll buy her what she needs to spend time here and me or Ryan will bring her back in a few days to spend some time with you.”

Feeling defeated, Tan nodded and stood. She held her daughter tightly in her arms and inhaled her scent before she delivered a series of kisses. It broke her heart to do it, but she handed her over to MyZell with tears in her eyes and watched as he headed to the door.

“I'll buy whatever Zyen needs, but you need to get a job or some shit like that. You're not my responsibility. You can live here, I'm good with that because I need to know where she'll be, but you need to figure out how to take care of you. I'll have her stuff delivered.” That was the last thing he said before he headed to his car to get Zyen situated.

Tan watched, feeling depressed. She knew it was all her fault, so she decided to try and make the most of the situation. She was not going to live without her daughter in her life, so if this was what it took to make that happen, then she would have to make it work.

### THREE MONTHS *Later*

“Are you mad?” Myah asked as Ryan filled her arms with blues, greens, and yellows. The two were shopping on their lunch break for baby items.

“No, not really. I wanted a girl because girls are easier. I guess it makes sense to have one of each and we already have Zyen,” Ryan said and then shrugged.

She had just found out days ago that she and MyZell were having a boy. He, of course, was thrilled, while she was in her feelings, which was why it had taken her a few days to actually buy anything.

MyZell, on the other hand, had already purchased four pairs of soft soled sneakers with identical pairs for himself along with almost everything newborn that Nike had to offer.

“Girl, quit lying. You’re pouting now,” Myah said, leaning into Ryan’s shoulder before she looked down and placed her hand on Ryan’s small stomach.

She was almost five months and still barely showing. She could hide it with certain clothes that she wore.

“No, really. I’m fine,” Ryan said with a smug grin. She was still in her feelings a bit, but she was just happy that their baby was healthy.

“Have y’all told her yet?” Myah asked, speaking of Tan.

So far things had been decent. Ryan and MyZell let her spend time with Zyen a couple days a week, but never alone.

They would stay at the condo with her while Tan spent time with Zyen in the room that MyZell had paid for Tan to set up for Zyen. Tan hated it, and as much as she tried to hide it, she hated Ryan even more. It wasn't really about Ryan personally because she didn't really know her, but it hurt and annoyed her that Ryan had the life that she thought she'd deserved.

Tan knew better than to let it show around MyZell because she knew he wasn't playing about the situation. She wasn't about to do anything to jeopardize time with her daughter, so she kept it to herself. But Ryan picked up on little things, mostly when MyZell wasn't around.

"No, but I'm showing enough, so I'm sure she knows," Ryan said, glancing at Myah before she lifted a blanket that she just had to have and rubbed it against her face. "This is adorable and it's so soft."

Myah took it from her and ran her hand across it. "It is. Get two so I have one for him at my house," she said with a grin. "I don't think she knows or you would have heard about it. She's probably going to flip."

Ryan shrugged. "I don't care. She had her chance and she blew it, so..."

"Girl, you're too nice. I don't see how you don't want to beat her ass every time you see her."

"Trust me, I do, but it won't solve anything, and I promised Zell that I would try to make things work. I don't have to like her, but I have to deal with her. She's good with Zyen and I respect that. As long as she stays in her lane and away from my man, we're good."

"There it goes. I knew you had it in you, boo."

Ryan laughed. "Girl, I'm nice, but I'm not playing about my man. Trust that."

"Good, because he don't play about you either, so that hoe better stay in her miserable, crazy ass lane."

"Girl, bye. I'm not getting on that petty bus with you today. Let's go pay for this so that we can eat before we get

back.”

\* \* \*

“Hey, do you know somebody named Terri?” Myah asked, sticking her head in the door to the office and waiting for Ryan to answer.

She was deep in concentration, staring at the laptop in front of her, so it took her a minute before she’d actually responded.

“No, why? Does he know me?” she questioned, now looking at Myah.

“She, not he, and I’m not sure. She just asked if you were here and said to tell you it was Terri. She sort of looks like you,” Myah said randomly. She knew that Ryan had a sister, but she also knew that they weren’t in touch.

Ryan felt her chest tightening a little at Myah’s confession, so she stood and walked to the door. She peeked outside, and sure enough, it was her sister standing in the center of the shop. She was looking down at nail color samples, so she hadn’t seen Ryan looking at her.

“That’s my sister. What’s she doing here?”

“What do you want me to tell her?” Myah could sense the mood change and hesitation coming from Ryan.

“Umm, you can send her back.” Ryan ran her fingers through her hair and smoothed her shirt before she looked at Myah.

“You sure?”

“Yes, it’s fine.” Ryan smiled weakly. She hadn’t seen or talked to her sister since before she’d met Polo and that was almost four years ago.

Terri was older and had left home before Ryan. They had seen each other once after that while Ryan was out with Polo and Terri had agreed to call and catch up, but it’d never happened.

Ryan was hurt, but eventually pushed her feelings about it to the side and moved on. With the bad relationship the two had with their parents, it had always just been them, but then Terri left and moved to Georgia with a boyfriend and their son and Ryan was alone. She'd eventually met Polo months later and he'd become her family.

"Hey, you look good." Terri smiled at her sister. It had been years and seeing Ryan warmed her heart and made her feel bad at the same time. She loved her little sister, but hard times had caused her to make decisions that she now regretted.

"Thanks, so do you." Talking to her sister felt like talking to a stranger. Ryan didn't know if it was the time that had passed or the fact that she had been through so much and had changed because of it. "Sit down," she said, pointing to the sofa.

"You have a kid?" Terri asked, noticing the swing and toys in the corner.

"My boyfriend does," she said, leaving out the fact that she was pregnant. She didn't know what was going to come of their connection, so she didn't want to go into that.

"Oh, okay."

"How did you find me?" Ryan asked.

"Pauline, well she told me you were in Miami, but I did some research after that. You just got a license here in Miami and you're registered for school." She smiled nervously.

"Pauline? How do you know her? She knows where I am?" All Ryan could think about was the fact that MyZell had killed her son. She wondered if they were looking for him. She didn't know what could be found out about that.

Ryan knew that MyZell was smart and that he'd likely covered his tracks, but he'd still killed Polo. If Pauline knew that Ryan was in Miami, then she likely knew that her son was here looking for her.

"She does. She said Polo was here looking for you but she hasn't heard from him. She knows you're in Miami, that's all. She likes you, Ryan. She's not trying to come for you. When I

found out you were really here, I called her back and told her that you had already moved on, and if she heard from you to let me know. I figured that if Polo was looking for you, then you didn't want to be found." Terri didn't know the full story of Polo and her sister, but she knew he was controlling. He did, after all, pay her to stay away from Ryan.

"Thank you, but how do you know her?"

"I don't really. I know him."

"How?" Ryan asked.

Terri sighed and looked at her sister. "I've done some things that I'm not proud of and—"

"Did you sleep with him? Were you one of the women he cheated on me with?" Ryan asked, getting upset.

"No! I would never do that."

"Then how do you know him?"

"After I saw you that day with him, I was excited. I missed you and I really wanted to be in your life again. I hated leaving you like I did, but Mom and Dad... well, you already know. But things in Atlanta didn't work. I was on my own with my son, with no money and no job. I just needed to survive. So, when he offered me the money, I took it. I know it was wrong and I shouldn't have, but I did."

"Money? What money?"

"I called you and he answered your phone. He told me that he was your family now and he asked me how much. I told him I didn't want money and that I just wanted to be with you, but he wasn't trying to hear that. He offered me a lot of money, Ryan, just to stay away. You seemed happy. I mean, he was rich, so I figured you were good. I took the money and left."

"Terri!" Ryan yelled. She couldn't believe what her sister was admitting to. After all that time, she'd always thought that Terri just didn't care. But now she knew that she was just greedy.

“I know, please don’t hate me. It was stupid and I’m sorry. I miss you so much, I just really want us to try and—”

“To try and what. Be a family. You wanna be my sister again? I don’t think so. You should leave.”

“Ryan, please. I know I was wrong, but can you at least just think about it?”

“No, why? I’m good. I don’t need you.”

“But I need you. I miss my sister, Ryan.”

“Well, you should have thought about that before you let him buy me from you. Please, just leave.”

Terri looked at her sister sadly. She knew that she had messed up but was hoping that Ryan would understand.

“I understand.” Terri stood and left the office.

Ryan felt tears forming and she broke down the second her sister was out of sight. Moments later, Myah walked in with a piece of paper. She placed it on the desk before she embraced Ryan.

“You wanna talk about it?” Myah asked after she’d let Ryan go.

Ryan quickly got it together and wiped her face with the back of her hand, then shook her head.

Myah hesitated for a minute, but then smiled softly. “Well, if you change your mind, let me know. I’ll leave you alone for now.”

Ryan nodded, appreciating the fact that she didn’t pry.

Myah left and Ryan looked around the office feeling out of place. It took Ryan a minute before she realized Myah had left Terri’s number. That was what was written on the paper that Myah had placed on the desk. She had no intention of using it, but she slipped it into her pocket anyway.

“DAMN, I’m glad you’re here. She won’t listen to me for shit. She’s been cranky all day.” MyZell handed Zyen off to Ryan the second she walked in the door.

A cranky, Zyen started bucking in her arms until Ryan kissed her face and rubbed her back, whispering soothing things in her ear.

MyZell watched as Zyen calmed down and rested her head on Ryan’s shoulder. She was still whining, but she was calm.

“Man, I think you got my baby under some type of spell. She’s been tripping with me all day. You come in, kiss her, and she calm, just like that.”

