



SAVING
SUNFLOWER

The Sun Series

RAE LYSE

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Rae Lyse



Contents

Part One

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Part Two

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Part Three

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Part Four

Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four
Epilogue
About the Author

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PART ONE

1

“BRO, YOU LISTENING?” Mo asked, looking up from his phone.

Cicadas buzzed in the distance as Dominic sat with Mo on the front porch of his grandmother’s worn shotgun house. The balmy Georgia air left a layer of sheen on their foreheads as they held court on her rickety porch. Dominic idly flicked the spark-wheel of his BIC lighter while Mo listed off everything they needed to accomplish to further his rap career—if they could even call it that. Mo had dubbed himself Dominic’s manager and had taken the role just as seriously as he took the role of being his right hand. Dominic admired his tenacity and let him take charge with little fuss.

“I’m listening,” Dominic replied, although he had zoned out ten minutes before, itching to spark a blunt.

Too much talk about paying for things with money he hadn’t made yet put him in a foul mood.

“We gotta shoot a music video.” Mo talked with his hands. “I wonder how much that cost? Probably a grip.”

A popular rapper’s influencer girlfriend had posted an Instagram video with Dominic’s song playing on repeat in the background, and it had garnered millions of streams online ever since. It was funny how much clout white chicks with bad plastic surgery had, but who was he to complain? Mo had been brainstorming on how to capitalize on the newfound buzz ever since, hoping it would be their opportunity for a legitimate come up.

Dominic could picture the wheels turning in Mo’s head. He had always been imaginative and most important, loyal. He

was one of the first people he met after moving to Atlanta from Los Angeles at ten to live with his aunt.

Dominic remembered selling candy he had purchased in bulk to other students around their elementary school to cover the past due water bill tacked on his Aunt Diane's refrigerator. A few older kids hemmed him up one day, attempting to steal the candy and what little money he had made. He threw the first punch and was on his back before he could throw another one, so he covered his face, preparing for the worse. He still shuddered, anticipating the impact of dozens of punches. None ever came. A stocky kid with braces and a huge afro came out of nowhere instead. He threw each of the kids down one by one while wielding a small pocketknife. That stocky kid was Mo. They served a thirty-day sentence in alternative school together and had been tight ever since.

"What else you got on that managerial to-do list of yours?" Dominic asked.

"I thought you'd never ask." Mo whipped out a Backwoods from his pocket and tossed it to Dominic.

"Court adjourned?" Dominic flicked his lighter, preparing to light the blunt, but wanting to hear his response first.

"Nah nigga. This recess." They laughed in unison and he lit the blunt before taking a deep drag and passing it over to Mo.

Thirty minutes later, they were just coherent enough to resume their prior conversation and Dominic was less stressed over his money woes.

"I might have a gig for you," Mo said.

"Real shit? Where at? Most importantly, what they trying to pay me?"

"Roc said he know a promoter at Playhouse. Some new club that just opened in Buckhead. Hopefully they tryna pay something decent." The sun set and street lights illuminated the eerily quiet cul-de-sac. "We could roll through and chop it up with him. See if he can give us the connect."

“Bet that.” Dominic dug in his pockets and pulled out a few balled up twenty dollar bills. “What you got on you?”

Mo pulled a crisp one-hundred dollar bill from his own pocket. They looked at each other and grinned.

“Let’s go before my granny come out talking shit,” Mo said.

They hopped up without another word and headed toward Mo’s beat up ’98 Impala.

Dominic's deep voice vibrated through the speakers of Mo's Impala, as they drove through the winding streets of metro Atlanta. It was around seven o'clock and the night was young for most ATLians. He and Mo had about two hundred dollars between the two of them, but that was all they needed to enjoy themselves. They would fill their empty stomachs with waffles and hash browns, chop it up with Roc to get the promoter's contact, and head to whichever strip club was closest to finish their night.

The gritty lyrics of Dominic's song had their eyes sitting low and heads bobbing in unison. His sound was uncategorizable, with the vibe of old-school Atlanta trap and a west coast feel that he couldn't shake no matter how long he had been living in the south.

Mo whipped into the bare parking lot of the Waffle House, haphazardly parking in the first empty parking spot he could find. He killed the engine while mumbling to himself.

They swaggered through the parking lot and entered the shoddy yellow building, inhaling the savory smell of bacon and chaos. Roc stood behind the register with a Waffle House cap perched backward on top of hundreds of the thick rope-like locs he had worn ever since Dominic had known him. He grinned at the sight of them.

"Look at these two fools right here!" he shouted in a deep southern drawl.

They approached him, slapping hands and taking seats at the counter next to him.

"That shit you dropped fire. Talk yo' shit youngin'." He spoke to Dominic at a fast pace as if he were in a rush but never moved an inch.

Dominic laughed and nodded in respect at Roc's reference to his song that had been gaining traction.

"Appreciate that man. I'm tryna make something happen."

Roc was older and acted as a surrogate older brother to both him and Mo. Everyone in their neighborhood knew Roc and knew that Dominic and Mo were an extension of him. Roc

supported everything they did, from selling dime-bags of weed to hitting licks, and Dominic's music hobby was no different.

Although the diner was almost empty, the staff still moved around the restaurant in a rush. A waitress wiped down the counter in front of them and menus appeared at their hands without being requested.

"You own this place yet Roc?" Dominic asked.

He'd been working there since he and Mo were teens. They had never known him to have another job besides selling dope and couldn't picture him working anywhere else.

"Fuck you!" They all laughed in unison. "Everybody know I'm team lead around here."

"Team lead? They making up positions for you now? Damn man," Mo said, shaking his head.

"Claudette, come take these fools' orders man," Roc replied while pecking at the keys on the register.

Dominic heard her smoky voice before he saw her. It had a raspiness to it that was rough, but soft at the same time. It was a voice that could rival the best strain of Indica.

She must have been new.

"You can't call your customers fools if you're team lead, Roc," she mumbled.

She approached the counter, gripping a notepad and pen, ready to serve. A mess of kinky ringlets sat in a large puff on top of her head, and her Waffle House uniform held a splatter of waffle batter on her left breast.

"You right babygirl. Please come take these idiots' orders."

She laughed, her chipmunk cheeks rising so high you could hardly see the whites of her eyes. Her teeth were straight with a slight gap just between the front two.

"That's not nice either."

Dominic pulled his eyes away from her and pretended to study the menu.

“Can I start you guys off with something to drink? Coffee, juice, water?”

She tapped the pen against her pouty lips.

“Yeah, I’ll have an orange juice,” Mo said. “You can take our orders beautiful, we regulars around here.”

Dominic looked at him, shaking his head. He was always trying to run game. It was corny, but often harmless.

She gave a bashful smile while fidgeting with the pen she held. She *was* cute, but the annoying cute. The type of cute where he felt sorry for her nigga, because he probably could never tell her no. She’d always have him eating out of the palm of her little hand.

“Well, Mr. Regular, what can I get for you?”

Mo rattled off his order and she jotted it on her notepad.

Big, marbled brown eyes stared straight into his. “And you?”

He wasn’t a bitch, so he maintained eye contact.

“A bacon, egg, and cheese melt with hash browns and a chocolate chip waffle.” She stared at him with a blank expression.

“Don’t need to write mine down?” he asked, frowning.

“Nope. What do you want to drink?”

Dominic glanced at Mo, wondering if he had caught the exchange, but he had busied himself with his phone.

“Surprise me.”

At that suggestion, she rewarded him with a grin. He stopped the smile that itched to spread on his own face and watched as she stalked away with their menus.

“Roc... the man with the plan,” Mo said, looking up from his phone. “You know you my nigga, right?”

Roc walked from behind the register and grabbed a towel, preparing to clean a recently vacated table.

“What y’all want?” He headed toward the table, towel in hand, with a skeptical look on his face.

He was no stranger to their requests for help—bail money, weed, a place to crash. This may have been their least problematic request yet.

“You remember that Playhouse connect you was telling me about?”

“Yeah...”

“You think we can get that number man?”

He shrugged his shoulders while wiping crumbs of bacon from the tabletop, probably expecting something more complicated based on his easygoing response.

“You know I got ya’ll,” he responded after a moment. “Autumn, come out here!”

A hodgepodge of bright hair and noise came from the back-storage. The Waffle House uniform she sported hugged every curve on her body as she sashayed towards Roc, still arguing with whoever was in the storage room with her, although the door had already closed.

“I thought I was still on break?” she asked with an eye-roll.

Roc shook his head, kissing his teeth in annoyance.

“Break was over ten minutes ago.” He handed her the rag in his hand. “And use your inside voice too, man.”

“Okay, okay. Break over. Talk quieter. Got it.” She named each infraction and rested all of her weight on one leg.

“I need something else from you too, Doll.”

“And that would be?” Her head cocked to the side. “Me and Claudy been on time all week. We shouldn’t owe you no more extra time.”

“Let *me* keep up with the time,” Roc mumbled. “I need you to talk to my cousin Mo and his boy. They need a hookup at Playhouse and I know you got the connect.”

He nodded towards Dominic and Mo. She followed the direction of his nod, noticing them for the first time. Her lips pursed, and she tossed the rag on the table, crossing her arms.

“What’s in it for me? I don’t do favors without getting something in return. Especially for people I don’t know.”

Dominic looked at Mo, who looked at Roc. Roc ignored Mo’s glare and headed to grab the industrial- sized broom from behind the counter. That was typical of Roc. He hardly handed them what they asked for, preferring to give the information and have them do the dirty work. Dominic was never one to complain about doing dirty work.

“Nigga, you said you had the connect. Not Rainbow Bright right here,” Mo said, directing a scowl toward Roc.

Dominic held back his laughter as her pretty face transformed into a frown.

“Bet you wish you could bag this Rainbow Bright, pussy.”

“Fuc—”

“A’ight, what you want?” Dominic asked, cutting off Mo before the bickering escalated and they left empty-handed.

“A ride.”

The thud of drinks being placed on the counter interrupted their intense negotiation.

“Orange juice for you,” a raspy voice rattled off drink orders, oblivious to the tense standoff, “and tea for you. You seem like a tea drinker.”

Oddly enough, he was.

“Claudy we found our ride.” Rainbow Bright smirked.

Dominic held up his hand, halting her suggestion as the waitress looked between all three parties with wide eyes, before practically running away.

“I need more information before we go wasting each other’s time and shit. Who you know at Playhouse?”

Although Mo was his self-proclaimed manager, Dominic was still his own man.

“I know who you are,” she responded, smirking at Dominic. “And I know the promoter that books all the entertainment for Playhouse.”

She picked at her nails.

“This promoter got a name?”

“Vaughn,” she replied with a shit-eating grin.

Dominic nodded, mulling over the information she had given him. She could be legit or full of shit and suckering them out of a ride. Roc never gave bullshit leads though. He looked at Mo who was already staring at him, ready for whatever decision that would spill from his lips.

“A’ight, but you only get three stops. Third and last stop is to talk to this Vaughn dude.”

He’d learned long ago to give a specific number of stops to people without cars. If he didn’t, they’d have him toting them around Atlanta, wasting his night and gas.

“Whatever.” She uncrossed her arms and began wiping down the table Roc had already cleaned.

Their shy waitress placed steaming plates of breakfast on the counter in front of them. She hadn’t uttered a word since her friend had bartered a ride for them. She worked, refilling drinks and putting out condiments as they talked with Roc and ate. Well, it was Mo that ate. Dominic took bites here and there, too preoccupied with his phone and Mo and Roc’s antics. At the end of their meals, Roc waved the two girls off, releasing them from their shift.

They waited in the car while the girls gathered their belongings. Mo tapped the steering wheel, mumbling under his breath in frustration at the abrupt change of plans for the evening. The girls trudged out of the building with backpacks on their shoulders, talking animatedly to one another. Their actual names were Autumn and Claudette.

The talking stopped once they piled into Mo's backseat. Dominic reached into his pocket and peeled a twenty from the folded money he had scrounged up earlier. He turned, handing the money to Claudette. Their meal had been on the house, but he appreciated her service. She took it, stuffing it deep into the pink sock on her right foot.

"A'ight ladies, first stop?" Mo asked, looking at them through the rearview mirror.

"Baker Hall," Claudette replied.

Dominic was no college student but had spent a night or two at Baker dropping off dime-bags, Percs, and Xans to student-athletes looking to have a good time. He reached forward, turning the volume up on the radio. Just as the volume increased, their chatter resumed, and he wondered what business a girl like her had to handle at Baker.

Mo shrugged and cranked the car up, heading toward I-75.

The car crept to a stop in front of Baker and Dominic cut the volume to the music playing. He glanced in the backseat at Claudette rummaging through her backpack while Autumn scrolled on her phone.

“How much you charge his dumbass girl?” she asked as her long acrylic nail tapped at the screen of the phone.

“Sixty dollars—easy money. He’s in remedial English.”

Autumn tsked in faux sympathy.

Claudette pulled what looked like a flash drive from her bag and turned to Autumn. The two locked pinky fingers.

“I’ll be right back.”

She got out, carefully shutting the door. Dominic watched her wild hair bounce up and down while she walked up the steps to the dorm, easing behind a lanky dude with a basketball tucked under his arm. He watched the door she entered, unsure of what she was selling or who she was selling it to.

Minutes later, she pushed open the door and reappeared outside. A tan, muscular arm gripped hers as she attempted to leave out. Dominic sat forward, attempting to get a closer look at who the arm belonged to. Whoever it was never came outside. They stayed behind the door, attempting to coax her back inside.

“Who’s that?” Dominic asked Autumn, who was still preoccupied with her phone.

She glanced out of the window and rolled her eyes. “A dumbass.”

Mo laughed as Dominic glared at her from the front seat.

She smirked and continued scrolling on her phone. “Some dude on the basketball team, probably tryna get her to hang out. She’s just collecting her coins though.”

Claudette removed her arm from his hold and waved him off while hurrying back to the car. She pulled open the door and fell inside with a sigh. Dominic shook his head as Mo

eased from the parking spot and turned onto a street that would lead them off campus and to the nearest Walmart.

Autumn had expressed that she and Claudette needed groceries and toiletries for the week. It was obvious they both worked as a team, each one using their own strengths to propel them both forward. They didn't seem as entitled as other college girls he'd come across.

His shoulders relaxed as he listened to Claudette's scratchy voice float from the backseat. She and Mo carried on about some show on Netflix they were both watching. A sci-fi drama he had no interest in, but Claudette's voice could have made a chemistry textbook sound interesting.

While the girls roamed around Walmart getting what they needed, Dominic wandered into the ice cream section of the frozen food aisle. He was in search of something sweet to cure the weed induced appetite he had gotten from the blunt he sparked in the parking lot out of boredom.

He licked his dry lips in search of the perfect pint of ice cream. That was the fucked up thing about smoking, something as minuscule as pints of ice cream became interesting. He found himself entranced by the various colors and flavors.

He could remember wandering through the ice cream aisle of the Walmart in his neighborhood back in LA., enticed by the colors, just as he was now. They never had enough money for luxuries like ice cream. Eve, his mother, would call his name in a singsong voice, promising him that one day she would buy him as much ice cream as he wanted.

"I like this kind," a voice he was becoming familiar with said from behind him.

Instead of being surprised by the unexpected sound, a lazy smile found its way on his face. He was too faded to stop it this time. Her silky, brown arm reached around him to open the freezer door and grab a pint of Ben & Jerry's.

"Chunky Monkey..." Dominic said, looking at her reflection in the freezer door after it closed.

Her chocolate skin, wild hair, and a button nose blessed his eyes.

“You should probably get some eye drops while you’re in here.” She tossed the ice cream in her cart and give him a silly wink.

He watched as she strolled away, studying her. His heavy eyes traveled from the kinky curls atop of her head down to the black vans and pink ankle socks she wore. She was average height but looked petite next to his towering six-foot-two frame. Her body was thin but still curvaceous from what he could see beneath the loose Waffle House uniform she wore.

He closed his hanging mouth and turned to the freezer, grabbing his own pint of Chunky Monkey.

2

He was enticing, but he wasn't her type, though, she had no clue what her type was. She only recognized the guys Autumn warned her to stay away from, and he was *definitely* that type of guy. She tried not to stare at him as they sat on the plush couches in the waiting room of Vaughn's office. Her eyes struggled to stay focused on all the modern décor, but they kept drifting back to his lanky frame spread across the swanky loveseat in front of her.

There were so many tattoos on his body, she could hardly see the caramel hue of his skin beneath them. The colorful ink started at his wrists and spread up to his neck. He was handsome, but in a rugged, unconventional way, in a way that was making her squeeze her jean-clad legs together. He sat back at ease, with red-rimmed eyes, unlike his friend, who paced back and forth.

"Man, sit down," he said, laughing at Mo.

Mo looked up at him, shooting a middle finger his way.

"You making me nervous with all that pacing."

Claudette chuckled quietly at their bickering, attempting to go unnoticed. She hadn't been as quiet as she thought, because Dominic's red eyes looked her way. Just as he opened his mouth to say something, a door opened in the distance and Vaughn appeared with Autumn trailing behind him.

Vaughn was a handsome, well-dressed man. He had a chestnut brown complexion and sported a bald head. He held an air of importance, as if he had been a CEO all of his life. But the swagger in his walk gave away his street edge.

Autumn once told her he worked in finance full time but owned an entertainment and lifestyle company on the side. He contracted with various clubs around Atlanta, supplying a team of bottle girls, entertainment, and sometimes even people to give the illusion of a crowd. He had legitimate connections to some of the most successful rap artists. He was definitely Autumn's type—older, accomplished, and well connected. She had met him while out partying one night and had kept him on her roster ever since.

Claudette watched as he exchanged pleasantries with Mo, shaking his hand. Mo sized him up as he moved on to greet Dominic—the reason they were there.

“And you must be Dough.” He stood in front of Dominic, who still sat on the sofa, and held his hand out for Dominic to shake.

“My nigga,” Vaughn said—the inflection of his voice changing as Dominic gripped his hand, laughing.

“That shit you got man, it got the streets talking and I respect it. We ain't heard no shit like that out of Atlanta in a minute. You taking us back to the trap, back to that early 2000s shit.” Dominic kept a cool composure but smiled at the shift in Vaughn's vernacular. “Let's step into my office and see what we can cook up.”

Autumn flopped down next to Claudette as if she'd worked a twelve-hour shift. She shifted closer to her, resting her head on Claudette's shoulder. Claudette sat in silence, still trying to train her eyes to look everywhere but at Dominic. But his eyes caught hers as he stood from the couch preparing to follow Vaughn. She looked away, hoping he hadn't thought she was staring. Instead of walking after Vaughn, he stood in the same place holding her gaze. She looked down, fidgeting with a coil that fell from her puff.

“Is it cool if my folks come too?” he asked Vaughn, who was a few steps ahead with Mo.

Vaughn followed Dominic's stare, noticing Claudette for the first time.

“Sure. It’s your world man.” He shrugged and approached Claudette, shaking her hand and introducing himself.

Autumn and Claudette exchanged a curious glance before getting up and following behind the three men. Dominic’s tatted arms swung as he walked behind Vaughn. The elastic band of his briefs peaked from the top of his jeans, and she tried not to focus on them. Autumn’s bony elbow jabbed her in her side, reminding her he was off-limits.

They entered Vaughn’s office, which was a calming mix of contemporary and modern décor. It resembled the waiting lobby in the sense that everything looked expensive. Vaughn’s desk looked as if it were built for someone important. It smelled of fresh wood and Pine-Sol. She and Autumn sat in two chairs off to the side, while Dominic and Mo sat in the chairs in front of Vaughn’s desk.

“Let me just say this—I’m glad Autumn ran into you today. That joint you got out is hot and now is the perfect time to capitalize off of that buzz man,” Vaughn said, falling into his sleek conference chair. “Tell me something bro and I’m asking strictly as a fan. Are you serious about this music shit or is this just something you’re playing around with?”

Dominic eased back into his chair, contemplating the question as if it were the first time he had ever had to think about the topic.

“It’s just a hobby right now... something legit I can get into,” he shrugged impassively.

Vaughn nodded as if he understood the sentiment behind Dominic’s answer. It wouldn’t surprise her if he did. He switched between CEO and dope boy so casually that Jay-Z would’ve been stunned.

“You ever performed anywhere?”

“Yeah, hole in the wall joints. Nothing major,” Dominic responded.

He didn’t seem invested in any of what they discussed. He was present, but Claudette could tell his mind was elsewhere. Vaughn sat back, threading his fingers together and she sat

forward engrossed in their conversation. Autumn fought to keep her eyes open, tapping her long nails against the arm of her chair.

“He had them joints packed though. My nigga name bring out the hood,” Mo added, attempting to vouch for Dominic’s popularity.

“I can respect that. I have no doubt he’ll bring out a crowd, but Playhouse is another level of entertainment.”

“I understand,” Dominic replied with no frills.

“Do you? We’ve been hitting capacity every weekend, so you’ll possibly be performing for a crowd of a thousand or more people. Are you ready for that?”

Claudette took a sharp breath, wondering how Dominic felt about performing in front of that many people. But then again, she had yet to see him distressed since they’d first met. She couldn’t tell if his calm demeanor was the product of the marijuana he indulged in or if he was always that way.

“Shit, the real question is, are they ready for me?”

They stared at each other in silence. The only sound was the tick-tocking of the gigantic analog clock on the wall behind Vaughn. Claudette held her breath, invested in the back and forth between the two men. A smile formed on Vaughn’s face and she released the breath she’d been holding.

“That’s what the fuck I’m talking about.” Vaughn reached out for Dominic’s hand and the two dapped hands with a loud clap.

It was obvious he admired Dominic. He not only admired him as a musician, but now he admired his confidence. Dominic was fascinating without even trying—a quality that she noticed most rappers had.

“So, what’s your booking fee?”

Dominic looked over at Mo, who stared at Vaughn with panic in his eyes. He was possibly attempting to come up with a number that would satisfy both parties. It was obvious that neither of them were ever asked such a question—probably

used to being told what they'd be given for showing up and performing. The tick-tocking of the clock made the silence even more dramatic as they waited on Mo to respond. Claudette's own palms became wet in anticipation.

"Well, what are your expectations of him?" she blurted out in haste, instantly regretting that she opened her mouth.

Once again, she'd failed at blending into the background. Everyone looked her way, except for Dominic, who kept his eyes on Vaughn.

"Looks like we have ourselves a little negotiator back there," Vaughn said. "Pull up a chair."

Autumn's eyes burned holes in the side of her face. Claudette could hear her shrill voice lecturing her as soon as they got home about minding her own business. *Stop trying to help everyone. One day you gone get yourself in some shit you can't get out of.*

"Mo, switch seats with Claudette," Dominic said with authority.

Mo gave Dominic a nasty glare before getting up from his seat and walking towards Claudette's. She hesitantly rose, sidestepping past him and walking toward the desk. She was sure she was a sight for sore eyes going to sit at an executive's desk in her stained Waffle House uniform and beat-up Vans.

She sat in Mo's chair and he sat in hers.

"The crowd at Playhouse wants a show and I plan to give them that. I have two other local rappers booked for next Saturday night that have some buzz." He looked from Claudette to Dominic. "Saturday is the busiest night and Playhouse is the new official after-hours spot, so adding you to that lineup will blow the lid off that bitch."

"So, he'll have to split the door?" she asked for clarification, while her brain worked overtime.

She tried to think of the research she had done back when she was writing papers for a retired NBA player's son who was determined to pursue entertainment management and

eventually entertainment law, but the arrogant bastard couldn't even spell his name.

“Yeah, or you could just charge me a flat fee. Choice is yours.” He shrugged.

Claudette calculated numbers and percentages in her head. She had no clue what Dominic's music sounded like or if he even had a fan base that would pay actual money to see him. She had never been to Playhouse but heard about it on campus. It was an illustrious place that many of the professional partygoers bragged about being able to get into once the major clubs closed in the early morning hours.

“Are there any other contractual obligations I should be aware of?” Vaughn asked, directing the question to Claudette.

He was no longer handling her with kiddie gloves, believing that she possessed more knowledge about negotiating than most college-aged girls.

“Ah... no. There are none.” She cleared her throat, digging her nails into the soft fibers of her chair.

“So, what's your asking price?” He was talking to her as if she were a seasoned pro at negotiating for artists, unaware that the only experience she had was a term paper on the legalities of the music business.

“Sixty-five hundred—flat,” Claudette replied. “He also requires a fifty percent deposit up-front.”

She'd come up with the price hoping it made sense to Dominic and he didn't feel slighted by the number. She knew artists could be sensitive about their craft. She maintained eye contact as Vaughn mulled over the numbers and stipulations she had thrown at him. His brows furrowed, and he pursed his lips as if he were in deep thought.

“I can do six thousand.” He tapped his fingers against the wood of his desk, anticipating her comeback.

He seemed to enjoy the back and forth.

Six thousand was still a good number. She wanted to make sure Dominic at least got a decent amount of money after the

dust settled and they reviewed the stipulations of the contract. She looked at him for approval, but he sat motionless, unperturbed at the negotiation taking place, so she made the executive decision herself.

“That number works, but the fifty percent up-front still stands,” she replied, sitting forward. “Will you be taking out an advertisement fee?”

Vaughn threaded his fingers back together and she waited in anticipation.

“Nah,” he replied after what felt like hours. “I fuck with Dough. I’ll waive that and the cut I’d normally take out for myself.”

She sighed in relief and stuck her hand out to seal the deal before he changed his mind. He shook it with the roughness of an experienced businessman.

“I’ll go draw up the paperwork and get that fifty percent for you,” he said turning to Dominic and shaking his hand just as roughly as he’d shook hers.

As soon as he turned the corner to leave his office, silence settled over the four of them like a thick cloud of dust.

“What the fuck was that about?” Mo asked between clenched teeth.

His teddy bear appearance was now menacing. Back at the diner, he seemed harmless—even flirting with her. It was obvious he was directing his anger at her. Autumn turned to him, placing a finger close to his face.

“You mean thanks, right?” She leaned in closer. “Because my girl didn’t have to say shit. You two could’ve been walking out of here with pennies or no deal at all.”

“What your girl needs to do is stop sticking her nose in business that don’t concern her,” Mo replied.

Claudette’s face heated as she sat back in her seat. She was only trying to help. She should have minded her own business.

“Hey, I talked to her about helping us. She was only doing what I asked her to do,” Dominic lied.

His tone was brusque, and his deep voice commanded everyone's attention. Autumn sat back in her seat with crossed arms. Mo looked away in disdain, and Claudette shrank in her seat.

Vaughn came back into the office, unaware of the tension between the four of them. He laid a contract in front of Dominic and sat a pen on top. He turned to the iMac on his desk and began clicking away at the keyboard, leaving Claudette to explain to Dominic what he'd be signing. She pulled the contract forward, checking every section for accuracy.

"This is what you're getting up-front, and this is the backend you'll get on that night," she said, circling the numbers in the contract.

He looked at her, nodding his head.

"This says you have no contractual obligations for any other venue on that night, so don't go signing contracts with another club for that same night." She pointed at the stipulations with the pen she held.

"This is the advertising fee he'd normally charge you, but he's waiving that." She looked at him, searching for any semblance of confusion on his butterscotch face. "You understand everything?"

He nodded once more, and she handed the pen to him to complete the deal. He signed his signature on the document and pushed it toward Vaughn, who had been waiting. Once Vaughn's signature was on the contract, he gave them their own copies and the deposit he promised. It was a thick wad of money that he'd placed in an envelope that had his company's name embossed on the flap.

The ride back to campus was a quiet one. Slow jams from V-103's Quiet Storm played on the radio while each of them occupied themselves with their own thoughts. A grimace had planted itself on Claudette's face at the thought of Mo's outburst back in Vaughn's office, but despite that, she was proud of herself and most of all happy for Dominic. A smile replaced her grimace as she thought back to the look on his

face once they left Vaughn's office. It was a mixture of disbelief and excitement.

Autumn broke the silence, directing Mo to the parking lot that was closest to their dorm. As soon as he put the car in park, she hopped out gathering her backpack and some grocery bags.

"I'll be back," Dominic said to Mo, opening his door at the same time Claudette opened hers.

He took the bags dangling from Autumn's hand and gathered the remaining ones from the backseat.

"Let me talk to you real quick," he said to Claudette.

Autumn looked between the two of them and shook her head before heading toward their dorm.

"Sorry about earlier," Claudette replied, looking down at her feet.

"What you apologizing for?" he chuckled. "That was some real shit you did back there. You had my back and you don't even know shit about me. That's brave. You could've let us get fucked over, but I knew you wasn't a punk."

She grinned. People had called her many things, but no one had ever called her brave. Her chest swelled at the unexpected compliment.

"You really think I'm brave?" She rocked back on the balls of her feet.

"You braver than most niggas I know." A smirk etched itself on his face. "I owe you one."

"You don't owe me anything. I was just doing what I thought was right."

"Fuck all that. I got you," he said. "Just promise me something."

He shifted the grocery bags from one hand to the other.

"Promise you what?"

"Keep having my back and I got yours?"

She nodded her head as if she'd accepted the deal of a lifetime, intrigued that he thought she could do something as important as having his back. No one had ever asked her to do such a thing, because no one ever saw her as audacious enough to fight on their behalf.

“A'ight then, show me where we going.”

She led him to their room, glancing back every so often, checking to make sure he was still behind her. Once they made it into the hallway, she felt a tug at her arm. It was him stopping her.

“I need you to hold something for me,” he said, sitting the grocery bags on the tiled floor. She watched as he fished the envelope from Vaughn out of his pocket and walked closer to her. Her breath hitched in her throat as he stuffed it in the front pocket of her jeans.

“What if you need it?” she whispered and looked around to make sure Autumn hadn't poked her head out of their room in search of her.

“I know how to get in touch.” He picked up the bags, and they resumed walking toward their room.

Once they made it, he sat the bags down beside the door.

“See you soon,” he said, tugging one of her wild curls.

She watched as he turned to leave, wondering what she had gotten herself involved in, but also fascinated that someone like Dominic had even taken an interest in her.

3

Dew settled on the unkempt lawns that lined the desolate street where Dominic parked. It was a quiet morning except for barking dogs and the constant lull of his car's engine. The clock on the dashboard read 6:26 a.m., so he turned the volume up on the instrumental flowing from his phone and reclined his seat. With closed eyes and aching limbs, he attempted to relax in the compact car, but no matter how much he reclined, his long limbs still felt cramped.

He listened closely to the drums and the bass of the beat that Tony sent him the night before. Verses formed rapidly in his head as he nodded along to it. He never had a formal writing process—only bass-heavy beats, meditation, and an impeccable memory.

At seven, the sound of gravel crackling underneath tires broke his trance. His eyes shot open, and he sat up, watching a pickup truck come to a stop in front of one of the many abandoned houses nestled on the street. Three burly bodies emerged one by one, talking loudly to each other. He waited until they made their way inside the house before opening the glove compartment and removing the pistol he had stashed there the day before. After tucking it into the waistband of his jeans, he eased from the car.

He looked around, popping the trunk and grabbing his gym bag as the 808s from the beat he was listening to played on a loop in his head. He crossed the street and walked up the steps of the house. With a balled fist, he gave three heavy knocks and looked into the camera concealed in the corner of the covered porch.

He was sure they were watching him from inside the house, just as he'd been watching them from the car. It was a basic street survival rule he'd learned at an early age—always keep an eye on his enemies. He wasn't an enemy to them, but he understood niggas could never be too sure who they could trust. The clicking of several locks being unlocked and the screeching of the front door opening took his attention from the camera.

“What up?” Tee looked him up and down. Dominic nodded his head, returning the greeting. He was already growing impatient, and he had yet to make it inside the house. Tee widened the door, leaving just enough space for Dominic and his gym bag to ease through. As soon as the last piece of fabric made it inside, the door slammed shut and the locks clicked back into place.

Tee walked past him without a word and Dominic followed him deep inside of the house into a tiny outdated kitchen. A foul combination of weed, cigarette smoke, and fried food bombarded his nose. None of the appliances worked and the tile on the floor was so worn, there was no way to tell what it originally looked like. Ten burly men harnessing guns lingered around, eating chicken and waffles and talking shit to one another.

“What you got for me?” Tee asked, turning toward him.

Tee was big. Big and bald, with a slight limp from a gunshot wound that damaged the nerves in his leg. He wore a sweat-stained wife-beater with faded blue jeans. Dominic had never seen him wear anything other than those two pieces of raggedy clothing.

Dominic looked around at all the eyes that were suddenly on him and tossed the heavy gym bag on the cheap foldout table that held their breakfast. Unbothered by his obvious sign of disrespect, Tee grabbed a piece of chicken and took a hefty bite while unzipping the bag. One by one he pulled out AR15s, pistols, revolvers, and a sawed-off shotgun. There were eight in total.

It was Dominic's second day of being awake. His feet felt heavy and his back ached like he had been sucker-punched in the spine but he watched over his merchandise. His victims of choice were rednecks in lifted pickup trucks cluttered with hunting gear and NRA stickers. The work was dirty, time-consuming, and dangerous, but he liked the challenge. Eve once explained to him that nothing in life would be handed to him. To eat, he had to work and to survive he had to hustle. So he did both with no complaints.

"How much?" Tee asked while admiring one of the semi-automatic pistols.

He turned it over with his free hand, admiring the hundred round drum its original owner had added to it.

"That's a Ruger. I'll let you have it for five." Dominic tried to keep the bite out of his voice.

Although he had been doing business with Tee for the past year, the two were far from close friends. There was a mutual respect between them, and that was all that Dominic cared about. One of Tee's homeboys approached the table, eyeing a revolver.

"This some shit for personal use," he said, picking it up and caressing the Smith & Wesson. "How much for this one?"

"I can do six."

The rest of his crew circled the table, picking out guns they needed for specific jobs or for their appeal. Afterwards Dominic left with an empty gym bag and heavy pockets. He tossed it into the backseat and cranked the car up, connecting his phone to the Bluetooth connection so he could replay the instrumental from earlier that refused to leave his head.

He made enough to cover the bills for the month and still had some money left over to gamble with, but he had no worries. There was always money to make. He'd be out on the prowl again. There was also the rest of the money Vaughn would hand over once he performed. It would be \$3,000 of easy money that he hardly had to work for.

At the thought of Vaughn and the Playhouse performance, his thoughts drifted to Claudette. He heard her raspy voice and pictured the coarse curls on her head. She felt so familiar that he found himself unable to shake her image from his mind. She was nothing like the girls he fucked with. He liked girls similar to him—flighty, street-savvy, and always on the hunt for someone more bad. She seemed like none of those things.

She was smart, but also naïve. Dudes like him sniffed out naivety like bloodhounds. Most of his homeboys used the skill to groom unsuspecting girls like Claudette, but that never interested him. In fact, naive girls terrified him because they possessed an innocent perspective of the world. A perspective taken from him as a young boy, and he refused to take it from anyone else.

A yawn escaped his mouth as he drove through the empty streets of Atlanta. The only signs of life were the early morning MARTA riders awaiting their next bus. He rolled the passenger side window down, turned the air conditioner up as high as it could go, and maxed out the volume on the stereo. His eyes strained to stay open until he pulled into his aunt's driveway.

The house still looked the same way it looked when he first saw it at ten years old. Burglar bars covered the windows and paint peeled off of the siding, but it still held its charm. With a manicured lawn and Diane's rose bush sitting in front of the porch, the aging house had great curb appeal compared to the other homes on their street.