Ryan smiled softly at Zyen before shaking her head and looking at MyZell. “She’s sensing your tension. She’s anxious because you’re anxious. Plus, she’s teething right now.”

MyZell smiled at the sight of his two favorite girls as Ryan bypassed him and headed for the master bedroom. He was right behind her.

As soon as the three of them were inside, Ryan climbed on the bed and laid Zyen across on her stomach next her. She slid her hand under the tiny pink shirt that Zyen was wearing and began rubbing her back. Ryan had also noticed that Zyen was tired, which was part of the reason why she was so cranky.

“Did she eat?”

“A little. She’s been whining all day. Like, real shit.” Myzell watched the two of them, a little jealous at how well



Ryan was able to handle his daughter. He was good with her too, but it was like Ryan had a magic touch that he didn't have.

He was just grateful that the two of them had bonded so quickly and so well. After eyeing his daughter who was drifting, he finally focused on Ryan. She looked stressed and he hated that he'd missed that when she'd initially walked through the door. His baby had something heavy on her mind, and even if he couldn't completely soothe Zyen, he knew that he could make things right in Ryan's world.

The two had been close, but over the past few months, since things had calmed down and MyZell had been able to focus on Ryan, the two had grown closer. They talked about everything and spent every free second they had together. When she was at the shop with Myah, he took care of his daughter and dropped her off to Ryan when he had to handle business. But when they got home, they became a family and were inseparable. Even little things like him staying in the kitchen while Ryan cooked or vice versa if he was the one who cooked. They ate together and spent evenings when she got in talking about their days.

He filled her in on the things that she missed out on with Zyen, while she discussed what had gone down at the shop.

While she studied for her GED online, he would be near, playing with Zyen or watching TV, or simply massaging her shoulders or rubbing her back while she was stressed about the work that she was doing. Things just flowed, so for him to have missed that she was upset about something bothered him.

“Ay, what's wrong?”

“Nothing,” Ryan said lowly while she looked down at Zyen, who was inches away from a peaceful sleep.

“Ryan?”

Hearing MyZell call her name the way he did caused her to look up at him and frown.

“Tell me what's on your mind, Ry. I can see it all over your face.”

Ryan looked him in the eyes, knowing that he wasn't going to accept another nothing. Instead, she stood and lifted Zyen with her. After getting Zyen situated in her pack and play, Ryan leaned over and rubbed her back while Zyen squirmed and drifted back to sleep.

At ten months old, she wouldn't dare leave Zyen asleep on their king-sized bed. It sat incredibly high off the floor and Zyen was feisty. It was nothing for her to move around and Ryan feared her falling off the bed.

She then moved to the door with MyZell right behind her, but he stopped to grab the baby monitor off the dresser. Zyen had a set of lungs on her, so they didn't really need it, but he always had it handy regardless.

Once they reached the living room, Ryan flopped down on the sofa and laid her head on the armrest, while pulling her knees up so that she was lying in the fetal position. MyZell really got worried and his first thought was their son. He prayed that nothing was wrong with the baby, but he figured that she would have told him if there was.

“Ryan, what's wrong, baby?”

“My sister came to see me today,” she mumbled so low that he was sure he didn't hear her correctly, so he repeated what she said for confirmation.

“Your sister?”

Nodding slowly, Ryan provided the confirmation that he needed, and MyZell stood there briefly looking down at her before he set the monitor on the table next to the sofa. After which, he pulled Ryan by the arms, lifting her upper body enough for him to slide under her, and then he allowed her to get comfortable in his lap.

She rested her head on his legs while he rubbed her back with one hand, which eventually ended up on her stomach. That was home to him.

“Tell me about it,” he said before leaning down to kiss her temple.

“What’s to tell? She came, I made her leave. I don’t need her now. When I did, she wasn’t there.”

“Do you know why?” MyZell didn’t know much about Ryan’s family because she didn’t talk about them.

What little he knew was that she and her sister were close before her sister had moved to Atlanta. Ryan had ended up with Polo and the two lost touch. That was really all she ever said about it because she got extremely emotional when he brought it up.

“It doesn’t matter and I don’t really want to talk about it,” Ryan mumbled. She had him, so her sister wasn’t important. She had survived this long without her.

“Baby, it matters. You’re damn near in tears now. People do fucked up shit sometimes, but is it bad enough that you can’t at least try to get past it? Look at Myah, she’s forever doing some shit that she don’t have no business doing, but she loves me, so I understand.”

“I bet she wouldn’t let someone pay her to not be a part of your life.”

“What?” MyZell wasn’t sure if he’d heard her correctly.

“He paid her. She took the money and left me.”

MyZell had no words for that, but he exhaled and continued. “Polo?”

“Yes.”

“Did she tell you why?”

“What does that matter? She took money to stay away from me. I can’t let that go. Maybe things would have been different. She’s my sister.”

Looking down, MyZell noticed the tears creeping down her cheek. He wiped them away and kissed her cheek before running his hand across her hair.

“People do what they need to survive, Ry. Maybe she felt like she didn’t have a choice. I know that shit hurts and you feel like she betrayed you, but she’s here. That has to count for

something and she's all you have. Don't you want to at least try?"

"No, I have you. I don't need her. Why get attached to someone who might leave again?"

That statement meant more than anything. He read between the lines. Ryan was hurt, but she was also afraid. She wanted to fix things with her sister but was scared that she might leave her again. He couldn't imagine how he would feel if Myah had betrayed him like that, and to make it worse, if he'd let her in and she did it again.

"Baby, look at me," MyZell insisted and then waited.

Ryan was stubborn, so she ignored his request until he said her name again, with more aggression. "Ryan?"

She turned her head so that she could see his face. He smiled at the attitude brewing in her eyes because he was forcing her to do something against her will.

"Look, nobody's perfect, but it's your sister. I'm not saying forgive and forget, just at least think about it. I can tell you miss her. You're hurt, but you still miss your sister, Ry. I'll support whatever you decide, but just think about it."

Ryan stared at him for a minute before she smiled. She loved him and knew that he would do anything to ensure her happiness. That was new to her, but still a great feeling.

"I will."

MyZell nodded and ran his hand over her stomach again, this time letting it move under her shirt. He wanted her to fix things with her sister, but he knew that he would protect her and their son. They were his priority, so if he thought for one second that her sister was on some bullshit or had bad intentions, she would disappear again, but by his doing. He had no mixed feelings about that.

"Good, now can I get up in this. My day was stressful as hell and so was yours." The hand he used to rub her stomach slid between her legs.

After rubbing coarsely for a few minutes, they were both horny. Ryan felt moisture while MyZell's erection was fighting against the fabric of his boxers and shorts.

"Your day was stressful?" Ryan teased. Something about his touch erased the worries of the world. He made her feel like life was perfect, even when it wasn't.

"Hell yeah. I'm telling you, Zyen be giving me shit, and then you walk in here, kiss her cheek, and she's smiling and calm."

Ryan felt the corners of her mouth turn up at the hint of jealousy in his tone. She lifted her body enough to look at him before she smiled softly, delivering a mischievous grin.

"She loves you, but she knows you don't know what you're doing," Ryan admitted and then slid off the couch.

Once she was on her feet, her hands slipped into the leggings that she seemed to live in since her stomach had begun to grow.

MyZell watched with anticipation as she worked them and her panties down her hips first, and then her thighs, which had become thicker the more her son grew inside of her. He loved the changes in her body. It was a turn on and excited him. Most nights he wanted her to sleep with little to nothing on or naked, which he preferred. His hands moved across every inch of her body while he held her through the night.

"Come here," he commanded after she'd pulled her shirt over her head and worked her way out of her bra. Now totally naked, she stood before him, slightly uncomfortable about her body.

Ryan knew that MyZell loved her, but the changes that her son was making to her body made her feel shy about being naked around him, even though he insisted that she be that way all the time.

Doing as he asked, Ryan moved forward, positioning her legs between his. MyZell's hands immediately moved to her stomach, which he leaned forward and kissed several times before he used his hands to spread her legs. As he glided his

fingers across her center just enough to graze her skin, Ryan's body shivered and then jumped when his fingers penetrated her. He always touched her just right. She loved the way he handled her as if she was precious and rare, but then there were times when he was aggressive and rough. All of it was just right.

MyZell slipped another finger deeper inside her, causing her body to tremble even more. Watching the pleasure he provided caused him to grow a few more inches, but he needed her to cum a few times first. Working his fingers in and out of her slowly at first, he picked up his pace and toyed with her clit at the same time. It didn't take long for her body to react and her juices to slide down her leg and cover his hand.

With a pleased smile, he watched her face as her chest heaved up and down. After a few seconds, he grabbed her hand and pulled her to the floor while he slipped off the couch to join her. Once Ryan was on her back with her legs spread wide, his head dipped between them. Latching onto her clit, he nibbled on it gently, knowing that she was still recovering.

Ryan tried her best to push him away, but he grew more aggressive, grabbing her hips to hold her in place while his mouth moved across her center. She loved how he always paid attention to detail. When she felt an area that needed attention, as if he read her mind, his tongue found it. When she was on the edge of cumming, he pulled back and kissed her thighs before diving in again. He was a perfectionist and she loved that about him. He knew how to please her.

"Cum for me, Ryan. I need to slide up in here, but I can't until you cum one more time." MyZell's voice vibrated against her skin, and as if her body followed his command, again, she gushed, delivering just what he'd asked for. His tongue dipped in her tunnel to receive it before he rubbed his mouth on her inner thighs, sending chills through her body.

He wasted no time coming out of his shorts and pushing inside of her slippery opening, unable to wait any longer. On his knees because he didn't want to lean into her stomach, MyZell stroked her long and deep. He was rock hard and his long, thick shaft filled Ryan completely.

She could feel him caressing her walls and it made her gasp several times as he pulled out slow and entered her fast and deep. She was convinced that he was connected to her soul, as heavenly as he made her body feel.

MyZell just wanted to erase her day. He grunted as she gripped him tighter the deeper he plunged into her body.

“Fuck, baby. Damn, I’m in love with you,” he mumbled, almost in a daze. That was just how good he felt when he was moving in and out of her. His eyes were closed, but he opened them briefly to look down at his shaft dipping in and out of her. The way her essence coated him had him even more engaged.

“Hmmm, Zell,” Ryan sang lowly, causing him to go harder.

The soft, sexy way she said his name had his nut building fast. He knew he couldn’t hold it any longer, so he picked up his pace, and after three deep strokes, Ryan’s body pulsed. Two more and he came right behind her. After exploding inside of her, he held firmly to her thighs, unable to move until she smacked his hands away because his fingers were painfully digging into her skin.

A smile stretched across his face as he pulled out of her slowly. She flinched from the feeling because her body was still sensitive and his thickness still filled her, even as soft as he now was.

“Come on, let’s go shower. I’m hungry as hell now and I know Zyen will be up screaming her head off soon.”

MyZell stood and reached for Ryan’s hands to help her up. She didn’t move at first and just admired the sight of him. Dick hanging low, his tall frame cut to perfection. She smiled at the sight of her man.

“Ay, you keep looking at me like that and we’re gonna be here all night, man. Get up.” He smirked and Ryan laughed.

She knew it was true, so she accepted his hands and allowed him to pull her to her feet. The couple made their way to the bedroom to shower and dress. After they ate, Ryan

planned on another round before bed. She needed the release and knew that he wouldn't object.

\* \* \*

The next morning, MyZell was up early. He had to meet Tan at the courthouse to get his name added to Zyen's birth certificate.

Even after they'd received the results from the paternity test, Tan had bitched and complained about adding his name. MyZell knew it was more or less about her having leverage, but he wasn't playing games with her.

As much as he was trying to make their situation work, he wasn't willing to compromise anything regarding his daughter. If Tan didn't understand that, she could get the fuck out of both of their lives.

He stood firmly by that and made it clear to her every chance he got. Things with them were cool, but he still didn't trust her, so making sure everything with Zyen was legal was his priority.

"Do you want me to go?" Ryan asked, sticking her head out of the bathroom. She had just showered and was still wrapped in her towel.

"Nah, I'm good. I'll swing by after I'm done," he told her. MyZell knew that Tan was still in her feelings about Ryan, so he tried to avoid the two of them being together as much as possible.

He had checked Tan a few times about saying sly shit about Ryan, but he never mentioned it to her. He didn't want her stressing about the situation.

"Okay, but I don't mind going," she said calmly before she went back to finishing up in the bathroom. Ryan was secure in her position with MyZell, so she wasn't worried about him being around Tan.

She could see the disgust in his eyes every time the two were around each other, but that didn't mean she trusted Tan



being alone with her man. Women had a way of getting what they wanted.

Ryan watched the disappointment and love in Tan's eyes when she looked at MyZell. She knew that Tan wasn't over him and Ryan wasn't taking any chances. She did, however, give him space, and didn't stress him about the relationship.

"Baby, you know I'm never going back to that, right?" he asked, making sure Ryan wasn't second guessing things with him and Tan. The last thing he wanted was for Ryan to be uncomfortable about the situation.

He leaned against the doorframe with his arms folded as he watched her finish brushing her teeth through the mirror and waited for her to respond.

"I know," Ryan said confidently after she'd spit and rinsed. She then pumped a small amount of face wash into her palm and rubbed it into her face before she soaked her washcloth and then wiped it away.

MyZell watched her every move until he heard Zyen whining from behind him. She was a late sleeper, which they both appreciated, especially knowing that they were about to have a newborn join them soon.

When MyZell turned and laid eyes on his daughter, a smile graced his face at her standing with her hands gripping the side of her pack and play. Her tiny face was balled up and she extended her arms, reaching for him.

"Ay, pretty girl. You're up." He lifted Zyen and held her against his chest, kissing her forehead several times while she snuggled close, balling up in his arms and resting her head on his chest.

MyZell loved the way she clung to him at times like this. It made him grateful that he hadn't missed everything in her life and that she was now with him.

Ryan smiled as she passed the two of them and stopped at the dresser. After she slipped into a bra and panties, she made her way to the closet and surveyed her clothes. She settled on a V-neck and a pair of jean overalls that she had purchased from

a maternity store. They were ripped on the legs in various places and rolled at the ankles, so it was still cute, even though it was maternity wear.

She dressed quickly while MyZell sat on the bed cuddling with Zyen until his phone rang.

“Get that for me,” he said without looking up from Zyen, who was sucking on two fingers.

Ryan did as he asked and grabbed his cellphone from beside the bed, but upon seeing Tan’s name, she handed it over to him. She wasn’t in the mood for her snide tone.

“Yo,” he answered dryly, making Ryan smirk.

“I’ll get her dressed for you,” she whispered, pulling Zyen away from him, but not before he kissed her a few more times and then focused on his call. He stood and left the room just in case things got heated. He didn’t want to upset Ryan’s mood this morning.

“Are you picking me up?” Tan asked with a smile in her voice, trying to ignore the dry way he answered.

“Nah, I already told you, I’ll meet you there.”

“But I thought...”

“You got a fucking car. Just meet me there, Tan. I have shit to do after we’re done and I don’t have time to be dropping you off,” he said, cutting her off.

He knew that she just wanted to be alone with him and he wasn’t having that. Not only because he respected boundaries, but because he could hardly stand her ass.

“She must be with you,” Tan snapped, causing his temple to twitch.

“This don’t have shit to do with Ryan, just meet me there like we planned and don’t be late.” He ended the call and massaged his temple before he shook off the irritation that he was feeling and then entered the room again.

Zyen was in a diaper laid out on the bed while Ryan was working a pair of jeans on her. He leaned against the dresser

and watched the two interacting. Ryan smiled and talked to Zyen while Zyen cooed and talked back, even though they couldn't understand shit she was saying. It was all just babbling.

Twenty minutes later, he was at the front door loaded down with everything he needed to handle Zyen while he was out. Ryan joined him and they shared a few kisses before he left with his daughter to go make things legal. That alone had a smile on his face, even if seeing Tan didn't.

"Mr. Abrams, I need you to print your name here and sign here, please." The clerk slid a paper across the counter and MyZell lifted the pen and did as she asked while Tan stood next to him, holding their daughter.

The entire time that they had been there, Tan had been in a funk, but he didn't care. Her feelings weren't important to him and she could figure that shit out on her own. As long as Zyen was happy, that was his only concern.

"Okay, you're all set. You'll receive the original copy in the mail in two to four weeks." She smiled at them both after she signed and dated the same document that he had just signed.

"To this address, right?" MyZell stated pointing to his address.

"Yes, sir."

Tan rolled her eyes and he shot her a glance.

"Aight 'preciate it," he said, then lifted Zyen's bag from the counter and reached for her, but Tan pulled away.

"You said you had things to do. Let her go with me," she said with pleading eyes. To date, she still hadn't been allowed to spend time alone with her daughter. Every visit was at his condo with him or Ryan present. Even if they were in another room, they were still there and it annoyed her.

"Nah, you already know better than that, man, let me have her," he said, reaching for her again. His phone rang and he held one hand up, slipping the other in his pocket to answer.

Noticing that it was Ryan, he turned his back and moved away from Tan to create some distance.

“What’s up, Ry, you good?”

“Yes, how long before you’re done?” she questioned, causing him to smile.

“I’m done now. Why? You miss me?”

“Maybe, but will you bring me something to eat? I skipped breakfast and I’m starving.”

“So, you only calling me ’cause you want something. You better be glad I want my son to stay healthy or you’d be shit out of luck, man.” He smirked and Ryan laughed.

“So, you’re only agreeing because of *our* son?” she teased.

“Hell yeah. You know I don’t play about my son and I should curse your ass out for not feeding him this morning, but I’ll let that slide. Give me an hour and text me what you want.”

“Okay,” Ryan said cheerfully before she ended the call. When MyZell turned to face Tan again, he knew right then that she had been listening. It was all over her face.

“Son?”

“Yeah, son. Ryan is pregnant. Don’t act like you didn’t know that shit, man,” he said with a bit of a harsh tone.

“I didn’t,” she said softly because the words got stuck.

She’d assumed but was secretly hoping that it wasn’t true. She and Ryan didn’t talk. They were cordial, but when she brought Zyen to see her, she handed her over and busied herself in the living room while Tan spent time with her daughter away from Ryan.

She thought she’d noticed a bulging stomach but didn’t want to believe it, so she wiped out the thought.

As much as she knew that MyZell had no interest in her anymore, it didn’t stop her from secretly hoping. She was jealous of Ryan and now knowing that she was carrying MyZell’s child, a son, made her heart hurt.

“Well, you do now. Let me get her. I need to go.”

“What about Zyen? You have your little happy family, so why do you have to hold on so tight? She’s not her child. You don’t think that she’ll want her around after her baby gets here, do you?”

MyZell was irritated at the thought. Ryan wasn’t like that. She included Zyen in everything, even the plans she had for when their son was born. She never discussed their future without Zyen and he loved her for that.