Dominic took the keys from the ignition and gathered his belongings from the car. He listened for Diane and his younger cousin Josiah as he walked up the steps to the house. He knew they both were up, eating breakfast and preparing to start their day. Josiah would catch the bus to school and Diane would head out to Buckhead to begin her workday, cleaning homes for wealthy clientele in the picturesque Brookhaven neighborhood. He heard laughter as he pushed the front door open.

"D, is that you?" Diane called from the kitchen as he dropped his keys on the entryway table.

The nostalgic scent of cigarette smoke and the lingering smell of fried food engulfed his senses as he walked further into the house and entered the kitchen. She stood behind the cluttered island drinking her coffee as he expected. Josiah sat at the small dining table eating cereal and scrolling on his phone.

“Who else you expecting?” he asked her, before planting a sloppy kiss on her cheek.

She grimaced and rolled her eyes. “Boy, I don’t know where your lips been.”

He laughed as she sat her coffee mug down and shoved a bundle of mail into his chest. Her hair was pulled back into a tight bun and she wore her Sunday best, although it wasn’t a Sunday and she was going to do physical labor.

With unblemished brown skin and a youthful appearance, she was the spitting image of Eve. She and Eve were the only kids his grandmother had birthed, and Diane was the older sibling. Eve said his grandmother held three jobs until the day she died, so Diane had taken care of her from the time she was a toddler.

“What’s all this? Bills?” he asked, fingering through the various pieces of mail.

She shrugged her shoulders, going back to her coffee. He flipped back to an envelope addressed to him, thinking to himself that he would open it and the other similar ones that he had accumulated over the past few months.

Tucking the mail under his arm, he fixed his own bowl of cereal, vaguely recalling that he ate a bag of chips the day before. If he didn’t consume something soon somebody would have to peel his body from the floor.

“How was the movie last night?” Josiah asked, aware of Diane’s ear-hustling.

“Litty. Appreciate the recommendation.” Dominic sat across from him and slapped the stack of mail on the table.

He dug a crispy one-hundred dollar bill from his pocket and slid it to Josiah. Josiah grinned and shoved the money

deep into his pocket.

“How many stars you think you would give it?” They looked at Diane, who read her copy of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, appearing to tune the two of them out, something she often did.

They both knew they held her full attention though.

“Shit... eight out of ten.” Dominic shoved a spoonful of Fruity Pebbles in his mouth.

Josiah nodded with a smirk. “Was it sold out?”

“Nigga, is water wet?”

“Don’t use that word in my house, Dominic,” Diane said while slapping the newspaper on the island. “Your ass not too grown to put a switch to.”

Josiah snickered before tipping his cereal bowl to his lips and slurping up the leftover milk.

“Yes ma’am.” Dominic kissed his teeth.

Diane could make a grown man cry and look at her with admiration all at once with the creative ways in which she cursed people out. It was an art she had perfected. The one word she rebuked was nigga or any variation of it. She said that she would never use it as a term of endearment.

“And one of those phones you got been going off since yesterday. I don’t know why you leave that thing here *with* the ringer on. The nerve. Like I want to hear that mess ringing all day.”

She was on a roll.

Dominic crunched on the colorful pieces of rice crisps, ignoring her bickering. She dropped her newspaper and dumped the last bit of coffee from her mug in the sink before shuffling past the table with a huff.

“You better get out to that bus stop, Josiah. I’m not dropping you off if you miss it again.” Josiah waited until she left before letting out an audible laugh.

His eyes crinkled, and he fell over.

“You know mama can’t stand that word. I don’t know why you say the shit around her.” He stood from his chair and slung his empty backpack over his shoulder.

Dominic shrugged, laughing at Diane’s cantankerous nature. He watched Josiah dump his empty bowl in the sink. It blew his mind how much he had grown from the curious six-year-old that greeted him when he first arrived on Diane’s doorstep with nothing but the clothes on his back. Josiah looked up to him and tried his best to emulate everything he did, including his illegal proclivities. Dominic tried to limit his interest in that area of his life, but the older he got, the harder it was to control.

“Hey... you tryna fade with me next Saturday?”

“What’s next Saturday?” Josiah asked while washing the bowl out.

“I’m performing at Playhouse.” The bowl slipped from his hands as he turned to face Dominic.

“For real, for real?” He placed a balled fist to his lips. “How you pull that off?”

“Shit, let’s just say I had some help.” He smiled, thinking about Claudette.

Josiah shuffled around, punching the air as if he were preparing for a boxing match. “Hell yeah, I’m goin’.”

“A’ight, don’t forget about me and go making plans and shit.”

“Boy, stop playin’ with me. You better not forget about me.” Josiah grinned and finished washing the empty bowl before leaving out of the kitchen to catch the school bus that had probably bypassed their house.

Dominic finished his bowl of cereal and made his way to his bedroom with the stack of mail from Diane. His room hadn’t changed since he was a boy. A twin bed covered in an Oakland Raiders comforter sat in the far-right corner, and a framed picture of Eve hung above the headboard. It was one of the few pictures he had of her and his most prized possession. The only other visible items were his collection of sneakers,

organized by color under the sole window. He seldom spent time there, so the room was always spotless.

He went to his closet, flinging the door open, exposing the fireproof safe he kept in the compact space. There wasn't room for anything else. The few pieces of clothing he owned hung above it. He heard the trill of his phone while he squatted, concentrating on putting in the combination. The bundle of mail sat bunched under his arm. The ringing stopped as soon as the door popped open but started up again as soon as he took the pistol from the waistband of his jeans and placed it inside. It rang while he counted out the money he'd made that morning. He counted it once, twice, and one last time before placing it in a neat stack next to the white sole of his sneaker.

Next, he thumbed through the stack of mail. Most of it was for Diane—rent, light bill, water bill, gas bill, electricity bill. He saved the only one addressed to him for last and counted out the money for each bill, placing the designated amounts in each envelope. The rest of the money he had left went into the safe along with the lone piece of mail with his name on it. It went on top of the other envelopes identical to it.

He sometimes wondered how Diane and Josiah survived before he came to Atlanta. Diane was a serial job-hopper and never had a well-paying job as long as he'd been there. She took odd jobs that her church friends hooked her up with that didn't even cover her rent. She hated his lifestyle but eagerly accepted the money he brought home. He often took her hypocritical tongue lashings, knowing that he couldn't leave because of Josiah.

Pulling himself up from the floor, he went to get the ringing phone from underneath his bed where he'd left it two days before. It was face down on the floor where it had slipped from his hand after he'd stumbled in drunk, falling face-first onto his bed. Ignoring the calls, he scrolled through the texts.

You on?

How was it? Bitch-ass probation officer was giving me grief.

Hit me up nigga. I got some fire for you.

I think it's funny how you can't respond to a simple text but hit me up when you want to fuck.

She work every other day. Mostly afternoons and nights.

Tryna meet Thursday at 6? Call me.

Be in the lab all day. Come through, let's cook up some shit.

Brooooo, you ain't gone believe who was up in Walmart just now.

He sighed and responded to Tony's text, ignoring the others. He needed to record the song that had been forming in his head before his brain exploded and erupted into verses and hooks. His body needed rest, but his mind worked overtime. Sleep wouldn't have come easy anyway, so there was no reason to stay.

He placed the stack of envelopes on his bed for Diane to collect when she returned from work and dragged his aching body to the bathroom to shower.

Tony lived in the basement of his parent's home in East Atlanta, where he'd converted his bedroom into a makeshift studio and slept in the living room. He was a lanky hip-hop head born to first-generation Mexican-American parents. Dominic had known him since high school. They went from freestyling over lunch table beats to making actual songs together, with Dominic on the mic and Tony being the brains behind the production.

Dominic parked in their long gravel driveway behind several other vehicles. Tony's parents, three sisters, two brothers-in-laws, and two nieces lived in the four-bedroom house along with his grandmother. His parents hated his expensive hobby but preferred he pursued music instead of the street life that once consumed him.

Dominic walked alongside the house, following the smell of Blueberry Kush and the heavy sound of bass to the entrance of the basement. Tony never locked it, allowing a steady stream of friends and associates to come and go while he worked. It was early in the day, so he was most likely alone in his natural habitat playing with the beats he had been working on for Dominic.

It was hazy and dank inside. Empty Styrofoam cups lay strewn on different pieces of IKEA furniture Tony had thrown together. Dominic continued to follow the intoxicating mixture of blueberry and cigarillo smoke. He pushed open the door to the bedroom and saw Tony behind his computer in a trance. He whipped his head around at the stream of light that had snuck in with Dominic.

"Bro, you finally here. I need you to listen to this shit I got." Tony's lanky frame shot up from behind the laptop with a blunt dangling between his fingers.

He stabbed a button and a gritty melody played through the speakers positioned around the room.

"You can't tell me this shit ain't *fuego*."

Dominic bobbed his head to the beat, walking up to Tony and gripping his hand in a dap.

“This shit nice.”

And it was. But Dominic was on a mission.

The kick drums and bass from the beat he had been obsessing over refused to leave his head. Tony went back to the laptop and hit a few keys before maxing out the volume so Dominic could feel the rhythm. Dominic nodded his head harder. He felt it, but it didn't speak to him. Tony stretched the blunt to him and Dominic took it without hesitation.

“You think you can work with this?” Tony asked.

Dominic blew a cloud of smoke from his plump lips and turned to him.

“I feel this, but I want that beat you sent me the other day.” He pulled his phone from his pocket, searching for the beat himself.

“Man... you liked that? That was just a throwaway. I ain't think you would really fuck with that.” Tony waved his hand, unconvinced of the greatness Dominic saw in it.

“Nah man, pull that shit up. I been listening to it nonstop. It's some verses I wanna lay over it.” Tony shrugged and pulled up the beat while Dominic paced back and forth, reciting the verses he had formed in his head earlier.

As soon as he heard the bass of the familiar beat, his feet stopped.

He closed his eyes and took a deep pull from the blunt. The beat was simple, but it was the simplicity that made it so intriguing. It was slow and sensual and the mixture of kicks, hi-hats, and bass made for a beautiful combination.

They stood, letting it play on a loop while they passed the blunt back and forth. The THC coursed through Dominic's body, forcing his aching limbs to relax. The stress of the past two days no longer mattered. What mattered was that beat, the blunt he smoked, and the verses he was about to lay.

He took one last pull and handed the blunt back to Tony before heading into the closet they had transformed into a recording booth. He took the pair of headphones that dangled

from the mic and threw them over his head, preparing to push out the verses that refused to leave his mind.

4

“The amygdala is one of the most crucial parts of the brain. Located in the limbic system—it is highly involved in how we process our emotions.” Professor Gilrich moved her arms around wildly. “Fear, anger, sadness, pleasure—all of those important emotions.”

The click-clacking of her heels kept Claudette awake as she paced around the auditorium. Ringlets of her hair stood up in every direction on her head, creating a curly halo. She wore a tailored pantsuit that looked as if she had just pulled it from a rack at Banana Republic. It was pressed without a wrinkle in sight.

“Imagine you’re walking home one day, minding your own business, and suddenly, someone approaches you. They put a gun to your head and demand all of your money.”

The click-clacking of her heels stopped.

“You freeze! Your heart beats fast, your skin becomes flushed, your pupils dilate.” Her eyes widened, and she paused. “Ladies and gentlemen... this is your amygdala at work.”

Instead of taking notes, Claudette doodled stick figures in the corner of her notebook. Professor Gilrich had enforced a strict no cellphone policy. In fact, it was a strict no communication zone. She instructed each student to sit with an empty seat between the next to ensure they would do no communicating.

Claudette looked at a small analog clock mounted on a wall twenty rows ahead. There were five minutes left in the

class. She sighed in defeat, knowing that those last five minutes would feel like five hours instead. She glanced at a girl sitting below her and admired her neat color-coded notes, along with a beautiful picture she had drawn of what looked like an amygdala.

“Remember, this midterm is worth a significant portion of your grade. If you are already struggling in this course you cannot afford anything below a C on this test.”

The rumble of students gathering their belongings broke Claudette’s amygdala-induced trance. She had a C in the class, which was a miracle considering she didn’t pay much attention no matter how theatrical Professor Gilrich was about bones, muscles, and the brain. She sighed and slung her backpack over her shoulder, falling in line with the rest of the students eager to rejoin the free world.

“Please tell me you were paying attention in there,” Autumn said as she leaned against the awning attached to the auditorium.

She wore her Thirsty Thursday wig with denim shorts and a spaghetti tank top—a complete juxtaposition to the jeans and plain white shirt Claudette wore.

“I was paying just as much attention as you probably were.” Claudette stuck her tongue out and Autumn playfully shoved her.

They maneuvered their way through the crowded quad, dodging solicitors and student organizations looking for new members. They were midway through the spring semester and slowly approaching Spring Break. The closer they got, the antsier students became to finally have a break from their college responsibilities.

“Seriously, we both need to at least pull Bs out of these classes,” Autumn said, referring to the statistics course she struggled in. “This is our first year in college. Our shit needs to be on point.”

“Says the girl that’s been partying every weekend since we moved on campus.”

Autumn smacked her lips and tossed the ends of her purple wig over her shoulder.

“Well, one of us has to have some fun, dang,” she said. “This is your first time living away from your grandpa. Loosen up. I think George would condone some ass shaking here and there.”

Autumn would go out every night if she could. She suffered from fear of missing out and her grades reflected it.

“Whatever.” Claudette rolled her eyes.

They shoved open the entrance to their dorm, and the arctic blast of cool air felt heavenly against Claudette’s sweat-soaked skin. The smell of cheap pizza and the rambunctious noise of residents getting an early start to their weekend greeted them as they trudged to their room. Claudette unlocked the door and prepared to kick her shoes off but stumbled over a week’s worth of Autumn’s clothing laying out on the floor instead.

“Sis, I love you. But really? I’m going to sprain my ankle one of these days.” She picked up a pair of boy shorts and tossed them at Autumn.

Autumn caught them and blew a kiss her way.

“I promise I’m cleaning up this weekend,” she said, dropping her bag on the floor and walking toward the bathroom.

Claudette let out a frustrated breath. She was no neat-freak, but Autumn’s piles of mess tested her patience.

She went to her dresser, pulling out her work uniform. Autumn came out of the bathroom wig-less and with her eyes glued to her phone. Claudette was sure she was scrolling through her Instagram feed because she checked it religiously.

“Are you done? I need to shower before we head to work.”

At the mention of work, Autumn’s eyes shot up at her.

“Please tell me you’re coming to work with me?” Claudette begged.

Autumn's eyes looked everywhere but at her. "I promised Marcus I would meet up with him to study."

"Study? He's thirty-six!" Claudette threw her hands up at the mention of another one of Autumn's *friends*. "So I guess I'm taking the bus alone. Great."

She pushed passed Autumn with her uniform gripped in her hands and slammed the bathroom door.

"I'll get you an Uber! Damn," Autumn shouted behind the closed door.

That was typical of Autumn. It had been her idea to apply and accept the waitressing jobs at the start of the semester so they could spend time together while also making extra money. Claudette turned down a stress-free work-study position to make sure they weren't separated but went to work by herself most days. She didn't quit because she was always in need of extra money. George covered her tuition, but anything extra was her responsibility and there was always something extra she needed.

After showering and dressing, she stuffed her feet into the beat-up Vans she often wore to the diner and grabbed her backpack. Autumn was tucked beneath her pink duvet without a care in the world.

"I hope you know I'm not lying for you," Claudette said, yanking the cover from her head.

She looked up and rolled her eyes. Claudette was unsure if she understood that most places of employment frowned upon showing up to work when she felt like it, but it was possible she just didn't care. Autumn grabbed her phone from her computer desk covered in makeup and unopened textbooks.

"I thought we were better than that," she replied.

Claudette watched as she opened the rideshare app and began ordering the ride she had promised.

"I'm saving you from that God awful bus today and you won't even tell a little white lie."

"You know I hate lying."

“Just tell him I’m not coming in. No lying required.”
Autumn huffed at her unwillingness to cooperate.

Claudette found no reason to invite bad karma into her own life from lying just because Autumn was skipping work to hang out with one of her sugar daddies.

“Just be careful and at least let me know where you’ll be tonight,” she replied, walking out and shutting the door, not caring to hear a response.

On the way to her ride, she hoped she’d make enough in tips that night to cover the bus ride back to campus and breakfast before her eight a.m. English class.

Roc's disapproving stare greeted Claudette as she rushed into the diner alone. Traffic was a nightmare and her Uber driver, who looked like the First Lady of a Baptist church, kept getting lost because she refused to follow the GPS's directions. She hurried past him and tossed her belongings in the employee breakroom. It was four o'clock and oddly, every seat in the restaurant was full. The other waitresses moved around each other, taking orders and cleaning up after customers. Before she could approach her first customer, Roc was already summoning her.

"Where your girl at?" he asked, cutting straight to the chase while keying in a customer's ticket.

"She couldn't make it tonight, but she will for sure be here tomorrow." She flashed a grin at him and took the ticket from his hand to finish ringing up the order.

His face hardened. "I like you, but that friend of yours won't be employed too much longer if she keep this shit up."

He walked behind the counter where the cooks were huddled together and she released a groan.

The start of her shift seemed to set the tone for the rest of her night. Smoke from one of the skillets billowed around the restaurant and one cook let out a string of expletives. Kids cried, dishes clanked together, and the entrance door wouldn't stop opening. By ten o'clock, it felt like bricks were tied to her feet. She had served so many customers she was running out of room in her sock from the tips she'd received. There was more than enough for the bus ride back to campus *and* breakfast.

"You moving like an old woman girl," Randy, one of the other servers said as he walked behind her and slapped a towel at her back.

"I feel like an old woman." She stretched her arms out, trying to loosen the kinks from her back.

Three booths needed to be wiped and swept before she could take her next break. The diner had finally emptied except for a few people that lingered around at the counter.

She began sweeping the crumpled napkins and an entire order of scrambled eggs from underneath a booth occupied by two rowdy toddlers.