“She ain’t a selfish muthafucker like you. She loves her and that’s all that matters. Zyen is good. Trust that.”

He pulled their daughter away from Tan, who looked like she wanted to cry.

“Can I see her later? Will you bring her by?”

“If I’m not busy, but it’s not your day, Tan. We’re sticking to the schedule.”

She nodded and didn’t argue. She was angry and hurt but knew that there wasn’t anything that she could do about it. This was her life now, while Ryan lived the one she wanted. She watched as MyZell walked away with her daughter and felt her chest tighten. She had officially lost him.

## *sixty-seven*

“ZELL, ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?” Myah tapped her brother’s arm and he looked up at her. He was deep in thought about a lot of things, but right now the most pressing was Ryan.

“Yeah what’s up, My?” he questioned, having no idea what she had just said to him.

She rolled her eyes and sucked her teeth. “You’re not listening.”

“My bad, sis. What’s up?” he asked giving her all of his attention. He was at her house after she’d called him and asked if he would stop by so that the two could talk.

It had been a while since they’d actually spent any real time together. She was always with Trez and he was always with Ryan. They were both happy, but she’d missed her brother.

“I want kids, but I don’t know if I’ll be a good parent. Mama raised us...” She paused, thinking about her grandmother, knowing that bringing her up was going to be a sore spot for her brother. But she needed to have that conversation with him, so it was necessary. “... and she always said she wanted us to find love and be happy but I don’t know if I really know how to do that.”

Trez wanted kids, and as much as she’d complained all these years about wanting the same thing, the idea of it actually being possible scared her to death. She watched her brother with her niece, and now with his son on the way, wondering how it was so easy for him.

The concept of being a parent scared her to death because she felt like she would be horrible at it. Myah loved Zyen, but that was easy. She wasn't hers. She could love on Zyen, cater to her basic needs, and send her home, but Myah knew that Zyen had Tan, Zell, and Ryan to depend on for the heavy stuff, like helping her learn and grow, and teaching her how to love.

"Why you say that?" MyZell questioned, confused about what she was getting at.

Myah shrugged and then sighed. "What if I don't get it right? What if I end up like her?" she said, referring to their mother.

"You ain't her, My," MyZell said sternly, looking his sister right in the eyes.

Their mother was selfish and had only loved herself. He knew that she was happily married with another man and another family in the same city that they lived in. She had left them and started a new life. He never told his sister that because he didn't want her to hurt behind it, the way it hurt him.

"But what if..."

"Myah, you ain't her. This is what you want and you deserve to be happy. Don't let her fuck with your head like that. Trez is my people. I love him like he is blood and I know he loves you. If you're ready, then don't let her fuck with your head like that." MyZell spoke in a way that let Myah know that he meant what he said.

He wasn't about to let her miss out on what he knew she had just because she was afraid of being like their mother. She was nothing like her and he knew that. Myah had a good heart and she loved hard. She was selfish to a certain degree, but never in a way that would ever make her run out on her responsibilities or make her incapable of loving her child. She wasn't their mother.

"I hate her," Myah admitted, softly speaking.

"Me too, baby girl, but fuck her. I'm good, you're good, and we'll always be good. I promise you that."

He yanked at her arm and pulled her into his side. After kissing her on the forehead, he just held her and the two sat silent in their thoughts.

“Ay, what you think about Ryan’s sister?” he asked his sister after a few minutes of it being stuck in his head.

“I don’t know her. She didn’t talk much. What did Ryan say?” Myah was curious because Ryan had yet to discuss the visit with her, and for once, she felt it was her duty to respect that.

“Old boy paid her off or some shit like that. It fucked Ryan’s head up. She’s hurt, but I think a part of her wants to forgive her.”

“Paid her?” Myah sat up and frowned at her brother.

“Yeah, I think it was more about him trying to keep Ryan away from her people. Her sister took the money, though, and now she’s back.”

“You think she really wants to fix things or she knows about you? People know who you are, Zell.”

“Yeah, I know, but why come to Ryan? If she wanted something, why not come to me?”

“True, but she’s been through a lot. She don’t need any more bullshit. She’s pregnant and she’s happy. We’re all happy right now. No more bullshit.”

MyZell smiled at the idea of his sister being protective of Ryan. He was glad that the two were close. It made his life much more peaceful.

“I wanna get married.”

“Married?” Myah asked, balling up her face.

“Yeah, man, married. Why you looking like that, damn? You act like I said something crazy,” he said and chuckled at his sister’s reaction. Just that quick, she went from protecting Ryan to protecting him.

“No, I’m not. It’s just out of the blue. I’m surprised.”



“Why? I love her. She’s having my son. I ain’t fucking with nobody else like that, so why not?”

“You talked to her about that?”

“Nah, I wanted to run it by you to see what you thought.”

Myah smirked. “You scared she gonna say no?”

“Hell no, she won’t.” He paused for a minute. “She better not.”

“Ahhh, you’re scared. You ain’t scared of shit, Zell, but you scared she might turn you down,” Myah teased.

“Nah, I’m not, but I just don’t want her to say yes because she feels like she has to. She doesn’t have nobody but us. She might think saying no might affect that. That’s why I kinda wish she could fix shit with her sister, you know. So, she has somebody else.”

“But her sister might not be good for her, Zell. We might be all she has, but we’re good for her.”

He chuckled and nodded. “You’re right. I’ll leave it alone for now.”

“You gonna ask her? I can help you pick a ring,” Myah said, grinning.

“Nah, I got it. You’ll be looking for shit you want and not what Ryan wants.”

“Zell!”

“What, man?” He smiled. “You know it’s true.” He shoved her in the arm.

“What time Trez coming back?” he questioned.

He hadn’t spoken to him today, but knew he was out running through their spots. He loved that shit. Even when he didn’t have to be out there, he was. MyZell, on the other hand, only collected money when he had to and dealt with issues when they surfaced. He knew that Trez had only gotten out of the game because of him, but his heart was still in it. He just chose not to be a part of it without MyZell.

“I don’t know. He didn’t say.”

“So, you cooking?” he asked with raised brows.

“Is your girl cooking?” Myah shot back.

“Not today. She’s studying right now and she has Zyen so that I could come kick it with you. You not gonna cook for me, My?” MyZell rubbed his stomach and tried his best to look pitiful.

“That don’t mean anything to me, you can take that sad ass look home to Ryan. Hell, you cook better than me. You hook me up,” Myah said.

“Man, get your lazy ass up and cook for me. You wanted me to come chill with you, so hook me up.”

Myah rolled her eyes and stood. She loved her brother, and if he wanted a home cooked meal, he could get that. Besides, she knew Trez was going to want to eat when he got there.

“Spoiled ass,” she mumbled as she stood and started toward the kitchen.

He laughed and lifted the remote. It was like old times again and he’d missed that.

“I THOUGHT ZELL WAS BRINGING HER,” Tan said dryly as she opened the door to see Ryan standing there holding Zyen.

She smiled as she reached for her daughter, who hesitated at first and clung to Ryan’s neck. Zyen loved her mother, but she had been asleep on the ride over, so she was still a little out of it. Even still, it crushed Tan’s feelings that her daughter had slightly rejected her.

“He was, but he had something to do.” Ryan stepped in, ignoring the nasty look from Tan. She was in a good mood and not about to let her ruin it. She’d woke up that morning to head from her man, and then two rounds of great sex, and now she was about to spend a few hours finishing up some homework while Tan spent time with her daughter.

“Well, you can leave and come back in a little while. I don’t need a babysitter.” Tan rolled her eyes, annoyed by Ryan’s presence. She instantly noticed her growing belly, which had seemed to pop out of nowhere.

As much as it hurt her to know that Ryan was about to give MyZell a son, she knew that she couldn’t do anything about it. That didn’t take away from the resentment that she was feeling, though.

“And you know I can’t do that. Until Zell tells me different, I’ll keep doing things like they are. Oh, and who’s her pediatrician? I have an appointment set up for a checkup, but if you already have someone you want her to see, then we...”

“We don’t need to do shit. I think you’re confused about who her mother is. She’s my daughter. You just worry about the one that you’re carrying. I can take care of Zyen.”

Tan delivered a hard stare and Ryan smirked. She knew that Tan was in her feelings and she wasn’t looking for a fight. Ryan really didn’t care how Tan felt about the situation. Ryan’s only concern was making sure Zyen was happy and healthy, so Tan’s little tantrum didn’t move her one way or another.

“I get that you’re not in the best place right now, but this situation is what it is. I’m not trying to be her mother. Clearly, you are, but what I am *going* to do is make sure she’s taken care of. If that means scheduling and taking her to doctor appointments, then that’s what I will do. I don’t need your permission for that because I have her father’s. This is a complaint that you need to take up with him. So, for now, she’ll see who I take her to, and you’re more than welcome to join us. It’s next Friday at ten. I’ll text you the information. Enjoy time with your daughter. I have some studying to do.”

Ryan started to walk off, but Tan’s voice stopped her. “You really think you’re better than me? You’re not, honey. You’re just lucky, that’s all. He’s with you because things didn’t work with me. I was the first one he loved and I will always have that. I gave him his first child. You have him because I made a stupid decision, but trust me, the same way you walked in, someone else can take that spot from you. Don’t get comfortable.”

Tan smirked at Ryan and walked off. She knew that most of what she was saying was a lie. True enough he’d loved her first, and she was the first to give him a child, but MyZell had never loved Tan the way he loved Ryan.

She could see it in his eyes, the way he looked at her, and when he said her name. It hurt Tan to the core. She was still nursing that wound and would be for a long time.

Ryan had learned to deal with Tan’s insecurities, so she wasn’t fazed at all by what had just happened. Instead, she made her way to the kitchen to set up so that she could get her

work done. Surprisingly, she whizzed through most of her assignments. It was as if she'd never missed a beat and she was ahead of schedule. She had two weeks before she was to take her exam and then she would have her GED. After that, she planned to try out a few college courses online.

She was motivated and MyZell encouraged her, even offering to help her purchase a business of her own.

Myah wasn't thrilled about that because she had gotten used to Ryan running things for her, but Ryan was excited about the possibility. Even if she had no idea what she wanted to do, just the thought of having something of her own had her motivated.

It didn't take long for Ryan to get engrossed in what she was doing, and before she realized it, hours had passed since she'd begun working on her assignments.

Her eyes were tired and she was in much need of a break, so she closed her MacBook and dug into her bag for the lunch she had packed that morning.

As if he could sense it, Ryan's phone vibrated with a call from MyZell, forcing a smile on her face.

"You better be feeding my son, Ry," was the first thing out of his mouth.

Ryan playfully rolled her eyes and smiled. "I'm eating right now."

"Good, because I'd hate to have to run up on you," MyZell announced with a smile in his voice.

Ryan carrying his son had him in a different place. He was happy and hopeful about their future. He hadn't had that feeling in a really long time, and even when he thought he had in the past, it was nothing in comparison to what he was feeling about Ryan.

"And do what?"

He chuckled at the sternness in Ryan's voice. She played tough, but he knew how to break her down. "I'll show you later. What's my baby girl up to?"

“You know I don’t know that. I’m in the kitchen studying. They’re probably in her playroom.”

“Then go see.”

“Zell, no. The situation is already complicated. I’m not trying to make it worse.”

“Why you sound like that? Something happen?”

Ryan hated that he could read her so well. Occasionally it was an asset, but times like this it backfired because he always knew when something was wrong.

“No, everything’s fine,” she said before releasing a short sigh.

“Yo, I’m about to swing by there.”

“Zell, no. I don’t need you to do that. I said everything is fine,” Ryan said, not wanting to be in the middle of an argument about Tan being in her feelings. They all needed to be at peace, if not for themselves, then for Zyen. She was getting older and could tell when things weren’t right.

“Then tell me what’s up.”

“Nothing, she just got upset because I scheduled Zyen’s checkup, but—”

“Man, fuck her, real shit. I’ll take care of it.”

“No, you won’t. It’s handled. She knows when it is, she can go or not go. I really don’t care. What about dinner tonight? I was thinking we could go out since Myah is supposed to have Zyen.”

Ryan just wanted to change the subject. She was tired of their lives being consumed by issues with Tan.

MyZell was quiet for a minute before he chuckled. “You ain’t slick, trying to switch shit up, but yeah, we can do that. How much longer you gonna be there?”

“Maybe an hour.”

“Aight, bet, call me when you leave. Love you, Ry.”

“I will, love you more.”

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## *sixty-nine*

“SO, you’re really gonna do this?”

MyZell smirked at Trez asking him the same question for the third time. “Yeah, damn. Why do you keep asking me that?” MyZell fired back as he pulled up to his sister’s shop.

He had been out all morning after Ryan left, looking for the perfect ring. He had no idea about the size because she didn’t wear jewelry, and as far as he was concerned, her hands were small as hell. When the clerks at the stores kept questioning him about her ring size, he tried to gauge it by their hands, but he couldn’t tell, so he picked what they considered an average size. They assured him that it could easily be adjusted to fit Ryan in a day or so if it didn’t fit when she tried it on.

He went with that because he wanted it to be a total surprise and asking her ring size would throw suspicion out there.

Trez laughed before he answered. “Cause, it’s just fast. I mean, what’s the rush? Y’all good, right?”

“Yeah, we’re good, and I want to keep it that way. I love her, she loves me, and we both love Zyen and our son. So why wait?”

“This about that or this about the fact that you worried about her not being around, Zell?” Trez asked, just to be sure. He knew Zell still harbored some doubt. Even if he didn’t speak on it anymore, the situation with Tan had messed with his head in a way that wasn’t easy to move on from.



“It ain’t about that. I’m happy. Ryan ain’t going nowhere. I know that, but she’s been through a lot. She deserves to have shit the right way. I want her to know without a shadow of doubt that I’m in this.”

“Aight, let me go order a tux then. Looks like you getting married, fam.”

MyZell laughed at Trez’s enthusiasm before he nodded. “Yeah, do that, but let me hit you back. I need to run in and see Myah real quick.”

“Aight, cool. We still got Zyen tonight, right?”

“Yeah, but not ’til later. She’s with her trifling ass mama right now,” MyZell said, irritated about the conversation he’d had with Ryan earlier.

“I’m not even gonna take it there with you. I’ll see you tonight,” Trez said before ending the call.

MyZell shut off his engine and grabbed the small silver bag that housed the ring that he had just purchased for Ryan. He was sure it was the perfect one, but he still wanted a second opinion.

The women at the store just wanted his money, so everything he picked was perfect as far as they were concerned. The more expensive the better for them. He wanted the opinion of someone who would be honest about it.

After he was out the car and had it locked, he made his way to the shop, but he heard a female voice call out to him. As always, his first instinct was to place his hand on his side where his gun rested.

“Excuse me, can I talk to you for a minute?”

He watched as the woman said something to a child who was in the front seat of the car she was in, shut the door, and then hurried over to him.

The second he laid eyes on her, he knew who she was. She and Ryan looked too much alike for him to be mistaken about her identity. MyZell stood on the sidewalk and waited while she approached. He kept his eyes on the kid, who was also

watching him. From the glare that he delivered, it was as if he was protecting his mother from where he sat in the front seat of her car. It made MyZell smile.

“I’m Terri,” she said as soon as she approached. Terri watched him nervously, not knowing how he would react to her.

“I know who you are,” he said with an expression that she couldn’t read. “What do you need?”

“I was wondering if you could talk to Ryan for me. I don’t know how much you know about me or our situation, but I miss my sister.”

MyZell searched her face. The stress lines were apparent and she seemed sincere. He was good at reading people, but he wasn’t going to just ride with it. Dealing with Tan had taught him that people showed you who they wanted you to see.

“What I know is that when she needed you, you chose money over your sister. That’s some shady shit and she’s not ready to let that go yet.”

Terri dropped her eyes before she glanced back at the car that her son was in. When she was focused on MyZell again, she fumbled with her hands and then looked him right in the eyes, feeling the need to convince him that she’d messed up and was ready to make amends for that.

“I’m not going to try and act like that wasn’t one of the worst decisions that I’d ever made because it was, but I love my sister. Nobody’s perfect. I did what I had to do for my son and hurt my sister in the process.”

“So how the fuck is she supposed to know that you won’t do that shit again? You’re here now, but what happens when you’re faced with the same decision for different reasons?”

“I won’t ever make that decision again. I miss her. She’s all I have. I look at my son every day and hate that he doesn’t know how great she is. I want him to know that. I want her to know him. She loves you, she’ll listen to you. I just want her to give me a chance. I don’t expect things to be easy, and I

know that I'll have to gain her trust, but I miss my sister. She needs me just as much as I need her."

MyZell looked at her and released a cocky laugh. "She don't need you. Ryan is good, believe that. I will always make sure she is too."

"I didn't mean anything by that."

"Look, I respect the fact that you're willing to try and fix shit, but it's not up to me. You already talked to her and she made it clear that she's not ready yet. I don't know if she'll ever be, but that's not something I'm going to push her into."

With sad eyes, Terri nodded. "I understand. Please just think about it. I live here now, so I'll be around."

She turned to walk away, but MyZell stopped her. "You live here?"

Terri turned and nodded. "I moved. I have my own place, a job and everything. I meant what I said. I want to fix things with my sister. She's all I have."

Terri offered a weak smile before she turned and made her way to her car. MyZell watched as she got in and drove off. He had no idea what he planned to do, but he did at least feel like she was sincere.

The only issue he had was that Ryan and their son were his priorities. He wasn't about to risk her happiness for anyone, not even the hope of her bonding with a sister that he knew she missed.

After Terri pulled off, MyZell made his way to Myah's shop and pulled the door to enter. All eyes were on him as he tugged at his jeans to pull them up around his waist and made his way through the building to what technically was now Ryan's office.

He felt the women in the shop watching him with lustful stares, but they didn't entertain him in the least. He had who he wanted and no one else could compete with that.

"So, you call this shit working?" MyZell asked with a grin from the door as he watched his sister swiping away on her

iPad. He knew from the intense look on her face and the way her lip was tucked between her teeth that she was shopping and not working.

“Shut up. Yes, I’m working. I need a new pair of leather boots. It’s about to get cold.” Myah rolled her eyes at her brother who entered and sat next to her on the sofa where she was posted up.

“What you doing here?” she asked, looking him over and noticing the small bag in his hand. She knew the store well because she shopped there a lot, which was apparent by the diamonds that graced her hands and wrist. “Oh, is that it? You picked one.” Myah said, reaching for the bag and snatching it from him.

“Yeah, check it out and let me know what you think,” MyZell said proudly while he watching his sister remove the tiny leather box and open it.

“Damn, is that what I think? How much this shit cost, Zell?” Myah announced, holding the box up before she removed the ring from it.

“Ay, why you cussing, damn?” he said and then smiled as he admired the ring after Myah slid it partially on her finger. “You think it’s too much?” he questioned.