She thought about Autumn enjoying another work-free night, while she slaved away for less than minimum wage. She swept harder, shoving the bristles of the broom as far as they would go underneath the table. Sometimes she wanted to stop being such a do-gooder and throw caution to the wind. But then again, what good would that do?

A few minutes later, she had a hefty pile of scrambled eggs and napkins ready to scoop into the dustpan and be discarded. She hummed along to the R&B track Randy played from the jukebox and concentrated on getting every crumb into the pan. It was a skill she had never mastered. She could hear George laughing, telling her to hold it as tight as she could while she attempted to sweep up the dirt.

She crouched down with a tight grip on the handle of the broom and just as its bristles flicked the last crumb onto the dustpan, an intoxicating woody scent mixed with marijuana drifted across her nose. The broom was snatched from her hand and milky white sneakers that held no trace of dirt stepped into her line of vision. She didn't need to look up to know who it was because her hardened nipples and the sudden jump in her belly told her.

"You trying to fight?" Dominic asked in amusement.

Instead of responding right away, her eyes roved from his white sneakers to his sagging jeans and plain white t-shirt. Her dilated pupils finally settled at the two stark white teeth that had sunk into his plump bottom lip. The scowl she sported transformed into a smile. Her entire body betrayed her.

"I don't fight," she replied with a hand perched on her hip. "But it *is* rude to snatch things from people."

"A'ight, Gandhi," he laughed and yanked a wild patch of curls on her head.

It was something she was becoming accustomed to.

"Come on. You ready to take a break?"

She looked at him with furrowed brows.

“I have two more booths to clean before I can take a break.” She grabbed the handle of the broom to take it back, but he held it firm in his grip.

With a huff, she turned and wiped the seat of the booth with a rag.

“You came to get your money back from me?” she asked.

“Nah. I came to tell you it’s time to take a break.” He watched in silence as she finished wiping up the table and rearranging the condiments.

She saw Roc approaching them in her peripheral. She had been doing a great job of staying out of his way and Dominic was blowing her cover.

“What’s up cuz?” Roc asked, clapping Dominic on the back.

“Same shit. You know how it go.” He spoke to Roc but kept his eyes glued to her as she worked, attempting to go unnoticed. “I was telling Claudette that it’s time for her to take a break.”

Dominic handed the broom they had been at war over to Roc and snatched the rag from her hand, handing it to him too. She figured he would pop up on her at some point considering she had his money in her possession. It *would* happen on one of her worst nights.

He took a seat in the clean booth and motioned for her to sit across from him. She looked at Roc, who was already nodding, giving her permission. The dynamic he had with Dominic was strange. She had never seen him so agreeable.

“I don’t have your money on me, but I can get it to you tomorrow,” she said while sliding into the booth across from him.

“I told you I ain’t come for no money.” He laid his head on the back of the booth and cast a lazy gaze at her.

The lids of his eyes sat so low it looked as if he would fall asleep at any moment.

“You starting to sound guilty, like you spent it or something. It’s probably stashed in that lil’ sock of yours.”

She laughed at his observation. George hated it; he’d tell her how unladylike it was.

“I only keep my chump change there.” She pulled her feet into the booth, sitting Indian style.

She noticed the weary expression he wore.

“You look tired. I didn’t know rapping was so exhausting.”

He shrugged with a smirk. “You look tired too. I ain’t know writing papers for dumb ballplayers was so exhausting.”

“Touché.” She grinned, shaking her head. “Actually, it’s been busy here tonight. Lots of waffle slingin’ and no time to write papers for my wonderful customers.”

“I see,” he mumbled. “Well, you might have another paying customer to add to your list.”

She paused, letting his response register. She was behind on her work but was in no position to turn down extra money because she needed a laptop. Lugging all of her belongings to the library to complete assignments had become cumbersome.

“What’s the subject? I think I’m pretty knowledgeable in most basic subjects, but sometimes I get thrown curveballs and have to do extra research, so it may take some time to finish certain assignments.” She rambled while picking at the hardened waffle batter on her jeans.

She could never finish a shift without having it somewhere on her clothes, face, and even in her hair.

“I charge by the number of pages and the grade they want. Ten bucks a page—five bucks for a C, ten for a B, and fifteen for an A. I have people that can vouch for my work if needed and I can guarantee they’ll get an original paper—no plagiarism.”

After she flicked the last piece of crust from her jeans, she glanced up at him. His eyes were closed and his head had fallen so far back that the large script tattoo on the front of his

neck was exposed. It was the name *Eve* spelled out in elegant calligraphy.

“I have literally talked you to sleep. Wow.” She pursed her lips.

His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down as his shoulders bounced. A deep chuckle rumbled from his lips.

“I’m listening to you,” he said, peeling each eye open. “It’s not no school shit I’m asking you to help me with.”

She frowned at the realization that he was asking her to help him. “Well then, what do you need help with?”

“It ain’t really writing. Just do the same shit you did back in Vaughn’s office.” He tilted his head to the side, attempting to stifle a yawn. “Read over contracts, help me understand shit if I don’t understand it. You know what I mean?”

She thought about his offer, unsure that she was the person he wanted for a job that important. She had limited knowledge of the ins and outs of the music business and didn’t want to steer him in the wrong direction. Her inquisitive nature refused to let her turn him down, so she nodded with big eyes.

“You got me?” he asked as the lids of his eyes lowered once again.

“Yeah... yeah. For sure.” She tried to mask the eagerness in her voice. “But what about your friend Mo?”

Her chest tightened as she thought back to his reaction a few days before when she inserted herself into their negotiation with Vaughn. How would he feel with her sticking her nose in their business again?

“What about him?” he asked.

She didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t the answer she was expecting, but Dominic was full of unexpected requests and actions. She would have to get used to it. Instead of prying further, she stood from the booth and prepared to resume her shift before Roc came back around. Dominic’s lazy gaze followed her every move.

“Hungry?” she asked.

He nodded his head, and those two front teeth appeared again, teasing her. There was no need to ask what he wanted because she had memorized his order from their first encounter, so she walked off without another word.

While she placed his order, Roc sat in her seat. She brought out a tea for Dominic while they talked and attempted to appear uninterested in their conversation, but eavesdropped, curious as to what they were discussing with such seriousness. Their conversation was hard to follow. It was as if they were communicating in another language full of random idiosyncratic phrases and run-on sentences that never ended.

Dominic still sat in the same spot at the end of her shift. His eyes carried the same heaviness they had all night. She tossed her backpack on her shoulder, preparing to walk toward the bus stop outside of the restaurant. Roc nodded, bidding her a farewell as she walked past Dominic.

“Ready?” he asked, standing from the booth.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “You’re taking the bus too?”

He laughed. “Fuck no. I’m giving you a ride.”

Her face heated at the mishap. She felt him tug at the strap of her backpack, and the heaviness of it disappeared from her shoulder. His towering frame crouched down to her ankle.

“Thanks,” he said, holding up a twenty dollar bill and shoving it in her sock with a pat.

He stood, and she followed the trail of his scent outside toward a Dodge Charger with tint so dark it almost blended into the black paint on the body of the car. Her heart beat in her chest as he swaggered to the driver’s side with her baby-blue backpack hiked on his shoulder.

The stuffiness from the humid night disappeared as she entered the front passenger side. He slid in and placed the backpack on her lap. As he started the ignition, 2Pac’s hard voice came thumping from the speakers, waxing poetic about riding until the very end with his gun.

“You in a rush to get back to campus?” he asked, putting the car in reverse.

She ignored the stiffness in her back and tried to control her jumpy leg while shaking her head *no*.

“Good.” He cranked up the volume and she sat back, nodding her head to the infectious beat.

He looked at her from the corner of his eye. “You like 2Pac?”

“I don’t trust anybody who doesn’t.”

His eyes widened in a mixture of amusement and surprise as he backed out of the parking spot. One thing her dad had instilled in her was her love of 90s gangsta rap. She could rap 2pac’s entire discography word for word—another thing George hated.

“Hold up...hold up. *All Eyez on Me* or *Me Against the World*?” He stepped on the gas, shooting them out of the parking lot.

“*All Eyez on Me*,” she replied. “His best album, hands down. “Picture Me Rollin’” and “Only God Can Judge Me” are perfection.”

The two tracks had gotten her through some of the darkest moments in her life.

Dominic grinned, looking a lot less menacing than he usually did.

“I knew you was a G.” He turned the volume up louder.

She suppressed her grin as he sped onto the highway, rapping along to the song. She didn’t bother asking where they were headed, content that he thought she was cool enough to spend time with him. They rode in comfortable silence, letting 2Pac do the communicating between them. Eventually, the vibration of the car, 2Pac’s husky voice, and the comforting scent of Dominic lulled her to sleep.

“Rise and shine thug life.” She felt a tug at her hair. “Time to get up.”

She frowned and attempted to clear the fog from her brain. For a moment she had forgotten where she was until she smelled him. Her eyes popped open, and she slapped a hand at her face self-consciously.

“Come on girl,” he said with a chuckle.

He took the backpack from her lap as he got out. He walked over to the passenger side and pulled her door open. She got out, stretching her arms and straining in the darkness to see where they were. She should have worried, but she didn't. Something in her gut told her he wouldn't put her in harm's way.

They were at a small house painted a neutral shade of yellow with a neat rose bush planted near the front porch. The only sign of life was a tiny white Honda parked out front and a flickering porch light. It was obvious Dominic was familiar with the house because of the comfortable way he glided up the steps towards the front door. She trailed behind him, unsure of who else was in the home.

He jammed a key into the door and pushed it open, and the heavy smell of cigarette smoke greeted her as she walked in behind him. It was a shotgun house, the type of house you saw straight through as soon as you entered the front door. She followed behind him as he strolled through the only hallway.

“D, is that you?” A woman's raspy voice called from the back.

It had the hoarseness of a longtime smoker.

Claudette heard shuffling and a door creak open. Before Dominic could respond a short, brown-skinned woman emerged with a head full of rollers and a large cotton robe wrapped around her slender frame. She was older but held a youthful look with plump wrinkle-free skin and high cheekbones. Claudette looked between her and Dominic, looking for similarities between the two. They kind of had similar facial features, but Dominic had a tawny beige

complexion compared to the rich brown of her skin. He approached her and kissed her on the cheek. She looked at Claudette with a tilted head.

“This Claudette,” Dominic said before Claudette had the chance to introduce herself.

Her head was still tilted as she looked Claudette up and down. Claudette shifted underneath her intense gaze. She wished she looked more presentable but could do nothing about it at that point, so she stuck her hand out and Diane gripped it weakly.

“It’s nice to meet you...” Claudette said, fishing for her name.

“Diane—you can just call me Diane.” She continued to hold Claudette’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Claudette.”

She let go and turned her attention to Dominic, placing her hands on her hips and looking at him with a frown.

“Well, I’m glad I finally get to lay my eyes on your ass. Ain’t seen you but once this week.” Dominic pulled the strap of Claudette’s backpack up and looked at her, unmoved by her worried tone.

“Don’t start.” She twisted her lips at his response and rolled her eyes. “Where Jo at?”

“Staying down at Kathy’s. Her husband got some extra tickets to the Hawks game tomorrow night. Said she would drop Jo and her boy off at school and pick them up tomorrow so they can go to the game afterward.” She pulled her robe tighter.

Claudette listened, wondering who Jo was, and why Dominic was concerned about their whereabouts.

“You give him money?”

“Yeah, I gave him a little spending money. He don’t need to be carrying that much.”

Claudette glanced around as they talked, looking for familiar signs of Dominic. There were framed pictures on the wall, some of them were older pictures of Diane and another

woman that resembled her, and some were pictures of a young boy that resembled Diane. She smiled at a picture of what looked to be a younger version of Dominic dressed in baggy pants and a long white t-shirt hugging Diane from behind.

“Well, I’ll let you two enjoy the rest of your night. I’m going to finish up my movie,” Diane said, breaking Claudette out of her trance.

The curious look had reappeared on her face as she waved at Claudette before walking back to the room she came from. Dominic stood and watched as if he were waiting for her bedroom door to close. He then led the way to a door not too far from where they were standing. He pushed it open and turned the light on. As they entered the room, her nose tingled with excitement at the smell of Dominic engulfing her senses once again.

A neatly made twin bed sat in the right corner of the room. There was no clutter at all. The only thing on the floor was a straight line of sneakers placed beneath the only window. There was no television, just an inconspicuous black box that sat on the floor where a television might sit.

Above the bed was a small framed picture of a woman. The more she looked at the picture, the more she realized how much the woman resembled Dominic. She had long hair that framed her angular face and the same plump lips that Claudette had started to obsess over. They both shared similar round noses. She approached the bed and attempted to get a closer look while Dominic fussed with his phone and the black box.

“Is this your mom?” she asked as she toed off her shoes and climbed onto the bed.

He stopped messing with the phone and glanced back at her.

“Yeah, that’s her.” His reply held no emotion behind it, which was strange to her.

Most people who kept sentimental belongings of their parents spoke adoringly about them. Dominic’s voice held

nothing close to adoration. It sounded hollow. He went back to his phone and continued to tap on the screen.

“She’s gorgeous,” Claudette said in awe.

Her hand reached up to touch the image because the woman *was* beautiful.

“Yup, she was.” Her finger stopped, hovering just above the frame.

“Was?”

Dominic hummed apathetically and placed his phone down next to the black box. A soft melody played from the device, which she realized was a speaker. She turned from the picture and looked toward Dominic, eager for him to continue.

“Yeah, was. She passed away when I was little.” He swiped a hand along the back of his head and avoided her gaze.

Her throat tightened at his response.

“I’m so sorry for your loss... were you two close?”

“Yeah, something like that.” He brushed off her response and walked toward what looked to be a closet.

A jumble of questions rolled around in her head, wanting to tumble out, but she turned back to the picture instead. He fumbled around in the closet as she laid back on his bed and stretched her legs out, thinking of her own mother and what she may have looked like.

She pulled her eyes from the picture as her legs were being lifted. Dominic had kicked his shoes off and settled on the bed with his back against the wall and her legs thrown across his lap. He had a stack of envelopes next to him and a blunt. Her stomach fluttered at the closeness of their bodies.

He took a lighter from his pocket, flicked it, and lit the blunt. She watched as he placed it to his lips and inhaled, blowing out a cloud of smoke. The skunky smell of marijuana permeated the air and something as innocuous as smoking had never looked so appealing to her.

She looked toward the bedroom door, worried that Diane would burst in at any moment to confront the both of them for smoking in her home, although it was only Dominic who was smoking.

“What about your aunt?” she asked in a whisper, although she was sure no one outside of the room could hear what they were saying.

Dominic looked at her and placed the blunt to his lips once more.

“She know I smoke.” He smirked and took another pull. “You ready for your first assignment?”

She went from worrying about Diane to wondering what Dominic had in store for her. She propped herself on her elbows and watched as he took the stack of envelopes and tossed them beside her. She pulled her legs from his lap and sat up.

“Do you mind?” she asked and grasped the first envelope from the stack.

He shrugged and continued to smoke. She flipped over the envelope and studied its outside. It was addressed to a Dominic DeBlanc with the logo from a popular streaming service stamped in the top right corner.

She tore it open as if she were opening a gift for herself. Her eyes danced across the page, reading through the contents of the letter. There were numbers, analytics, graphs, and a second piece of paper stuck behind it—it was a statement with a check attached.

“Oh my...” Her mouth fell open.

She tossed the papers down and ripped open the next. Each envelope contained a check for different amounts of money.

“These are checks Dominic...they’re checks from music streams. This is so dope.” She cheesed and put the checks in a pile. “This means people all over the world are listening to your music.”

She tried her best to control the shriek itching to come out. “Why haven’t you opened these?”

“Haven’t had the time and I ain’t really understand why they would send me letters in the mail. I never get nothin’ in the mail except legal shit. I know my homeboy Tony told me he had a way to get my music out there, but I thought it was all cap.” He shrugged and a satisfied grin settled on his face before he held the blunt out to her. “You smoke?”

Her puff of kinky curls bounced around as she shook her head. Although she had attended a few parties with Autumn she had never indulged, sticking to the comfortable familiarity of beer and wine. She remembered George lecturing her thirteen-year-old self about marijuana being a gateway drug. She still didn’t know what a gateway drug was. Ignoring George’s niggling voice, she reached out and grasped the blunt.

She attempted to mimic Dominic and took a deep inhale from it. The smoke filled her small chest with a burn, and water filled her tear ducts as she choked out a cough.

“Shit, Claudette.” Dominic reached out and snatched the blunt from her hand. “Not so much. You gonna be fucked up.”

He wiped the tears from her face with the calloused pads of his fingers. One last cough hiccupped from her chest as heat spread across her face. He held his face close to hers, smiling at the blunder she’d made.

“Let me show you.” His deep voice was quiet and her hands started sweating.

This time he held the blunt himself and placed it to her lips. “Inhale it slow and hold in the smoke. When you feel like you can’t hold it no more, let it out.”

She did as he instructed, inhaling the smoke with apt concentration. It burned a little less. Her virgin lungs were warming up to the unfamiliar sensation. Dominic pulled the blunt from her mouth and she held in the smoke while looking into his eyes, which were rimmed in red. She had become so

focused on maintaining eye-contact that she'd almost forgotten the cloud of smoke in her chest.

"Let it out," he said.

She did as she was told and let the smoke stream from her nostrils into his face. She swore she saw three different expressions pass on his face in those few seconds of her blowing the smoke out—surprise, excitement, and a strange look that had the crotch of her panties moist.

They stayed that way forever, or what felt like forever to Claudette—staring at each other. She looked at his face with a new awareness. It was as if she were seeing him for the first time. The deep waves in his coarse hair, his almond-shaped eyes, the tiny scar underneath his left eye, his round nose, and pink lips. Her thoughts jumped from one idea to the next, but they all had one thing in common: Dominic. She wasn't sure if she was high from the marijuana or from being in such proximity to him. Everything felt new.