The ring was a two-karat emerald cut and he was assured by the woman who sold it to him that it had top ratings. He didn’t know much about diamonds, but he could tell from the way it shined that the clarity and cut were high quality.

“No, it’s perfect. I mean, I love it. Does she even wear jewelry?” Myah asked, looking at her brother briefly and then going back to the ring.

“Nah, not really, but that’s an engagement ring. It’s not really jewelry.”

“Baby bro, this is definitely jewelry. Expensive ass jewelry,” Myah said with a grin.

“So, it’s good?”

“Hell yeah it’s good. If she don’t marry you, I will, just to rock this.” Myah held her hand up and tried to let the light catch it.

“Ay, let me get that. You getting too attached.” MyZell grabbed his sister’s wrist and then pulled the ring off. He lifted the box from her lap and placed the ring back into it before he closed it and put it back in the bag.

“I’m happy you’re happy,” Myah said, staring at her brother, who was now leaned back on the sofa.

“You’re happy, I’m happy? You sound dumb as hell, My,” he said with a light chuckle.

“Yes, smart ass. You know what I mean. You deserve it. We both do, and things are good right now.”

“Yeah, they are, and I pray they stay that way. I don’t think I can handle any more bullshit right now.” MyZell lifted the hat he was wearing, ran his hand across his head, and then returned his hat to its original position, pulling it down low.

Myah nodded to agree. They had been through it lately, but now that the dust had cleared, she was grateful for the outcome. She had Trez, something she didn’t see happening. Her brother had Ryan, a son on the way, and a beautiful baby girl. It wasn’t a fairytale, but it was real.

“YOU’RE TRYING to stay in tonight, looking like this.”

Ryan smiled when she felt MyZell behind her. His hands moved across her stomach and then down her thighs, before she felt his lips graze her neck and then deliver a series of soft kisses.

“Stop, I look crazy,” she said, observing their image in the mirror.

She had spent the afternoon after she’d left the condo shopping with Zyen, trying to find a dress. MyZell wouldn’t give her any hints about where they were going, but he had insisted that she dress nicely. Ryan found a navy, baby doll dress that flowed around her baby bump and connected around the neck, exposing part of her back. Ryan basically lived in leggings and t-shirts, so it felt weird to her to actually be dressed up.

“You’re beautiful,” he said with a smile as added confirmation.

“So why do you get to wear jeans, but I have to dress up?” Ryan frowned after he stepped away from her to finish dressing.

After he had his shirt on and buttoned, he began rolling the sleeves until they were positioned just right, exposing part of his forearms down to his wrist.

“Cause I don’t dress up. I don’t need to. You make me look good.” He winked at her and she blushed while admiring her man.

If only he knew just how wrong that statement was. He was so sexy to her. Everything about him turned her on, even now, dressed in jeans that fit perfectly, hanging slightly below his waist. His crisp, white, Polo button up looked clean against his golden, tatted skin, and his perfectly trimmed beard and freshly shaped-up hair seemed as if he had just left the barber's chair. She was addicted to the simplest things about him.

Ryan was in love. No question about that.

After a few hits of cologne that had Ryan faded, MyZell pulled her into his personal space and kissed her lips. "I love you, you know that, right?"

"Yes, I do."

"Good, let's go. I'm hungry and I know my son is ready to throw down too." He smiled before releasing her and taking one of her hands in his and using his other to grab his keys from the dresser.

Ryan smiled and followed him as he led the way to the door. An hour later, after multiple questions about where they were going, and MyZell telling her to just relax and wait, the two finally arrived at their location.

Ryan frowned as she looked around, unsure of where they were. She didn't know Miami well, but she did know that they were at the beach, only the area appeared secluded and she didn't see a restaurant.

"Why are we here?" she asked after MyZell got out and opened her door for her.

He extended his hand to help her out, and once she was on her feet, he kissed her cheek and simply, said, "Dinner."

"But where? There's nothing out here." Ryan frowned again, but MyZell wasn't fazed. He smirked and led the way through the parking lot that lined the beach. A few feet away, they reached a pier where he had their evening set up for them.

Ryan smiled when she noticed a table sitting at the end. The short pier was lined with candles and roses and three men stood at the end wearing white shirts and black pants.

“You did this?” she asked, sliding her arm through his and snuggling close to his side as they made their way down the pier.

“Yeah, why?”

“It’s sweet. It doesn’t seem like your thing,” she said with a grin.

“Damn, it’s like that?” MyZell chuckled and kissed her cheek again just as they reached the table. He nodded at the three men and pulled her chair out. Once she was seated, he pulled his chair close to hers and sat down.

Ryan glanced at the ocean around them and smiled before she looked at MyZell again. “This is perfect, thank you.”

“You’re perfect, and you’re welcome. Even though you don’t think I can pull off shit like this.” He smirked and she laughed.

“No, it’s not that. I’ve just never seen this kinda stuff from you. You’re usually just so...” She paused, trying to find the right words. “I don’t know. I can’t explain it.”

MyZell laughed and then leaned back. “This is usually not my shit, but tonight was special, so I put a little extra into it.” He winked at her and she blushed.

“Special how?” Ryan questioned with a curious grin.

MyZell elected not to answer. Instead, he held his hand up. One of the men turned to the cart that was behind him and lifted the bottle of sparkling cider he had stored on ice. He poured a glass for Ryan and then returned it to the cart before placing a beer in front of MyZell.

“Well?” Ryan asked since he hadn’t answered her.

With a cocky grin, MyZell lifted his beer and turned it up. Ryan watched intently, annoyed by his silence. After he finished off half of it, he then leaned back and reached into his pocket where he had her ring.

He placed it on the center of the table between the two of them and then nodded at it.



“This kind of special,” he said, pulling his hand back and resting it on the table closer to him.

Ryan’s eyes grew wide and her mouth dropped open just a little as her eyes moved from the ring back to him. The smug grin on his face had her wanting to roll her eyes because she could read his thoughts.

He had caught her off guard, and it was apparent from her reaction, or lack thereof.

“Wha... what’s that for?” she asked, looking down at the ring again. It was beautiful, but she’d expected nothing less from him. If she didn’t know anything else about MyZell, she knew he had an eye for exquisite things.

“It’s for you,” he said calmly, never once taking his eyes off of her. She was so beautiful to him, and right now, the innocence in her reaction had him wanting to jump across the table and kiss her.

“For me? But that’s a...”

“Engagement ring,” he finished her sentence and then smiled.

“Yeah, it is. A really big one,” she said, checking it out again.

“I’ll get you a smaller one if you don’t like it. That part don’t matter to me, but your answer does.”

Ryan was smiling big now and she had finally got her thoughts together. “Answer? I don’t recall you asking me anything,” she said, delivering a smirk as their eyes locked on each other.

MyZell chuckled and then stared at her intensely. “Marry me, Ryan.”

“That was a command, not a question,” she said with a smug grin.

MyZell shrugged. “Aight, cool. Don’t worry about it, then,” he said coolly and then reached for the ring, but Ryan got her hand on it before he did.

“Nope, too late. You can’t offer a girl diamonds and then take it back. I guess I can do forever with you.”

“You guess?” MyZell questioned with a smirk.

“Okay, I can,” Ryan said with a slight shrug of her shoulders.

MyZell shook his head and stood. He slipped the ring out of her hand and then held it up. Ryan obliged by holding out her hand and waiting for him to slide it on her finger. Once he had it in place, MyZell kissed her in a way that had them both ready to say fuck dinner.

“Aight, let’s try this again. Will you marry me?”

This time with a wide grin, Ryan nodded first and then confirmed verbally. “Yes.”

Their lips met again before MyZell let her go and took his seat. Ryan followed, holding her hand up to admire her ring.

“Did you pick it?” she asked without looking out at him because she was so engrossed in the beauty on her hand.

“Hell yeah, I did, so you better love that shit. Took me all damn day to find the right one,” he said with a smile. With his eyes on his future wife, he couldn’t help but keep a smile on his face. She was everything.

“I love it. And I love you,” Ryan admitted.

“Good, now let’s eat. I got plans for you later.”

Upon announcing that they were ready to eat, the three men rolled their carts to the table and began placing trays on it.

MyZell had requested all of Ryan’s favorite things, wanting to make the evening perfect. So far it was, and after they made it back to the house, it was going to be even better. He planned to make love to her in a way that let her know just how much he belonged to her and how much she was made for him.

The next morning, Ryan lay in bed with MyZell flushed against his body. Her back was against his chest, while his arms circled her waist and rested on her stomach. Ryan was

deep in her thoughts about everything going on in her life, but her mind kept going back to her sister.

The idea of getting married had Ryan thinking about family. She didn't know why, but it really made her miss her sister even more. She was torn about whether she wanted to try and mend what was broken between the two of them.

"Can I ask you something?" Ryan questioned after releasing an exaggerated sigh.

She trusted MyZell's opinion. He wanted what was best for her, so he wouldn't dare agree to something that he didn't feel was good for her. Ryan knew that.

"What's up?" he asked in a lazy tone before he kissed her bare collarbone.

"Do you think I should try to fix things with my sister?"

MyZell briefly opened his eyes, which had been closed, and then kissed her shoulder again. "Why do you ask?"

He was curious if Terri had reached out to Ryan again. He didn't think she had, since he had just had a conversation with her yesterday and she didn't mention it, but he still knew it was possible.

"I don't know. I'm having a baby and getting married."