He moved and took another hit, blowing it away from her face. She said nothing in fear that she would tell her innermost thoughts to him. He held the blunt back up to her mouth and she placed her lips around it again, inhaling once more.

"Let it out," he said again.

She opened her lips this time, letting the smoke trickle through them. He reached over her, pulled an ashtray from underneath the bed, and put the blunt out. She fell back onto his pillow with a soft thud and stared up at the popcorn ceiling of his bedroom. He fell back next to her.

"Are you high?" He turned his head and looked at the side of her face.

"Possibly." She cleared the phlegm from her throat.

He let out a laugh and looked up at the ceiling with her.

"You have the best fuckin' voice. I swear." The marijuana made the intensity of the butterflies in her stomach increase at his sudden revelation. "I could listen to you talk about nothing all day. That shit have me stuck sometimes, on God."

She didn't know what to say in response to his compliment at first, so they laid in silence for a while. She wasn't sure how long. The funny thing about marijuana was that it slowed down time, so much so, that minutes sometimes felt like hours and hours felt like days.

"I used to get teased for it when I was in elementary school," she whispered. "Once I didn't talk for a whole month. My dad cried...I had never seen him cry before. He would beg me to talk and even bribe me with candy. It drove him crazy."

She had no control over what she said. Her mind couldn't filter what she wanted to share with him and what she wanted to keep to herself.

"What made you talk again?"

"Tupac." They turned their heads from the ceiling at the same time and fell into a fit of laughter. "Me and my dad would listen to his albums together. One day we were listening to "Only God Can Judge Me" and I swear he almost had a stroke because after weeks of not saying a word I started rapping the song to him word for word."

She licked her dry lips. "He died about a week after that. Someone shot him. Cops said it was mistaken identity. Guess he was at the wrong place at the wrong time."

"I'm sorry..."

Silence lingered between the two of them before she responded.

"Don't be. I think I've made peace with it. He was a beautiful man and my grandpa continued to raise me to the best of his ability. Sometimes life isn't fair, but we have to learn to play with the cards we're dealt."

"True shit," he said. "A lot of niggas use the bad things that happened to them in life as a crutch and make excuses instead of taking that shit on the chin and doing what they got to do to make the best of it."

There was pain beneath the harsh words he shared. He sounded broken.

“How did you cope when your mom died?” As soon as the words left her mouth, she regretted them, but it was too late to take the question back.

It had already slipped out.

“I didn’t.” He sat up and collected the checks stacked between them.

She could only be mad at herself for ruining the mood. Her chest tightened as she watched him go back to the closet and put the checks back where he got them. He came back to the bed and stuffed his feet back into his sneakers.

“I need you to do something for me.” He walked over to his phone and unplugged it from the speaker.

She said nothing, frustrated at the sudden wall he had put between the two of them.

“You heard me?” he asked.

She continued to watch him as he walked over toward the window and picked up another phone she noticed for the first time.

“Uh yeah...what do you need?” She decided that she should get out of his bed and put her shoes on.

It seemed as if he were ending their evening.

“After I cash those checks I want you to hold on to the cash. A’ight?”

She realized that he had yet to share anything of importance with her and felt foolish for sharing the things she had already shared with him. The phone that was once plugged into the speaker dangled from his left hand and the phone plugged into the wall held his intent focus.

“Sure...” She rolled her eyes while she finished tying the shoestrings on her sneakers.

The mood was blown, but he still held her attention. He hit a few buttons on the phone and held it up to his ear.

“Aye...I just seen your message...yeah I got that for you... I can come through in about an hour...bet.” He hung up.

She sat with her elbows on her knees and her face cupped in her hands, awaiting his next move.

“Come on G. I better get you back.” He pulled his car keys from his pocket and picked up her backpack from the floor. “We can stop and get a snack on the way there for your munchies.”

She perked up at the kind gesture and stood from her position on the bed. She decided not to feel offended by his snub. One thing that George had always stressed to her was that people didn't owe her anything in life—physically or emotionally. Dominic didn't have to answer any of her questions because they weren't lovers or friends. They were barely acquaintances.

“You could have been anywhere in the world today, but you decided to be here in the house of the Lord on this fine Sunday. I’m happy to see you good Christian people, filling up the pews of the church.”

Diane rubbed Dominic’s back as he sat stiffly against the uncomfortable wooden pew. His ass had fallen asleep within the first hour of the service.

“Psalm 27, verse one says, ‘The Lord is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid?’ Marinate on that for a minute—think about all the things you are in fear of at this very moment. Some of you are afraid of losing that luxury car you’ve been driving around town, some of you are afraid of losing your job tomorrow, some of you are even in fear of losing your life. Understand that no matter how minuscule your fear is or how great your fear is, the Lord will cover you. He will provide you with light in your time of darkness. He will show you the way. He will show you that there is nothing for you to fear, for he is your strength and your salvation. Can I get an amen somebody?”

“You better speak on it, preacher!” Diane shouted from her seat next to Dominic.

Pastor Johnson hooped and hollered as he paced back and forth in the church’s pulpit. Josiah sat next to Dominic, nodding off every few minutes. Dominic attempted to listen to what Pastor Johnson preached about, but nothing he said stuck. Nothing he said ever did.

Church was something he still hadn't gotten used to after eleven years. He and Eve never attended church back in California. They were too busy trying to survive. Although they never stepped foot in a church, poor Eve would still try to keep some form of spirituality in their home by reserving Sundays as their sanctified rest days. They would wake up at noon, thank God for what was most important to them, share a bologna sandwich, and when he turned nine, they began to share a blunt. Sometimes he wished he was back in California in that junky motel room, sharing a blunt and a bologna sandwich with her. He loved Diane, but she didn't *get* him. She showed that she cared in her own way, and he guessed he loved her for that much.

“If something is weighing heavy on your heart today, I want you to know the Lord is aware of it. He knows. He will show you the way out of your darkness. For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Pastor Johnson stepped down from the pulpit. “The doors of the church are open. Please come up for prayer if your heart desires.”

The choir hummed the beginning of an old church hymn that Diane would sing when she made him and Josiah clean on Saturday mornings. He sighed and shifted in his seat. Both he and his body recognized that service was almost over.

Before he could register what was happening he was pulled so hard from the pew by Diane that Josiah's eyes flew open in surprise. She rushed him to the front of the church and pushed him into one of the empty chairs the ushers had lined in front of the pulpit. Sister Francis came toward him with her hands covered in white gloves and a bottle of Holy Water. He huffed at Diane's decision to thrust him in front of the entire congregation, but he knew better than to look less than enthused. It was her way of showing that she cared.

She sat to the right of him and a young girl no older than six sat to the left of him. She was brown with a head full of unruly curls and a dimpled smile. He could only think of one person when he looked at her. It was funny how she found her

way into his thoughts daily. Every day he would see, hear, or smell someone or something that reminded him of her. Eve would call it a soul connection or some spiritual shit like that, but he called it annoying.

The little girl sat straight and crossed her tiny legs at the ankles. She looked like she was wise beyond her years. Pastor Johnson approached the three of them with his Bible and a rag to wipe the pouring sweat from his bald head. He got close to Dominic first.

“Young man, I understand you’ve been experiencing some significant pain in your life.” He laid a hand on Dominic’s forehead and his breathing became labored at his words.

He wondered if Diane had been telling the church his business again.

“Lord, I ask that you deliver this young man from evil. Deliver him from his suffering, Lord. Guide him toward the light he needs in his life to crawl from this black hole he has found himself in. Lord, only you know what his eyes have seen and why his heart is so weary.”

Sweat trickled down his back as he listened to Pastor Johnson, Diane, and Sister Francis pray around him. He felt Pastor Johnson’s weighty hand on his sweat-stained forehead and his mouth became dry. The harder they prayed, the drier his mouth became and the blurrier his vision got. The only thing he could focus on was the tiny cocoa-colored hand that had snaked its way into his, holding it as tight as she could.

It was as if time stopped and the important milestones of his short life flashed before his eyes. He was awake, but not present. He couldn’t feel Pastor Johnson’s hand anymore, Diane’s robust energy or the Holy Water Sister Francis flicked on him. It was just him and the owner of the tiny hand watching the good, the bad, and the ugly of his existence.

“Amen,” they declared in unison.

He gradually came back to consciousness. He felt the hardness of the chair again, the cool air blowing from the vent above him, and that same tiny hand. It never left his hand as

they moved on and prayed over her. After all of that, he figured he'd feel weightless, but he felt even heavier. *What was God trying to tell him?*

“Lord, we come to you today to ask that you pour your blessings over this baby. Protect her and keep her covered. We ask that you give us the strength as her village to raise her properly and give her the guidance and love she so deserves.” Pastor Johnson crouched down in front of the little girl and placed a hand on her forehead.

Her face was a mixture of awe and confusion as she looked at the people surrounding her.

“Romans 14:8 says, ‘For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.’ God bless you baby—we hope that you find solace in the fact that your mother is with the Lord.”

Her round eyes filled with tears and she squeezed his hand tighter. Once he realized the severity of the situation, he pulled her into his lap and covered her with his long arms. Her tiny body shook as she buried her face into the polo shirt he wore, and within seconds it was soaked with her tears. She shook and sobbed in pain. The congregation moved around in a frenzy, trying to decide if they should take her from him or leave them both alone to comfort each other.

He understood that there was nothing anyone could say to stop her crying. Losing a parent was like losing a part of yourself. The fucked up thing about it was that losing her mother would forever stunt her, no matter how much she convinced her future self she was healed. She could grow up and be the richest and most successful person who has the world convinced that she's well adjusted, but the little girl in her would always lurk in the back of her mind attempting to understand why she had to lose somebody so important.

She stayed tucked in his arms for the rest of the service and eventually fell into a deep sleep. Once church ended, he followed the rest of the congregation out into the parking lot with her head resting on his shoulder. A lady who claimed to

be her aunt came and pried her from him once they made it outside.

“Thank you,” she mouthed with somber eyes.

He nodded and watched them walk away toward a waiting Yukon. His chest felt empty—not in a physical sense, but a spiritual one. It was as if she had taken a piece of him with her.

“That poor, poor baby,” Diane said, walking up next to him.

Her hand rested against her mouth. “They said the cancer progressed so quickly they hardly had time to prepare. What a shame.”

She rubbed Dominic’s back as if he were the one that needed comforting.

The ride back home was quiet, not even the radio played. There was a heaviness that had settled over the three of them, and it damn near suffocated Dominic. As soon as Diane’s Honda came to a stop in the driveway, he and Josiah hopped out like it was on fire.

When they made it inside, Josiah rushed toward the kitchen to stuff his face with the baked roast, greens, and candied yams that Diane cooked. She had a habit of cooking dinner before Sunday service. She would get up early, blast Shirley Caesar and The Clark Sisters, and talk shit with Sister Francis on the phone while she cooked. With her work done for the day, she would have a cigarette and hide in her room watching Hallmark movies for the rest of the day.

Dominic’s stomach was empty, but he wasn’t hungry. Instead of going to eat, he went to his room and slammed the door before falling face-first onto his bed. His head thumped and his eyes were so heavy that he couldn’t hold them open anymore.

“Nic... ‘Nic... wake up.” There was a hard tug on Dominic’s bare foot.

He swore he had been wearing socks when he went to sleep .

“Wake up baby.”

Why the fuck couldn’t he ever get any sleep? He pried his eyes open and stared into Eve’s hollow, crusted eyes. She wore a dingy white shirt with a pair of leggings that had seen better days. Her thin hair was tangled so badly at the ends, it was starting to loc and the crust from her dry lips cracked as they trembled.

“What’s wrong ma?” Dominic reached out and wiped the dried gunk from her eyes.

“He’s back. He’s back and his ass won’t leave. I told him you was in here sleep.” He heard the pounding at the door.

“Bitch you better open this door! I want my fuckin’ money Eve! I ain’t playing with you.”

Dominic tossed the thin sheet from his body and reached under the bed for the youth baseball bat he kept there. Pushing Eve out of the way, he stood and pulled up the loose basketball shorts that hung from his skinny body. He cleared a path to the front door, kicking away clothes, shoes, empty bottles, and trash. Deko still pounded on the other side.

“What if he got a gun this time?” Eve stood behind him, panting and holding onto his arm.

He shrugged her hands off and reached toward the doorknob, gripping it in his sweaty hand.

“Shut up.” He yanked it and pulled the heavy door open.

Deko’s gigantic frame charged toward them, screaming. Before his fist could connect with Dominic’s face, Dominic took the bat, drawing it back and cracking it across his ribs. He roared, his face transforming into a grotesque version of itself. His eyes bulged and his teeth were sharpened like fangs.

“Motherfucka’ didn’t I tell you to leave my mama alone!” Dominic hit him again, this time on his ankle.

He crouched over in pain, holding it. Eve screamed so loud behind him; he just knew twelve would come if she didn’t shut up. They’d be trying to take his ass again if they came and saw how their room looked.

“You lil’ bastard. That hoe of a mama you got... owe me... my fuckin’... money.” The tighter he clenched his teeth, the louder Eve yelled and cried.

“Mama, shut up!” Dominic kicked his tiny foot up to kick Deko’s large body out of their motel room.

He reached up and grabbed Dominic’s ankle, pulling him on the floor. Eve yelled even louder.

“Shut the fuck up mama!”

Dominic woke up drenched in sweat with his heart pounding against his chest. The tri-tone of his ringing cellphone had him feeling underneath his bed to shut it up. His body still didn’t feel rested. He was desperate to sleep for once without dreaming about Eve. It had been so long and she still wouldn’t let him rest.

“What?” he asked.

His voice was gruff and still full of sleep.

“Damn, I ain’t heard from your ass in days. Just checking to see if your hateful ass was still in the land of the living,” Mo shouted.

Dominic pulled the phone from his ear with a mug. “That’s what you called me for?”

“Hell yeah and to see if you wanted to hit up Pleasures later on. I came up on a lil’ something.”

Dominic sat up and peeled his sticky body from the comforter.

“The least your ass can do is fuck with me since you straight fired my ass.”

Mo didn't understand his reticent nature, but he respected it. He would go off the radar for days at a time until Mo got worried enough to check in on him. Their brotherhood was simple: Fights were forgotten after a few days, emotions were hardly expressed, and they hid apologies behind casual invites to the strip club.

“Now you know damn well I ain't fire your out of work ass.”

He placed the call on speakerphone and prepared to get an earful about the demotion Mo believed he got. He looked at the hundreds of texts, social media notifications, and missed calls on the face of his phone.

“Shitttt.” Mo stretched out the word with exaggeration. “Straight dropped my ass for shawty. Heard you was visiting her at her job and shit.”

Dominic kissed his teeth at Mo's gossipy nature. If he didn't know him well, he would have thought he was a snitch with the way he probed for and regurgitated information, but Dominic knew he was just messing with him.

“I thought you called to link up, not to play gossip girl.”

Dominic opened his Instagram instead of entertaining Mo's antics. Out of boredom, he scrolled through the many new follower notifications that had accumulated over the past few weeks. Social media was always at the very bottom of his to-do list. When he had time to log on, the most he did was post a caption-less picture and log off. He would never understand sharing his whereabouts, thoughts, and feelings with people who wouldn't piss on him if he was on fire.

As he scrolled through the notifications, he stopped at the sight of a familiar face sporting a rainbow-colored wig. He clicked on the image without hesitation and scrolled through her profile on the search for a puff of hair.

“I'm just saying. I ain't think you would ever let pussy come between us.” He had forgotten Mo was even on the line.

“Pussy? You trippin' bro. You startin' to sound pussy for keepin' tabs on my dick.”

“She must got some magical shit. Got you firing me as your manager...visiting her at work. I ain’t never know you to chase no ass man.”

He had found her. He stared at the picture of her and Autumn posing in front of a building on campus. It was the first time he had seen her in something other than a Waffle House uniform, and damn was she a sight.

“You right. It’s magical as fuck. It’s so magical, it got my finger itching to hang up on your nosey ass.”

She wore a baby blue tracksuit that fit snugly around her hips and thighs. A tiny sliver of her brown stomach was exposed, and it made his breathing spike. Her thick hair was pulled up in a curly puff and his fingers itched to pull it and rub it, to feel the coarseness of it.

“Man, I see how it is. You trying to link or what?”

“Yeah, I’ll come fuck with your ass, I guess.”

Autumn tagged her in the post and he clicked on her Instagram handle, eager to get closer to her even if it was through social media.

“A’ight, I’ll come scoop you around eleven.” He hung up before Mo could get another word in.

He didn’t want to be interrupted any more while he lurked.

There were five pictures on her profile and only two of them were pictures of her. The rest were pictures of random things—books, flowers, 2Pac. He could tell she didn’t spend a lot of time on there. He rubbed his head and clicked on one of the rare pictures she had posted of herself. She posed in the mirror of her dorm room in spandex biker shorts and sneakers with her wild hair going in different directions. He stared in fascination.

It was funny how the images she posted perfectly illustrated the vibe she emanated in person—calm, soft, and always with her head in the clouds. He was still trying to understand her and understand why she’d taken residence in his brain.

He scrolled through her profile one last time and with sweaty palms, hit the follow button.

Pleasures was packed body to body without an ounce of space to roam. Money flurried around like weightless snowflakes while naked dancers walked around to collect it all, some even made a show by stuffing large amounts of it in black garbage bags.

A Backwoods dangled from Dominic's mouth as he bobbed his head to Young Thug's nonsensical rhymes and ignored the constant no-smoking warning the DJ shouted every few minutes. He hung around in a section bought by one of the D-Boys he knew from his neighborhood while Mo chased after a girl he had been trying to hit since high school. He had been turning down dances and after hour propositions all night and was growing tired of the crowd altogether, but knew it was best that he hung around. He was a typical Atlanta nigga that used the strip club for everything other than its intended purpose. That night was no different. He was there to placate Mo, but also for his own selfish interests.

"You sharing tonight?" a woman's breathy voice whispered in his ear.

Her small arms full of stacked bracelets encircled his waist, and the sweet smell of strawberries overpowered the rank smell of smoke that was a permanent fixture inside Pleasures. Without missing a hit of his blunt, he pulled Tia in front of him.

"It depends on what you got for me." He looked her up and down in the blue G-string she wore.

Everything about her looked expensive. She was stacked with ass for days and a handful of breast that Dominic once loved to caress. Her body was one of the best he had seen, thanks to a surgeon in the Dominican Republic that her sugar daddy paid for her to see. She had transformed from a lanky cheerleader that would boost anything Dominic would ask her to, to a confident woman that laced him up on the wealthy clientele that came through the club.

He met Tia at the local skating rink when he was only twelve. She was four years older and was his first foray into girls. They were never boyfriend and girlfriend, but she taught

him everything he knew about sex and how to please a woman.

She was one of those misguided girls with daddy issues that he started to shy from. He had limited their sexual encounters because of the clinginess she exhibited afterward. It was as if she believed she should have been his be-all and end-all.

“I got something good for you.” She snatched the blunt from his hand, taking a hit.

As the beat switched up, she moved her hips, grinding on him.

“You see those dudes over there?” She nodded her head toward the stage at a rowdy group that had been tossing beaucoup money all night and flexing with diamond-encrusted watches.

The gleam from the diamonds that dripped from their ears, wrists, and mouths was damn near blinding, despite the dim lighting of the club. Tia made a show of dancing on him, while he scoped out the group. He smirked as she turned around and caressed his face with her long dainty fingers. She placed the blunt back between his lips and he inhaled more of it. He watched as the group hooted and hollered, slapping every ass that walked by. They all looked like walking licks to him.

“I think they got something you could use.” She snaked her hands under his shirt and stroked his taut stomach. “They’re in the McLaren and the Jeep.”

She gave him one last dance and walked off, knowing he would follow the trail of crumbs she dropped. He watched her plump ass sway from side to side as she walked over to the group. She entertained them with her gift of gab and made a show of waving over a waitress who walked by with a sparkling bottle of champagne.

He finished the blunt and left out the section to search for Mo, blending into the crowd of drunk club-goers paying a grip for half-assed lap dances and ear candy. He watched Tia and the group as he roamed around the club.

Mo's stocky body appeared at the very end of the bar, hunched over the same girl he had followed all night. Dominic laughed to himself at Mo's fixation with her. She looked just as unimpressed as she did in school and was no doubt waiting on Mo to leave her to enjoy the rest of her night.

He approached Mo and tapped him on the shoulder.

"How much longer you gone chase?" he asked in his ear.

Mo waved his hand with a roll of his eyes. "Fuck you."

Dominic hunched over in laughter before straightening up.

"Nah... I'm just fuckin' with you." He rested his back against the bar, looking for the group to make sure they hadn't left.

They were still there, being entertained by Tia. She had clung to one of the men in the group and was sitting on his lap.

"What you thinkin' man?" Mo asked, noticing his line of vision.

"I'm thinkin' we should see what's up with Tia."

Mo asked no more questions, content with following his lead.

Dominic hung back at the bar with Mo and his female friend for the rest of the night. The group left with Tia in tow right before closing, and he and Mo followed behind them. They hurried to the parking lot and hopped in Mo's Impala. Dominic knew if they lost the group, they would fuck the entire plan up. Thankfully, they were parked close to the souped-up McLaren and Jeep that Tia had told him about. He could see that she was in the Jeep with the guy she was glued to earlier. He must have been the high-roller in the group—sniffing out money had always been her thing.

Mo tailed the vehicles out of the parking lot but stayed behind the Jeep once the vehicles merged onto the highway. He and Dominic followed the Jeep in silence to the swanky W Hotel in Buckhead. They parked across the street in an empty shopping center and watched as Tia hopped out of the passenger seat, dressed in skintight jeans and a sleeveless tank

that exposed her toned caramel arms. A designer tote sat in the crook of her arm as she balanced herself on the expensive heels she wore. The high-roller got out and tossed the keys to a waiting valet. They walked inside the hotel hand in hand. If Dominic didn't know any better, he would have mistaken them for a young well-to-do couple that had just gotten back from a night on the town.

“How long you think we gone be out here waitin’?” Mo asked, breaking the silence.

One thing that Dominic learned long ago was that patience was important in the work he did. He used to do his dirty work with crews, but that ended when he realized that not everyone possessed the same self-restraint he did. He had seen too many foiled plans because impatient dudes jumped the gun. Now he worked alone, except for the rare occasion that Mo was with him.

“Shouldn't be long. Dude was pretty fucked up.”

Tia had gotten him liquored up back at Pleasures and Dominic was sure she wouldn't waste time before stripping him naked once they got in the room—it was her M.O. He reclined in his seat and prepared to play the waiting game. Mo turned the volume up to the radio and they listened to the late-night DJ mixes to fill the empty silence while they watched hotel patrons come and go.

An hour later his cellphone pinged with an incoming text message. He pulled it from his pocket.

Let's meet at seven on thirty-fourth street.

He twisted his lips at Tia's cryptic message and pressed a button to put the phone back to sleep. Raising forward with relaxed limbs, he felt for the pistol in his jeans.

“You got some shit in here to cover our faces?” he asked.

Mo grinned and turned to his cluttered backseat. He rummaged through empty fast food bags, dirty laundry, and muddy shoes before pulling out two ski masks. It was no telling what he had used them for in the past, but they would now come in handy. They each grabbed one and stuffed them

under their shirts before exiting the car and walking across the street to the hotel's entrance.

They entered one of the many elegant elevators in the lobby, blending in with the late-night partygoers retiring for the night. Dominic's stomach no longer toiled at the thought of doing something illegal. It hadn't rumbled at that thought since he was young. He now committed crimes with the same precision as a surgeon performing their one-hundredth surgery—with apt concentration, precision, and success.

They exited on the seventh floor and placed the masks on their heads before finding room seven thirty-four. Dominic gripped the stick in his jeans with one hand and Mo did the same. Mo rapped lightly on the door to the room and they waited, holding casual stances.

“Who is it?” He recognized Tia's voice from the other side of the door.

“Room service,” Mo responded and looked at Dominic.

They shared a grin as the door flew open. Tia stood before them in a silk red robe with only a red thong underneath. She bit her lip at the sight of Dominic, probably creaming her panties because she loved stupid shit like that.

He pulled the ski-mask down over his face and pulled the pistol from his jeans. Mo followed suit, and they pushed Tia inside. She waited until they kicked the door closed before letting out one of the most convincing blood-curling screams he had ever heard. He placed a hand over her mouth before they drew attention to the room and lifted her small body from the floor.

The high-roller from Pleasures was doing his damndest to find the gun he had stashed beneath the bed, but he moved too slow. Mo was already next to the bed with his pistol cocked and pointed toward him.

“Move again and I promise I'll light yo' ass up.”

High-roller laid in the bed in only boxer briefs and the jewelry he had on at Pleasures. Mo kept his gun pointed at him and moved to get the gun he'd hidden. He used his foot to feel

around for it, still keeping his eyes glued to High-roller just in case he had other weapons stashed. Once he touched it, he dragged it from beneath the bed, keeping his foot over it.

Dominic held his pistol to Tia's head.

"What... what... do you want?" she asked.

Her voice trembled as if she were afraid.

"You know what we here for." Dominic cocked the gun and eased her to the floor.

High-roller gritted his teeth from his position on the bed. "Man, what the fuck is this shit? I swear if I find out who you motherfuckers are..."

"What's the combination?" Mo asked, referring to the courtesy safe in the hotel suite.

He eased closer to the bed.

"Forty-eight twenty-one," High-roller replied, rolling his eyes.

Dominic pushed Tia, giving her the go-ahead to take him to it. They went over to the safe built into an entertainment center below a mounted flat screen. He pushed her hand toward the keypad and made her punch in the numbers herself. Once the door popped open, he found just what he had been looking for.

Three semi-automatic pistols laid on top of each other, and beneath them were stacks of money. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a duffle that he knew belonged to Tia.

"Get me something to put this shit in," he said as he reached forward to pull all of it from the safe.

Tia scrambled from his arms and ran to get the duffle-bag as if she could read his thoughts. She emptied the contents of the bag and lugged it over to Dominic. He threw the guns and all the money inside and zipped up the bag.

He whistled at Mo, who was snatching the jewelry from High-roller's neck. Mo looked up after pulling a Rolex from his wrist and followed Dominic's lead to the room's entrance.

They kept their eyes on both he and Tia before easing out of the room. As soon as they entered the hallway, they pulled the masks from their faces, stuffed the pistols back in their jeans, and zipped up the loot they had stolen.

Dominic threaded the handle of the duffle-bag between his hand and they walked back to the elevator like they were two buddies checking out for the evening. They even made small talk with an older white couple who mistook them for Hawks players. Once they entered Mo's car, he tossed the bag in the backseat and they peeled out of the parking lot.

Back at Diane's, he split the money with Mo and took all the guns before getting out of the car with Tia's duffle bag tossed over one shoulder. He entered the house, quietly walking to his bedroom, determined not to wake Diane or Josiah. Once inside, he dropped to his haunches and placed the guns and money in his safe. As the door closed with a quiet thud, he let out a deep breath,

“Fuck...” he muttered.

The day finally caught up to him. His eyes had become heavy and his shoulders sagged. Diane would tell him that all the running he did would leave him breathless one day. Maybe what she said was true. Maybe he was breathless for once.

He took a shower to clear his cloudy mind and hoped that it would be the one thing that would ease him into a restful sleep, but instead, he laid in his bed staring at her again. She had posted no recent pictures, so he looked at her profile picture instead. Her hair stretched around her head like a puffy cloud and she grinned, showing off the slight gap between her teeth. She held a sunflower out toward whoever was taking the picture. He wondered if he ever occupied her thoughts as she did his.

closing out of Instagram, he went to the contact list on his phone where there were very few numbers saved. His finger hovered over the name he added only recently, debating on whether he should call. The debate was foreign to him. He was never one to contemplate over things like that and he didn't want to start, so he tapped it.

It rang only a few times before she picked up.

“Hello...” she said.

Doubt dripped throughout her raspy voice and he was immediately soothed.

“You always answer the phone for numbers you don't have saved?” he asked, staring up at the ceiling just as they both had done a few days prior.

He still smelled the coconut scent of her coils in his pillowcase. She cleared her throat, and he heard the shuffle of

papers in the background.

“Dominic?” His pulse raced at the way his name rolled off of her tongue.

“You ain’t answer the question.” His eyes closed as he awaited her answer.

“Is this some rapper thing? Calling me at three in the morning... asking me questions... demanding answers?”

He released a deep laugh, picturing her hair standing up in a curly afro as she asked the questions with a serious pout on her face.

“Why you up anyway? You sound like you on a hundred right now. Let me find out you been lit tonight, hittin’ up them college bars and shit.”

“Oh... I’ve been very lit.”

Before he could respond a FaceTime call rang into his ear. He pulled the phone back with a frown and smirked once he realized it was coming from her. He accepted it. Once the camera focused, he realized he wasn’t looking at her cheeky grin, but a round table filled with papers and textbooks. He groaned and rolled over onto his side.

“This is my definition of lit.”

“And just what am I looking at?” He didn’t want to admit to himself that it was her he longed to see and not some bullshit schoolwork.

“Simmer down grouchy.” She flipped the camera around and exposed the grin he was supposed to see.

Her hair was all over the place, just as he expected, and he felt his teeth sinking into his bottom lip. He needed to control his facial expressions.

“By the way, I feel honored.”

“What you talking about?” he asked, scraping his thumb across the screen as if he could feel her through the device.

“You follow two people on Instagram and this girl is one of them.” She did a silly dance, and he laughed at the sudden

emergence of her goofy disposition, despite it being three in the morning. “I hope you don’t mind pictures of sunflowers and 2Pac on your feed because that’s all I’m good for shawty.”

She propped him up on another textbook she seemed to pull out of thin air.

“You could post pictures of rocks all day. I don’t give a damn. I barely be on there.”

“And why is that?” She concentrated hard on whatever she was writing and hardly paid attention to him looking at her.

“Not interesting enough to me. Bunch of clout chasers and drama, but I might have a new reason to get on there.”

She continued to write and flip through spiral notebooks, oblivious that he was even referring to her.

“What’s the new reason? Keeping tabs on the opps? Isn’t that something rappers do?” She contemplated hard as if her questions were legitimate and then finally shrugged her shoulders.

“Shut up,” he laughed.

He switched positions again and placed an arm behind his head. “What you know about opps anyway, Sunflower?”

It was ironic how much she loved sunflowers because he believed she embodied the bright flower. She looked up from what she was writing and stared at Dominic with an ashen look on her face. If he hadn’t been staring at her, he may have missed the strange look altogether. It was as if he had imagined it.

“I’m a G, remember?” She winked.

“You right, you are,” he responded quietly. “So, how was your day G?”

“Why do you want to hear about my day?” She looked at him and scrunched her button nose. “I promise you it’s not very interesting.”

“So, let me hear what was so uninteresting about it.”

She sighed and rolled her eyes upward.

“Well... I started my day writing, and it looks like I’ll be ending it doing the same thing.” She groaned and stretched her arms high. “I got kicked out of the library when they closed at two and now I’m here in a study room in my dorm, finishing the rest of my assignments that are due tomorrow by hand. Fun, fun, fun.”

“Damn...”

He heard the frustration in her tone and saw it on her face. He didn’t notice how stressed she looked before, but now it was glaring. The whites of her brown eyes were a deep red and puffy bags sat beneath them.

“Anyway... did you call to hear about my boring day or to give me more work to do? I need to up my price if you’re going to call me at odd hours.” She stuck her tongue out in jest and tucked away stressed Claudette for the time being.

“You never even gave me a price. That’s bad business man.”

They had never agreed on a price for her help, and he had been curious to see if she would ever bring it up. She hadn’t, so he decided he would.

“You’re right, it *is* bad, but I also have no experience in the music industry and the limited knowledge I do have comes from the lovely library and Google. Give me whatever you think is fair.” She shrugged and went back to her work once again, unbothered by his presence on the phone.

“You take half of whatever I tell you to hold,” he stated in a matter-of-fact tone.

She stopped writing and cut her eyes at him. “I am not taking half of your money Dominic, don’t be ridiculous.”

He could hear stressed Claudette coming back out. He wasn’t used to someone else calling the shots, especially not some baby-faced young girl. Silence stretched between them as she wrote and he watched.

He broke the uncomfortable silence. “Can I ask you somethin’?”

She looked at him and blinked, her lips twisted to the side. “Shoot.”

“Do you trust me?”

Her eyes widened. He wasn't asking her to lay her feelings on a platter and serve them up to him, but it was something he needed to know.

“Dominic, I trust you as much as anyone would trust someone they've only known for a week.” She scratched at the curls on her head before pushing them from her forehead.

“Okay... and how much is that?”

“Put it this way, my gut tells me I can trust you, so I do.” Her tone was firm and the look on her face reinforced what she said.

“Good... I trust you too.” He sat up from his position on the bed. “So let me explain somethin' to you. Never do shit for a nigga for free, no matter how much your gut tells you that you can trust him. You charge those ballplayers you write papers for, right? What's the difference between them and a nigga like me? Trust?”

She jerked her head back at his words, and her face scrunched, marring her soft features. He didn't realize how rough his tone had come across, and guilt crept into his conscience. Naivety—fuck, it was the shit he hated and somehow the universe was testing him by thrusting this naive girl into his life.

“Well, thanks for the street lesson. Got anything else you want me to know?” she spat back.

He pictured steam coming from her ears. It wasn't how he'd imagined their first phone conversation would be. He wasn't sure how long they sat in silence after their disagreement, or whatever it was, but it seemed like hours. He refused to end the call and she didn't move to end it either. As time went on, her hand moved slower and she yawned more often. He wanted to tell her she had done enough writing for herself and those stupid athletes she slaved for, but it wasn't his place. She wasn't even his.

“Claudette...” He cleared the raspiness from his throat and her head jerked in the phone’s direction.

Instead of responding, she hummed and sat up in a sleep-deprived trance.

“I’m sorry.”

If there was one civilized thing that Eve had taught him, it was the power of an apology. She always stressed that real men owned up to their wrongdoings.

“I ain’t mean to talk to you in that way. I don’t take back what I said, but I regret the way I delivered the message.”

He held his breath, unsure of whether his words had registered to her in the state she was in. She looked at him adorably with heavy eyes and smiled.

“Apology accepted,” she whispered, her voice raspier than it normally was. “I wasn’t going to hang up until you apologized anyway.”

He smiled at the newfound layer of her personality that she had exposed to him. She was stubborn as a bull, and he knew it would drive him insane.

“You should never go to bed angry,” she added.

“I wasn’t angry. You were.” He smirked.

“You’re right. I shouldn’t go to bed angry and you shouldn’t go to bed guilty.” She smiled. “Are we partners again?”

“We never stopped being partners. I guess I need to teach you somethin’ about loyalty too.” He rolled over on his side, taking the phone with him. “Real partners never fold on each other, no matter how pissed they get.”

“Noted.” She propped her head on her dainty hand, and for once he had her full attention. “My phone is dying...”

“I guess that means you should call it a night.”

“Maybe.” She let out a soft yawn and packed up her things. “Guess I should save your number, huh?”

He shrugged. It didn't matter to him if she saved it or not because he already had hers embedded in his brain. He'd memorized the seven digits with ease as soon as he'd gotten them from Roc, simply because they were associated with her.

6

He never smiled.

Claudette lounged in her twin bed and scrolled through Dominic's Instagram feed while she waited on Autumn to get dressed. Curiosity had finally led her to explore it after he followed her out of the blue, and she wasn't sure what to expect before she clicked on his profile.