MyZell smiled at her confession. It was still new to him, but it felt good to hear. That was why he was convinced that he was doing the right thing.

"Yeah, and how does that change things?"

Ryan turned so that she was facing him and he kissed the tip of her nose and stared at her as he waited.

"Those are things that you do with family around. I don't have family, not like you do."

"You do have family, Ry. We're your family," MyZell said confidently. He didn't want her making decisions about connecting with her sister because she felt alone. He wanted it to be a choice, not a need.

“I know and I love you guys. I love the fact that you guys feel that way, but maybe I should at least try.”

“Is that what you want to do?” he questioned with a serious stare.

“I don’t know. I guess a part of me does, but then again, I don’t trust her.” For the first time, Ryan admitted her reservations out loud. She was afraid to trust her feelings with her sister and then be stuck again with a broken heart when she took them for granted.

“I saw her yesterday,” MyZell said and then waited for Ryan to react.

“Saw her? Where did she come to you?” Ryan sat up, feeling anxiety about him mentioning Terri.

*Had she gone to him for money? Was she worrying about fixing things in vain because history was about to repeat itself?*

“She did, but nothing like that. Chill, baby girl.” He pulled her back toward the bed and kissed her forehead. “She wanted me to talk to you for her. She didn’t ask me for shit and I don’t think she would.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Ryan questioned, balling up her face.

“Because I didn’t want you stressing. If you dealt with her, I wanted it to be your choice, not mine or hers.”

“But I don’t know what my choice is,” Ryan pouted, causing MyZell to smile at her.

“Yes, you do. You’re asking me because you want me to confirm what you already made up in your mind.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea?”

“I think that you miss your sister. You want her to be a part of everything going on right now, and there’s nothing wrong with that. She wants that too, or at least she said she did. They live here now.”

“They?” Ryan questioned.

“Yeah, her and your nephew. Lil man was mugging the shit outta me when your sister was talking to me. He wasn’t trying to let shit happen to her.”

Ryan smiled at the thought. “Maybe I’ll call her.”

“Whatever you want.” MyZell kissed her again and then slipped his hand between her legs.

“Can I slide up in this again, though?” he asked with a smirk before he worked two fingers inside of her.

Ryan didn’t object. She opened her legs, allowing him more access. They were both done talking, and she had no problem with that.

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“YOU SURE YOU GOOD WITH THIS?” Trez asked as he watched MyZell watching his condo.

MyZell just shot him a look that told Trez exactly where his head was at, but MyZell didn't respond.

“Ay, we have to go or we'll be late. We can go in there and get her if you want,” Trez said and then waited.

“Nah, we're good. Let's go.” MyZell glanced at the car with his guys in it who he had assigned to watch the condo. This was the first time that he was allowing Zyen to stay overnight with Tan and he really wasn't feeling it.

Aside from her still being in her feelings about Ryan, they hadn't had any issues out of her. She loved Zyen. He knew that and she was a good mother. Aside from all the bullshit she'd pulled on him and keeping Zyen from him, he couldn't deny that Tan loved their daughter.

He would never fully get over how shit went down, but he had more positive things to focus on like his wedding to Ryan, and the birth of their son, which was only a few months away. Harboring ill feelings toward Tan wasn't high on his priority list.

“Bruh, you look tense as a muthafucker. I know that's your baby girl but relax. You got eyes on the house and in there too.”

MyZell smirked at the fact that he had access to the cameras in the house. He wasn't leaving anything to chance.

He could check in on Zyen whenever he wanted to and Tan didn't know shit about it.

“I'm good.”

Trez chuckled as he drove to the restaurant where they were meeting up with Ryan, Tan, and Terri.

“Nah, you're not, but you will be. Baby steps, bruh, but she gon' be alright.”

“She better be,” MyZell released with such a deadly tone that Trez couldn't do anything but laugh. He knew MyZell would be out for blood on behalf of his daughter, but Trez also understood that Tan knew that too.

When they got to the restaurant and walked in, they found the girls at the bar and headed their way. MyZell had made Ryan pick Myah up, telling her that he had to make a run. He didn't want her to know that he was going by to check on Zyen because she would go in on him.

She was part of the reason why Zyen was even staying overnight. She had insisted that they couldn't keep babysitting Tan forever and that he would eventually have to learn to trust her with Zyen. Ryan was always fair and level headed, and MyZell knew that she was right, but it didn't make it any easier.

As if she felt him near her, Ryan looked up just in time to see MyZell heading her way. She smiled big when their son started doing somersaults like he too felt his father's presence.

“Why you smiling like that, Ry?” MyZell moved right to her and kissed her lips. His next move was to place his hands on her stomach and feel around for their son, who responded with a few strong kicks.

“Because my man is sexy, that's why.”

“Word. He got you grinning like that. He must be the shit,” MyZell teased.

“He's alright. I guess I'll keep him for now, but if I change my mind, I'll hit you up.”

MyZell chuckled and pointed at her. “Ay, you said that shit too smooth. Let me find out you running that line with muthafuckers for real, and that’s your ass, baby girl.”

“Girl, bye. All you have to do is look at him and he’s under your spell. He ain’t gon’ do anything.” Myah smirked and looked right at her brother, who laughed.

“You’re right. She here yet?” he asked, looking around for Terri while Trez ordered drinks from the bar.

“Not yet. She might not show,” Ryan said, trying to hide the fact that she would be disappointed if she didn’t. She’d finally reached out to her sister but felt like it would be less awkward if she met with everyone so that the pressure wouldn’t be there. MyZell had agreed, so the five of them were having dinner.

“She’ll be here. Relax. She tried too hard to make it happen.” MyZell placed his hand on the side of Ryan’s face and let his thumb glide across her jawline before he kissed her again.

“Here.” Trez handed MyZell a beer and then twisted the cap off the one he was holding and turned it up while positioning himself behind Myah. She leaned back against his body and smiled.

The four of them talked at the bar until the hostess showed up to let them know that their table was ready. Just as they stood to be escorted to it, Terri rushed through the door, looking around.

“Hey, she’s here,” Myah said, nudging Ryan and they all turned to face her, but Ryan threw up her hand to signal where they were.

“Sorry, I’m late. I had to get my son situated with the neighbor. She has a son his age and they were going a mile a minute about their plans for tonight,” she rambled before she stood awkwardly waiting.

“It’s fine. We just got our table,” Ryan said, relieved that she had showed.



“I’m Trez.” He extended a hand and she accepted with a soft smile.

“Myah. We sort of met.”

Terri nodded and MyZell spoke up. “I guess we did too.”

Again, Terri nodded and the five of them then followed the hostess to their table. Not long after, they all had their food and were engaging in idle chit chat as they ate.

“So, when are you due?” she asked Ryan, excited about the fact that her sister was having a baby. She was hopeful that she would be a part of it.

“A little over a month.”

“Are you nervous? I was so nervous with Dalen.”

“I am, I’m trying not to be, but I am.”

“You’ll be fine. No sweat,” MyZell said and leaned over to kiss her cheek.

“Easy for you to say. You’ll be on the sidelines,” Ryan said and rolled her eyes.

“Exactly,” Myah added.

“Right where he should be,” Trez said and held up a closed fist to dap MyZell, which he accepted.

“See, that’s how it is. If men had to be responsible for having babies, our population would be doomed.”

Trez smirked and shook his head. “Nah, I could do that shit if I had to, but I don’t. That’s what you’re for, baby girl,” he said and kissed Myah who then rolled her eyes.

Terri didn’t speak much. She just enjoyed being around her sister. She loved how happy she was and was just grateful to be there. Things could have been drastically different, but at least Ryan was trying and she appreciated that.

“Your son seems like he don’t play. He was mugging the hell out of me the day you were talking to me,” MyZell said, trying to include Terri in the conversation.

She laughed and nodded. “It’s been us for so long, he’s a little protective.”

“Where’s his father?” Ryan asked. Terri getting pregnant and moving away with her boyfriend was the reason why they had originally separated.

“Not around,” Terri said with a bit of hostility. “He wasn’t really a good choice and he didn’t really want to be a father,” she admitted.

They had tried, but when they’d gotten to Atlanta, he’d found his way into the streets and any woman who would have him. They’d argue about his infidelities and he would promise to do right, and then mess up again. That was when Terri had decided to try and go back home and find Ryan. She found her, but Polo had intervened and things had ended up like they were.

“I’m sorry,” Ryan said, truly meaning it. She had MyZell and couldn’t imagine him not loving her or their child the way he did. She felt sorry for her sister.

“Don’t be. I’m good. We’re good. I love my son. He’s a good kid and I did that for him. It’s not easy, but we’re surviving,” Terri said, smiling at everyone.

“That’s what’s up.” Trez nodded and lifted his beer.

“I want to meet him,” Ryan said, smiling at the thought of having her nephew close.

“Anytime. He knows all about you. He wanted to come tonight, but I promised him another time, so he settled for a sleepover with his friend.”

“Soon. Real soon.” Ryan smiled again.

The five of them enjoyed dinner and made plans to meet up again. MyZell paid the bill while the rest of them said their goodbyes. He and Ryan took her car while Trez and Myah left together. The night was a success and Ryan was just ready to get home and snuggle up in bed with her man. She was in a good place.

\* \* \*

“Zell, wake up,” Ryan whispered because she felt like her words were stuck in her throat. She clenched her jaw and bucked as a sharp pain hit her right in her back and side.

When MyZell didn't move, Ryan shoved his shoulder before she buckled over from another pain.

“Mmmm, what's up, Ry? You good?” he mumbled, reaching for her but she pushed him away.