She found that the pictures he posted were an exact portrayal of the energy he exuded in person. His spirit was beautiful, troubled, and angry, and she wondered who had hurt him and hardened his exterior. He posted pictures of himself cradling guns. He posted them with such reckless abandon that it was almost disturbing. It was as if this Dominic was an imposter that had taken the place of her Dominic, though he wasn't hers. That was something she had to remind herself of.

He didn't interact with other people on there. It was as if he logged on to post pictures to taunt the thousands of people that watched his every move that he would never follow.

"Ready sis?" Autumn asked as she stepped out of the bathroom dressed in a skintight midi dress and sandals that showed off her manicured toes.

Claudette looked down at the old cropped tank, distressed jeans, and sneakers she wore, pursing her lips.

"I thought we were going to get wings?"

Autumn rolled her eyes and shoved on oversized hoop earrings. She brushed out the bone straight wig she had been wearing for the past few days. Claudette admired the sleekness

of the style and the way it complimented her heart-shaped face.

“We are... don’t start with me. You know I’m extra.”

Claudette rolled her eyes. *At least she had some self-awareness.*

She took one last look at Dominic and closed the app.

“What were you looking at?” Autumn stood at the end of her bed with a raised eyebrow.

“Nothing. You ready?” She jumped down from the bed and went to the mirror to fluff her own curls out.

Her wild mane was the only saving grace to the lackluster outfit she wore.

Autumn looked at her through squinted eyes. She had been giving her similar looks ever since she noticed Dominic followed her on Instagram and upped his following count to two. The only other person he followed was Mo. Claudette still shuddered at the memory of Autumn’s interrogation after she noticed the activity between her and Dominic’s accounts.

Ignoring her glare, Claudette grabbed a wristlet so she could look somewhat civilized for the evening. They locked up their room and headed out to begin their journey to King’s Wings on foot.

They had dinner together every week, no matter how busy their schedules were. Sometimes they could only scrounge up enough money for pizza and sometimes they had a good week and could afford a nice sit down dinner at the Chilis near campus. Tonight they were somewhere in between, so greasy hot wings from the local hole in the wall seemed to be a safe choice.

“You can tell me if you’re talking to him,” Autumn said as they strolled through campus toward the main road that would lead them to the restaurant.

“What’re you talking about?” Claudette kicked at a lone stick on the sidewalk.

“Don’t play dumb Claudette. I know I came off harsh the other day, but I don’t want you to feel like you have to keep shit from me.” Claudette kept quiet, unsure of what to say. “I just don’t want you to get involved with him and lose sight of yourself.”

“I understand and I’ve told you that won’t happen, but I feel like we’re bordering on mother-daughter territory instead of besties.”

She understood Autumn and knew she had no ill intentions. They both came from two different worlds. Autumn was rough around the edges and could pinpoint gritty guys like Dominic and their motives a mile away while Claudette’s sheltered life with her grandfather prepared her for none of those things.

“Believe me, I’m not trying to be your mamma, but I’m calling it like I see it.”

They hurried across a busy intersection on campus. The sun was setting, and they got some reprieve from the Georgia heat.

“Listen to me—dudes like Dominic live a fast life and you don’t.” She stopped and pulled Claudette’s arm to stop her from walking ahead. “He’s older than you and involved in a lot of shit that you don’t need to be around.”

“I get it…” Claudette whined.

She didn’t really, but she wanted the uncomfortable conversation to end.

After the intense phone call she had with Dominic, she’d been listening to his music ever since. The words he rapped, the theme of all of his music, and the images he shared of himself on social media gave her a small glimpse into the *shit* Autumn was referring to, but there was no way a guy like him would ever be interested in her. She was getting worked up for no reason.

“I don’t think you do,” Autumn said, walking off and leaving her behind to catch up.

At King's Wings, they placed their orders and grabbed a booth in the back corner of the restaurant, away from the rest of the patrons that were dining.

"How's Uncle Kel?" Claudette asked Autumn while fidgeting with the paper she had torn from her straw.

They had grown so close since their first semester that they referred to each other's families as if they were their own. Autumn was the closest thing she had to a sister.

"Girl, still bitching. Him and his new boyfriend supposed to be going to Cabo for their three-month anniversary, which falls on the same week as our Spring Break." Autumn rolled her eyes. "If my grades are like they should be, he said I was coming too. If they keep looking like they do now, he said I'm keeping my black ass in Georgia."

"Well, that means we need to work hard so you can be *muy caliente en Cabo*." Claudette did her best salsa moves, and Autumn cracked up. "As your best friend, I better get something back too."

"If I get to go, you know I got you mamacita."

Claudette's eyes lit up.

"Aht! Aht! Let's speak it into existence. You *are* going and you will bring me something magnificent back since I'll be stuck helping George in the garden and delivering food with Meals on Wheels." She grimaced and balled up the straw wrapper, thinking of her own Spring Break plans.

"Don't front on George, you know he enjoys your company. He may fuss, but you know you're his favorite girl."

It was true, though it was probably inevitable because she had nowhere else to go after her father's premature death. With a dead father and missing mother, she felt every bit like an orphan, but George would have a fit if he ever heard her refer to herself as such. They had been stuck together for so long that she couldn't imagine a life without him.

A waitress slid baskets of hot lemon pepper wings and a bowl of fries onto their table. Claudette's stomach growled in

anticipation because she hadn't eaten since breakfast. Autumn led them in a quick prayer before they eagerly dug in.

"So listen..." Autumn began licking the hot sauce from her fingers.

Anytime she started a sentence off that way, Claudette knew it was trouble to follow.

"I know you have a thousand papers you're writing and a hundred tests you're studying for."

"Okay... and?" Claudette rolled her eyes at her exaggeration and bit down into one of the juicy wings, wondering where she was going with the conversation.

"How about we both take a break and go have a little fun?" she asked, shimmying in her seat.

She knew it would be trouble.

"When you say fun, what kind of fun are we talking about?" Claudette asked. "I mean we can go to the movies; we can go bowling, we can hit up the roller rink."

She ticked off all of her definitions of fun in between mouthfuls of fries.

"Hell no. We can do that shit when we're old with kids. Let's go to Z-Bar. I have the hook up on drinks."

Claudette rolled her eyes and took a long sip of her sprite. Autumn's unpredictable nature was something she was still trying to get used to, but she knew a night out with her was a night of guaranteed fun.

"I guess," she replied with a sigh. "But we're not staying long!"

And thus, began their night at Z-Bar.

Z-Bar was a confusing place. Claudette couldn't tell if it was a bar, a club or a restaurant. It was nine o'clock and it was already packed with locals and college students because it was two-dollar Tuesday all over the city.

The DJ blasted local music and shouted out a birthday girl every five minutes. Claudette held onto Autumn's hand as she dragged her to the bar, ignoring the come-hither eyes and tugs from random guys. They squeezed into an empty spot at the end of the bar, and Autumn signaled for the bartender like a seasoned pro.

Claudette looked around at the crowd while Autumn ordered their drinks. Clubs or clubs that masqueraded as bars were never her thing. Back in high school, her definition of *going out* was dinner and a movie with a close friend. Hanging with Autumn had thrust her into the uncomfortable arena of clubs, fraternity parties and bars. When she turned back, Autumn pushed a shot glass toward her filled with clear liquor.

"What's this?" Claudette shouted over the music.

"Just take it." Autumn grabbed her glass and clanked it with hers. "Cheers to us taking a break from life and school."

Autumn tapped the shot glass on the bar and then brought it to her lips, chugging it without warning. Claudette followed her lead and threw the shot back with a grimace. The clear liquid burned her chest and warmed her entire body. She hated shots and had learned the hard way that the mini drinks of hard liquor didn't agree with her body after taking one too many at her first Kappa party with Autumn their second week on campus. It was a disaster that ended with Autumn cleaning her vomit from the carpet in their dorm.

Autumn took the empty glass from her hand and slid it onto the bar. She signaled the bartender for another round. Three shots later they were more than comfortable with loosened limbs and the relaxation that came with consuming alcohol. They had wandered around the bar and landed in a section with a few older guys Autumn knew from campus. They were friendly enough to share the bottle of liquor they had bought. Claudette had met none of them before that night,

but they seemed nice enough to hang with for the time being. She trusted Autumn's instinct and knew that she wouldn't have them hang and share alcohol with unsavory characters.

Autumn stuck close by her, knowing that bars and clubs were still a new thing for her. Claudette hung onto her arm and the two danced along to Drake's mellow crooning. They sang the lyrics together in unison, while the group cheered them on and laughed at their silly antics.

The alcohol flowed, and time seemed to slow down. She had forgotten how many shots she had taken, and the DJ's voice sounded like a chopped and screwed version of his original self. She thought about how much she would regret all of it the next day as she sat in a drunken haze on Autumn's lap. Getting drunk had not been a part of her plans for the evening.

"Hold up... hold up." The record scratched at the DJ booth. "I know it's a Tuesday night, but y'all got this bitch lit. It ain't even eleven o'clock yet, but we gone keep turning this bitch up. Shoutout to my motherfuckin' partna Dough!"

A beat dropped, and she hiccupped at the familiar bass. Dominic's heavy voice blasted through the sound system throughout the club. It was so surreal that she wasn't sure if she was imagining it all. Even in her drunken state, her body responded to his voice in ways that still amazed her. She squirmed on Autumn's lap and fought to keep herself in line in her inebriated state. Autumn pinched her side, and she turned to her while rolling her eyes.

"What's wrong with you?" Autumn slurred in her ear.

Claudette bit down on her lip and shook her head as she tried to control her body's natural reaction to him. The crowd rapped along to every word of his song with fervor. There wasn't a soul in the room who didn't know the words.

"Hold up... hold up... hold up! We got to run that shit back!" The DJ scratched the record, feeling the energy from the crowd.

He started the track over from the beginning and the crowd grew rowdier.

“I told you, Dough my motherfuckin’ partna’! We got to show him some love!”

The bass dropped again, and the crowd shouted even louder. Even the guys from Autumn’s English class rapped along. Claudette watched as they poured up more drinks and spat every word Dominic rapped, though they probably had experienced nothing he talked about on the track. It was a track laced with gun metaphors and cocky bragging with a beat that made anyone feel hype enough to commit a crime of their own. It was that captivating. She placed a clammy hand on the back of her neck as she fought the desire that erupted in her belly. She had never had that reaction to anyone’s voice.

The song ended and everyone came down from their temporary high. The DJ mixed a smooth R&B track in with the bass of Dominic’s song before transitioning into a full-on slow jam mix and Claudette exhaled a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. Autumn jammed a finger in her rib again.

“Come on girl. I hope you done geekin’ out to Dominic. I have to pee.” Claudette rose from her lap and held a hand out for her to grasp.

She thought she’d done her best to control herself, but apparently not, because Autumn had noticed her visceral reaction to Dominic. Luckily, she was a lot more drunk than Claudette realized and hopefully wouldn’t remember anything the next day. Autumn stumbled to her feet and gripped Claudette’s outstretched hand. They shoved their way through the crowd to the bathroom, doing their best to avoid bumping into people.

It was that strange time of the night when club goers were in such a drunken haze that nothing they said or did made sense. Bottles were empty, restrooms were packed, and girls hung on to the guys they planned to leave with for the night. Although Claudette wasn’t a normal party goer, she recognized the night was coming to a close.

After hoisting Autumn up against her side and waiting in line for the girl's bathroom for ten minutes, they made it to a stall which they shared. Claudette held Autumn's bag while she squatted and let out a stream of pee she had been holding since they got there.

"Claudy..." she groaned while doing her best to balance on the balls of her feet. "I am so fucked up."

"Yeah, I know." Claudette huffed and shoved a wad of tissue toward her.

They both were, but Claudette had sobered some during their long wait for the bathroom. That was the sour side of Autumn's unpredictability. It was all fun and games, until she lost control of herself, leaving Claudette to pick up the pieces.

Just as Autumn straightened her dress out and flushed the toilet, Claudette's phone chimed in her hand. She threw Autumn's crossbody around her shoulder and pulled her from the stall. She forgot the chime as she helped Autumn wash her hands and pulled her from the bathroom in search of the group of guys they had been hanging out with. Claudette hoped they would continue their generous streak and let them bum a ride back to campus because they had blown their budget for the night on wings, drinks and the Uber to get there.

They circled around the bar twice looking for the group, before she gave up and went outside so Autumn could soak up the fresh air and they could scrape together the money to order another Uber back to campus. She sat Autumn on a brick boundary wall in front of the bar while she checked her bank account, hoping that there was enough in there to get them back home.

Her phone chimed again, and this time a ring followed. She blew out a breath and looked at the screen. It was Dominic. She fumbled with it, hitting the green *accept* button.

"Hey, can I call you right back?" she asked without taking a breath.

He didn't respond, and she pulled the phone away from her face to make sure he was still there. He was, so she put it back

to her ear and glanced behind her to make sure Autumn was still sitting where she had left her.

“You been drinking?” he asked, breaking the silence on the line.

His voice held no emotion, and she wondered how he knew what she had been up to.

“No... no... I mean... yeah,” she stammered, looking over at Autumn who was slumped.

She paced around, hating the loss of control she was experiencing. Dominic let the silence between them linger again and then let out a soft chuckle.

“Where you at, G?”

“I’m good. I’m good. I’m about to get an Uber now.” She pulled Autumn’s slumped body up and sat next to her.

“I didn’t ask that. I asked where you was at?”

“Z-bar,” she whined as if he caught her doing something bad.

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” she asked.

“That whining shit. I’m ‘bout to pull up on you.” He hung up, and she threw her head back with a groan.

“Claudy I didn’t mean to get so... fucked up. You know what I mean girl?” Autumn’s words became muffled as her head fell into Claudette’s lap and she closed her eyes.

Claudette stroked her straight wig that was now a messy fluff of silky hair. She looked at her phone to check the time and saw the text notification from earlier. It was from Dominic too.

Sunflower

That was all it said.

She smiled at the message. It was jarring to hear the nickname come from someone other than her father, Bryson. It had been so long since anyone had called her that. The first

time it came out of Dominic's mouth, it momentarily shook her. It had been over ten years since she was last called that.

Ten minutes later Dominic's sleek Charger pulled up to the curb of the bar and she heard the bass thumping from the inside. The driver's side door flew open, and he emerged, walking with a confident gait toward them. Her heart thumped as she watched him approach. People called his name in the distance, greeting him with familiarity. He acknowledged each person with a nod of his head or by chucking two fingers up to let them know he heard them.

He held out his arms at her with a smirk on his honey toned face.

"You can't hold your liquor?" he asked in amusement.

She poked out her bottom lip and shook Autumn, who groaned and snuggled closer to her.

"I'm not drunk," Claudette said in a haze.

She thought she had sobered up enough to not appear drunk in front of him, but the slur that she thought had left was a dead giveaway.

"Autumn... get up." She shook her again.

Autumn rose with her eyes still closed. Dominic couldn't contain his laughter as she smoothed the straight wig on her head, attempting to pull herself together. She fixed her lace bra that had exposed itself and turned to Claudette to fuss over her appearance.

"A'ight, Thelma and Louise, let's go. And ya'll better not throw up in my shit either," he said.

His deep voice got Autumn's attention, and she looked between him and Claudette with bugged eyes. She crossed her arms and glared at Dominic.

She struggled to spit her words out. "I knew it."

"Shut up and come on," Claudette said.

She eased from the brick wall and ignored Autumn while Dominic looked between the two of them. She knew the

inevitable was coming. It was only a matter of time before Autumn found out she had been in contact with him, she just didn't expect on it being so soon. She crossed her arms and left Autumn sitting on the brick wall with Dominic staring. She walked to his car and slid into the passenger seat, letting his familiar scent hug her as she sat back listening to Future boom from the car's speakers.

Looking out of the window, she watched as Dominic trailed behind a sluggish Autumn, who couldn't stand upright. Autumn slid in behind her and Dominic got into the driver's side. They were barely on the highway before Autumn was knocked out again, but not before she let it be known that Dominic was to stay far away from Claudette. Claudette had grown tired of shushing her and let her talk until she fell asleep while Dominic continued to laugh at them.

"What's so bad about me?" he asked as he sparked up a blunt and drove.

She looked at him from the corner of her eye, admiring the smooth way in which he inhaled from the blunt. It was something she had grown to like about him. She liked the way the smell mingled with his natural scent, the way his eyes lowered, and even the way his lips wrapped around it. It gave her a new appreciation for the otherwise terrible habit, but he always seemed to make terrible things not so terrible—it was just in his nature.

"Nothin'." She smiled at the way he released the smoke from his plump lips. "She's just being protective of me. That's all. It's nothing personal."

He didn't respond and continued to smoke as they cruised down the highway. He seemed to be deep in thought, or maybe he just didn't care to respond.

"Why she want me to stay away from you?"

She thought he had forgotten about the subject altogether and mulled over how much she wanted to share with him. She had already embarrassed herself enough by sharing her personal thoughts with him before. If she told him the actual reason Autumn didn't want him around her, it would insinuate

that he had romantic intentions for her and she didn't want to insinuate *anything*.

"I don't know." She fidgeted with her phone, hoping that he would change the subject.

They said nothing else after that, and she basked in his presence while he smoked the rest of the way to campus. She didn't need the confusion or exposure of her feelings for him. It was something she wanted to keep tucked close to herself. Autumn was the only exception because she knew Claudette so well that it was obvious how she felt toward him. It was in the way she spoke his name, the dilation of her pupils when she looked at his golden face, and even the way her thighs clenched at the sound of his deep voice.

They pulled into campus, and he put the car in park. He turned toward her as she stared out of the window.

"You good to get her upstairs?" he asked.

"Yeah, yeah. We should be good." She moved to grasp the door handle. "I really appreciate this. You didn't have to."

Instead of responding to her gratitude, he looked at her with red eyes.

"Come back down afterwards," he said rather than asked.