“No, something's wrong. I'm in pain. Bad pain.” She moaned as she tried her best to sit up. Hearing that instantly snapped him out of the groggy state. MyZell reached for the lamp next to the bed and turned it on before he looked at Ryan.

“Pain like what kind of pain? It's too early for the baby, right?” It rolled out of his mouth so fast while he was standing that he hadn't even realized he was speaking until Ryan answered.

“Sharp pain in my back and side.”

“Like contractions?” he questioned, leaning down and touching her stomach, not knowing what else to do.

“I don't know what contractions feel like,” she admitted as another sharp pain shot through her, bringing tears to her eyes. She was panicked and scared. Just a few hours ago, she had been at dinner with everyone, happy and healthy, and now she was afraid of losing her son.

“Okay, hold on. Let's go to the hospital. Can you give me a second to throw some clothes on?” he asked while moving at the same time.

Ryan nodded and waited.

She was in one of his t-shirts and nothing else so she tried to scoot to the edge of the bed but he stopped her.

“Don't move, Ry. I'll help you. Just let me throw some clothes on.”

She did as instructed and stayed put. Forty-five minutes later they were both dressed and pulling up at the hospital. MyZell pulled up at the emergency entrance and scooped Ryan out of the passenger seat to carry her inside.

The entire drive to the hospital she had been in tears and it had him scared as shit. There wasn't much in life that he was afraid of but losing one of them was definitely at the top of that list.

Once he was inside, he explained what was going on and then went to go park his car. He returned moments later and they had already taken Ryan, so he found a nurse who took him back to where she was.

Ryan was on a table already hooked to monitors and the doctor was standing over her, pressing around her stomach, which seemed to cause her more pain.

“Ay, you gotta do all that?” MyZell snapped, moving to her side and kissing her on the forehead before he shot the doctor a death stare.

“We're trying to figure out what's going on. So, we have to check all possibilities. So, Ryan you said the pain is in your back and your side?” he asked and Ryan nodded.

“And you have another month before your due date?”

“Yeah, why? What's wrong?” MyZell asked.

“We don't know yet, but she's not showing any contractions, so we're about to do an ultrasound to take a look.”

Ryan looked at MyZell and he could see the fear in her eyes.

“But you don't think it's anything serious, right? My son is fine?” MyZell questioned

“I can't say just yet, but let's just take a look and see.”

He whispered something to the nurse, which pissed MyZell off, but Ryan squeezed his hand, sensing that he was about to react. He looked down at her and relaxed a little.

Not long after, the doctor did an ultrasound that showed Ryan's placenta had totally detached and she needed to have a cesarean right away. After a million and one questions, which the doctor tried his best to answer without upsetting the couple, Ryan was rushed off to surgery.

MyZell was in scrubs right there by her side, keeping Ryan calm until they heard their son's first cries. Ryan's tears had turned from panic to joy and MyZell couldn't stop smiling.

"Baby, he's so little," MyZell said as he stared at his son after cutting the cord and waiting for the nurses to clean him up.

The doctors were still working on Ryan, so she couldn't hold him after the nurse had handed him over to MyZell, so he leaned him down enough for her to see and kiss their son.

"He's okay, right? They're sure he's okay?" she asked for the tenth time, making MyZell smile even harder.

"He's good, Ry. He's an Abrams, just like you're about to be. This shit don't faze him. He was just ready to meet his pops, that's all."

MyZell held his son tightly while he waited for them to finish up with Ryan. The nurse wanted to take the baby and wanted him out so that they could stitch Ryan up, but he'd refused both. He wasn't about to part with either one of them at the moment, so there he was, holding his son while he watched over Ryan.

"He bad as shit, Ry. Causing problems already. He just couldn't hold out like he was supposed to," MyZell said, causing everyone in the room including Ryan to laugh.

She watched the two of them with a smile on her face. Knowing that a son of MyZell's couldn't have come into the world any other way. She hadn't even held him yet, but she was in love with him already. The first time she'd laid eyes on MyZell, she never would have guessed that their journey would end up here, but she was glad it had.

There were no words for how much she loved him and she knew without a shadow of a doubt that he felt the same. Now

that their son was born, it only made things that much better. She had found her place and knew that was where she was supposed to be. It wasn't perfect, but it was well worth the struggle they'd faced to get there.

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## *epilogue*

“DADDY, I want to stay with you and Ryan. Please, Daddy.” Zyen hit MyZell hard with the sad eyes. He was about to say yes, but Ryan shot him a look from across the room.

She knew that Zyen had a way of breaking him down, which was why she was still there now. She was supposed to be at her mother’s house two days ago, but had begged her father to let her stay home and he’d given in.

“How about if I come see you tomorrow and I’ll take you and Zyer to get ice cream.”

“Daddy, no. I want to stay here,” Zyen pouted, folding her tiny arms across her chest, sticking her lips out and breaking him down even more. Zyen was his heart, his baby girl, and what she wanted, she got.

“Zyen, Mommy has a surprise for you at the house and you can help me fix your sister’s room. Don’t you want to help Mommy do that?” Tan chimed in.

It took her a minute, but Zyen gave in. “Yes,” she whined with a slight pout.

Zyen loved her mother, but she loved her father even more. MyZell showered her with love twenty-four seven, and when he wasn’t, Ryan was. Zyen also loved her baby brother, Zyer, who was a year younger than she was, but they may as well have been the same age, as close as the two were. Zyen was now three and her baby brother was about to turn two.

MyZell lifted his daughter into his arms and held her against his chest, kissing her face, which she shied away from

because she was upset. He laughed at her resisting him and dug his fingers into her side, causing her to giggle and laugh.

“Daddy, stop it,” she sang, tightening her arms around his neck.

“Stop what, man? You laughing for no reason,” he said, pulling her back enough to see her face. A face that was identical to his.

“You tickled me,” Zyen said, smiling back at him.

“Nah, man. You’re laughing for no reason.”

“Zyen, give me hugs before you go,” Ryan said, interrupting their moment because Tan was getting impatient.

Tan envied the fact that the two of them were so close, which Ryan understood because she would have felt the same way if Zyer constantly chose MyZell over her. He was a mama’s boy, though, so she didn’t have to worry about that, at least not right now.

Taking Zyen from MyZell, Ryan hugged her and kissed her cheeks.

“How many days?” she asked Ryan with a pout.

“Four,” Ryan said softly, but Tan could still hear her. She knew that Ryan loved her daughter, but it still hurt her just how much.

She was now in a happy, healthy, relationship and six months into a new pregnancy, yet it was still hard for her to be around Ryan. Tan still felt that Ryan had the life that she was supposed to have. Tan loved her man and the baby she was carrying, but she still had her moments of regret, especially at times like this when Zyen preferred them over her. Zyen still lived mostly with MyZell and Ryan for that reason, which also bothered Tan, but she dealt with it.

“Okay, baby, let’s go. We have a lot of work to do in your sister’s room and I have some surprises for you too for your room.”

Ryan lowered Zyen to her feet and she ran over to Tan and grabbed her hand.



“Like what, Mommy?”

“You’ll see when we get there,” Tan said, smiling at her daughter as they left the house. She had long since moved out of MyZell’s condo to her own place that he helped her get and was settling into her new life.

Just before Zyen was completely out the door, she pulled away from Tan and ran back to her father.

“Ice cream with Zyer tomorrow. Don’t forget, Daddy.” She puckered her lips expecting a kiss, which he leaned down and delivered. After which, Zyen ran to the door and took her mother’s hand again and the two left.

“I miss my baby already,” Ryan pouted after MyZell locked up and joined her in the living room.

He pulled her to his side and kissed her forehead.

“You the reason why she be hurting Tan’s feelings like that,” MyZell teased.

“No way. That’s you.” Ryan laughed.

“Whatever, man. What time they bringing Zyer back?” MyZell questioned about the fact that Trez and Myah had their son.

“Tonight sometime, why?”

“You know why. We got an empty house, Ry.” He lifted her chin and pulled her into a kiss.

“So what, we had full house this morning and that didn’t stop you, so now, I’m about to relax.”

“You really telling me no?”

“Yep, now deal with it,” she said with a smug grin.

“You wrong for that, but I’ll let you slide, ’cause I know you still recovering from this morning. Hopefully, I accomplished my goal.”

“And what goal is that?”

“To put a baby girl up in you. You thought I was playing. Trez and Myah are having twins, Ry. We can’t let them outdo

us.”

“Uh, you need to check that. We’re good. We have Zyen and Zyer. We can chill for a minute.”

MyZell chuckled because Ryan was so serious. He knew she wasn’t trying to hear that, which was why he picked at her about it. He did want a daughter from her, but he understood that she had just opened her business and it wasn’t the time.

After totally redoing things at Myah’s shop, Ryan had come up with the idea to help small businesses like Myah’s organize. She did for them exactly what she had done for Myah. Ryan had one more year before she finished her degree, but her business was already doing well.

MyZell couldn’t be more proud of her, so he could wait, if she wanted to wait. Just not too long.

He wanted to see Ryan’s face on a smaller version of herself. Zyer, of course, looked just like his father, but had Ryan’s color. She complained all the time about being the one who put in all the work to get him here, but their son taking after his father.

Either way, they were in love with him. Ryan was just grateful that he was a mama’s boy, which MyZell hated.

“Ay, you know I love you, right?”

“You better, you trying to get me pregnant,” Ryan teased and stuck her tongue out at him

MyZell chuckled and stared at his wife. Life couldn’t get any better than this. As long as he had her, he had the world.