She was growing to realize how commanding he was. He naturally told. It was his world, and he controlled any and every one in it.

She nodded her head with wide eyes and got out.

"Come on... we're back home," she said as she yanked open the back passenger door.

She shook Autumn, who grumbled, and mumbled an incoherent, "Thank you," to Dominic. Claudette pulled her from the car and they stalked off toward their dorm, holding on to each other.

“WHAT’S THIS?” DOMINIC asked.

Claudette sat cross-legged in the passenger seat with wild hair and gentle eyes. After dropping Autumn off in their room, she had come back downstairs at his request and shoved her phone toward him as soon as she closed the passenger door. Her actions were disjointed in her drunken state and it made him smile. *It was cute.* She thought she was doing a good job of playing sober, but the alcohol she’d consumed dripped from her pores and mingled with the coconut and ivory scent he had grown to associate with her.

He took the phone from her hand and looked at what she was so eager to show him. It was an inbox for an email address.

“It’s your new booking email,” she responded in a child-like manner.

She bit into her lip and her cheeks rose.

“Now people have a way of contacting you or us.” He stared at the phone. “Now you don’t have to rely on two crazy girls to introduce you to promoters, they can just contact you directly.”

Her energy was so charged that she filled every silent moment with chatter.

“Put it in your IG bio, that way people can just click it and send a message. I’ll give you the login details.”

She leaned forward, invading his personal space, and a lone, wild curl brushed across his cheek. He discreetly inhaled,

attempting to suck in all of her. He held the phone while she clicked around to show him the details of the account.

“How you do this?” he asked.

She turned to face him.

“I don’t just write papers for stupid ballplayers, you know.” She smirked. “An IT major owed me for a Cultural Diversity paper I wrote for him last semester. I asked him to help me with some social media marketing. This was just an easy fix to one of your problems. Now that we have this in place, people can actually send those contracts that you’re supposed to be paying me to review. We already started working on some other ideas for you. This is just a start.”

He pressed a button on the side of the phone, putting it to sleep and dropped it in the cup holder between them. She still gazed at him.

“Well... what do you think?” Her pouty mouth was open, and she wrung her fingers together. “If you don’t lik—”

Her words became stuck as he reached forward and cupped her round face. She’d done more than what he’d asked her to do, and he wasn’t sure why.

“Claudette, I like it.” His thumb brushed her bottom lip and the labored breaths she took tickled its tip. “Stop doubting and downplaying the shit you doing for me.”

She nodded her head, and her shoulders dropped as tension left her body.

It was the most intimate they had ever been, and he had never had a girl react to his touch the way she did. She couldn’t hide her physical reaction and it fucked with him. It made his stomach clench and his head feel light at the thought of having that much control over someone. He had drowned so much in his thoughts about her; he didn’t even realize she had reached out to touch the tattoos etched on his neck.

“Is Eve your mother’s name?” she asked, referring to Eve as if she were still there with them.

Her body was so relaxed that her head rested in his hand like she didn't plan on going anywhere.

“Yeah.”

Her finger lightly traced the letters of Eve's name, creating featherlight strokes in the shape of an E, V, and then an E.

“What's she like?”

“You mean was?”

“Sorry, sometimes I use the wrong tense.” Her fingers moved on to trace the large tattoo of a cross on the side of his neck. “When my dad died, my grandpa told me that people don't really die. Their physical self may no longer be here, but their spirit is always around. They're in our hearts, in our actions, and in our minds.”

She whispered the last part like she was sharing top secret information with him. He swallowed at her words, because everything she said was true. He could never articulate the strange presence he felt since Eve died. She came to him in his dreams or even when he was doing the most mundane things like taking a shower. She was always there.

“She was...” he started and then stopped.

Claudette stopped tracing the tattoos and wrapped her small hand around his neck, silently urging him to continue.

“She was crazy as fuck.” She didn't flinch at his words. “But she loved me hard. She would kill for me... she taught me how to be a man.”

He let go of her face and she frowned at the sudden disconnection from him. She moved her hand from his neck, but he pushed it back. He didn't want her away from him just as much as she didn't want to be away from him.

“It was just me and her for the first ten years of my life... just surviving back in Cali.”

She hung onto every word he said. He reached up and grabbed her hand from his throat and laced his fingers with hers.

“I bet she was amazing,” she whispered.

And she was—when she was sober. He remembered Eve getting so fucked up he would have to clean her piss from their bedsheets and bathe her. He hated those days and couldn’t find it in himself to share that with Claudette. He wanted her to see Eve in the innocent light she had cultivated in her head.

He laid his head back and squeezed her hand before releasing it.

“So, what’s our next move partna?” he asked.

He didn’t want to go down memory lane anymore.

She pursed her lips and moved from his space. Her head fell onto her own headrest and she rolled her eyes upward.

“Are you letting *me* call the shots?” she asked.

He caught her sarcasm and reached over to tug at her hair.

“Second rule of a partnership—each person needs to know what their strengths are and what their partner’s strengths are.” He twirled a curl between his finger and let it go. “That way when it’s time to do a job, the strongest person takes the lead.”

She sat in a relaxed state, but she focused on the words he spoke.

“Feel me?” he asked.

She nodded with a grin.

“And let me guess what the first rule is...” she said, sitting up straight. “Loyalty.”

He laughed at the reference from their late-night conversation. It was funny how pliable she was for him. She soaked in every word he said, whether or not she wanted to.

“In all seriousness... prep for your performance and let me brainstorm this online thing,” she added.

He trusted her enough to leave her to her own vices. He knew nothing about social media marketing, music streaming, or booking emails. He was a street dude to his core, and music

didn't bring in enough money for him to care to learn the intricacies of it, so he left that responsibility to her.

“You should do a mixtape,” Josiah said.

He concentrated on getting into the perfect form and tossed the football with precision to Dominic. They were in the front yard of Diane’s house in basketball shorts and wife beaters. It was a mild afternoon, and the sun had finally started to set, leaving a bright orange cast over the city. Mo sat back on the porch and watched.

“Maybe...” Dominic snapped the ball back to Josiah. “You bringin’ the ball too far down before you release it.”

He saw Josiah think before he released the ball again. This time he pulled it up higher at Dominic’s advice.

“I mean what’s stoppin’ you? That shit would be so fire.” Dominic hurled the ball back with intensity and Josiah caught it in his middle with a loud huff.

Mo laughed off in the distance and stretched his legs out in front of him.

“That nigga got to clear it with his manager first, Jo,” he said.

Dominic stuck a middle finger up at Mo without turning to face him and focused on the incoming football. The jokes about Claudette had been endless since he’d found out she set up a legit booking email for him.

“What he talkin’ about D?” Josiah asked.

After one last throw of the ball, he wiped the sweat that had trickled down his face and stood with his thumbs hooked into the sides of the wife beater he wore.

“I don’t know what that nigga talkin’ about.” Dominic tossed the ball into the air while he walked to the porch to sit next to Mo.

“Oh, he ain’t tell you he got a little admirer? That’s how he got that Playhouse gig.”

Josiah raised an eyebrow and looked at Dominic for an answer. Dominic’s leg bounced up and down as he purposely ignored Mo’s stupid comments.

“So you got a manager or an admirer? I’m lost,” Josiah said as he came and sat on the other side of Mo.

They looked at Dominic, who still hadn’t said a word. Dominic hated dudes who sat around all day and gossiped like bitches, and that’s what Mo was doing. It was messy.

“This nigga mad because a girl got more heart than him,” Dominic said.

He had never known Mo to care about any of the girls he fucked with, but Claudette got under his skin. Mo glared at him and Josiah leaned back and let out a deep rumble of laughter.

“You lyin’,” Josiah wheezed. “If that’s true, I got to meet her. She got him over here in his feelings like a bitch.”

Dominic felt the heat radiating off of Mo as he kissed his teeth.

“Fuck ya’ll.” Mo tossed his hand up. “You gone get enough of chasin’ that girl. Believe me, she ain’t built to fuck with a dude like you.”

Dominic squeezed the football tightly in his hands and ran his fingers over the rough texture of the pigskin. He still felt Claudette’s featherlight strokes on his neck. That moment kept repeating itself in his head.

“You don’t know what she built for,” he responded.

Silence settled over the three as they watched the sun set before them.

“I’m gone miss this shit,” Josiah said, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees.

Mo pulled a Backwoods and a lighter from his pocket.

“What you mean?” Dominic asked, resting back on the concrete steps of the front porch.

“You know... kicking it. Shooting the shit with y’all,” Josiah sighed.

Dominic knew what he meant, but he played dumb. He needed to be the rock for the both of them, because in just a

few months they'd be separated for the first time since he was ten and Josiah was six.

“Fuck that. You gone get to that campus and be pulling hoes left and right,” Mo mumbled his words with the lit Backwoods dangling from his lips. “They love them football niggas. *And* you a quarterback?”

He whistled and looked up into the sky as if he were thanking the Lord for the blessing he had bestowed upon Josiah. Dominic rolled his eyes and snatched the blunt from his mouth, taking his own hit of it.

“You know it's more to life then fucking on females, right?” he asked, blowing a cloud of smoke from his mouth.

Mo glanced over at him and shrugged.

“D ain't lying. I'm gone be taking flights for the first time in my life, going to places I only ever seen on tv.” Josiah looked up toward the sky too. “I'm not tryna be caught up. I'm gone be like a sparkly new pair of Uggs to them white girls and I don't want no parts of them.”

Dominic smiled to himself at the wistfulness in Josiah's voice. It had been a long, hard road to mold him into the athletic phenom he was. He would hustle up money to send Josiah to elite football camps every summer. They'd get up before sunrise and take the bus to the Mercedes Benz Stadium, where Dominic would drop Josiah off for the day. He'd ride it back to their neighborhood afterward and then back to the stadium once the camp ended for the day. When he and Mo got hotboxes under their belts, he'd shoot Josiah downtown in the stolen vehicles.

The red and orange hue of the sky melted together, creating a serene atmosphere as they started a rotation. Dominic's elbows relaxed into the scratchy concrete steps. His body savored the calm environment before night fell and he found himself back on the grind—wherever or whatever that meant.

“Y'all gone come visit me, right?” Josiah asked in a tone tinged with worry.

The blunt sat between his fingers with smoke billowing from the lit end. Dominic looked down at his feet.

“You know we got you,” Mo said, grabbing the blunt from Josiah’s relaxed fingers.

Mo answered with confident reassurance but Dominic wanted Josiah to forget about the life they lived there and if that meant leaving the both of them behind, it was fine with him.

“When you make it to the league, you just make sure you don’t forget about us,” Mo added, taking a long pull from the blunt and then passing it along to Dominic.

“Nah, he going to focus on getting a degree that’s paid for,” Dominic clarified before placing the blunt to his lips.

There was no room for unrealistic NFL dreams. Ever since Josiah was big enough to throw a football, Dominic had stressed that football was just *that*—football. It was only meant to be enjoyed because statistically he’d never make it on anyone’s NFL field.

Dominic treated rap in the same manner. There were plenty of dudes just like him, so he was fine with dipping his toe in the water. It was easy but slow money, so he’d never submerge himself in it. Their lives moved at much too fast of a pace to wait on offers from music labels or to devote days to slinging mixtapes. It kept his overactive mind occupied between hustles, and he was content with that.

“Right. A nigga tryna be somebody’s CEO.” Josiah beamed, resting back onto the steps, mimicking Dominic. “I got to get D that condo downtown and buy Mama a house.”

Dominic chuckled at his imaginative words.

“You don’t got to get me no condo, just show me that degree man.” He passed the blunt back down to Josiah while looking out at the last few specks of sunlight that were disappearing into the horizon.

Diane’s flickering porch light turned on, casting a hazy glow on the three of them. A group of moths wasted no time, swarming toward the yellow bulb. He decided he would let his

high subsidence before he and Mo headed out into the city, leaving Josiah to get into his own trouble.

He'd found himself back in the same booth looking for her. Her shift had started an hour ago, but he hadn't seen her poof of coils yet. Other waitresses offered to take his order, but he declined, telling them someone had already taken care of him. Roc walked by with a broom in his hand, looking down at his watch.

"Ain't heard nothing from her. She be late sometimes, but not this late," he said.

Dominic nodded in response. He hadn't even told Roc that's who he was waiting on, but Roc knew he'd never hung out at the Waffle House, or any restaurant. Claudette was obviously the reason he was there. He was full of dark liquor and was coming down from a high after spending the night engulfed in a dice game. His ears craved her hazy voice. So he'd found himself back in that booth.

Roc swept around him, savoring the slow of customers until the clubs closed and they all found themselves crammed inside the compact space. He swept while Dominic's droopy eyes kept watch on the door. A waitress plugged her phone into the jukebox, playing a playlist full of sultry R&B. He tuned it out—his eyes falling lower and lower until the chime of the door made them widen.

She was frazzled. Her hair was flopped over her eyes and her backpack was flung across her shoulder. Roc stopped sweeping and looked from Dominic to her. She hadn't noticed either pair of eyes on her while she rushed toward the back breakroom.

Dominic waited for her to return. His long legs stretched in front of him.

"I ain't even gone ask." Roc shook his head, picking up the broom and going back behind the counter.

She came back out with a tucked in shirt and an apron tied around her small waist. She pulled a notepad of blank tickets and a pen out of the front pocket of the apron and put it back inside like she was making sure they were there. One of the other waitresses approached her, nodding toward Dominic.

They exchanged words—the waitress probably warning her of his reluctance to have anyone wait on him. Claudette nodded, glancing toward him since the first time she'd walked in and his shoulders relaxed. She said a few parting words to the girl and went behind the counter, fixing a drink. He hadn't realized he'd been drumming his fingers on the table in anticipation until she approached.

“Is that your way of rushing me or something?” she asked, sitting the drink in front of him and nodding toward his fingers.

The clean smell of ivory and coconuts brushed across his nose when she moved back.

“Ain't even realize I was doing it,” he replied.

“They said you're being difficult.” Her small hip perched out to the side like she was giving him attitude, but he knew she wasn't.

“Nah. I told them somebody already took care of me.” He licked his dry lips, sinking further down into the booth.

“Oh.” She reached out to take the glass of tea back, but he swatted her hand away.

“I was talking about you.” He reached forward, grabbing a straw from the front pocket of her apron before she could. “You was supposed to take care of me, but you an hour late.”

She cleared her throat, avoiding his gaze.

“I was working on something and fell asleep. Forgot to set my alarm.”

“For real?” he asked

She seemed embarrassed by her excuse.

“Yeah.” She nodded. “You want the usual or something new?”

“I don't want nothing.” He was hungry for her attention—not food.

She crinkled her nose and frowned. “So, you just came for me to fix you tea?”

“Maybe.” *Maybe to hear her voice as well or to inhale that coconut scent she liked to shower in.*

“Okay.” She shrugged with a grin as the door chimed again.

She looked up as a group of girls entered.

“I’ll be back to check on you,” she said walking over to them, leaving him to follow her with his eyes.

He watched her work, her raspy voice flowing through the restaurant and meshing with the R&B music that played. She smiled. She brought food. She joked. The more he sobered, the more he wanted her to himself.

She dropped off plates of waffles to the table of girls that came in when she’d first gotten there and walked toward him afterward. She hummed along to the song playing—some song he’d heard a thousand times on the radio but never paid attention to. He recalled the girls he messed with in the past singing along to it while riding in his car. He thought it was terrible, but hearing the melody being hummed by her voice made it sound so good. The coconut and ivory scent came back as she grabbed his glass again.

“You doing okay?” she asked, picking up the empty piece of paper he tore from his straw.

“You like this song?” He ignored her question, smiling at the waffle batter already on her shirt.

“It’s okay. It’s catchy.” She shrugged. “Why? You like it?”

“Nah. Sound like she talking about something I don’t know nothing about.” He looked up at her with one cheek raised.

She gasped and sat the cup back down in front of him.

“She’s talking about having a crush on someone and the elation she feels when she’s around them.” She leaned forward, resting her hand on the top of the cup. “I know you’ve had a crush before.”

He thought of the girls that came in and out of his life. Some of their faces were clear in his memory, others weren’t.

He didn't know what elation felt like, but he knew he probably felt nowhere near close to it when dealing with them—not even with Tia.

“Nah.” He shook his head. “You be having crushes on guys?”

She looked away from him and shook her head up and down.

“Yeah.... I mean, I have before,” she blurted. “Let me go get you another tea.”

Her feet moved quickly, and he wondered why she'd rushed off. He just wanted to know about the guys that might have made *her* feel elated in the past.

She came back and sat the fresh glass of tea on the table. Her eyes didn't meet his as she grabbed the straw from her pocket herself.

“What time you go on break?” he asked, grasping at anything to make her stay.

“I don't. I was an hour late, remember?” She looked off, still avoiding his eyes.

“You gone be on your feet all night?” He looked down at the Vans she wore, the same ones she'd had on the night they met.

“I'll be okay.” She reassured him, but he was asking for selfish reasons.

When would she have time for him?

His phone chimed from its position on the table, but he ignored it.

She nodded toward it. “Your phone's going off.”

“It's good.”

He didn't want the distraction when she was right in front of him. One arm laid flat against her abdomen, reaching across and clutching her other arm at the elbow. She was shielding herself from him, and he wasn't sure why—it could have been his intensity. The energy between them was different.

“You sure you don’t want anything to eat?”

He shook his head no and she nodded before sauntering off with his eyes on her. They caressed her from behind, touching every dip and curve.

When she disappeared behind the counter, he turned his attention to the phone. The screen was full of notifications that he couldn’t keep up with. He always carried two—one for personal use and one for business. He’d left the one for business in the car because he’d mentally clocked out for the night. Gambling had done him some good, because he’d came up on a nice lump sum. Now he’d spend the rest of the night scratching the itch he had. He turned the phone on silent and reached for the new straw she’d sat down. It tore through the hard white wrapper as he slammed it on the table before dousing it in the tea.

She knew every R&B song that played from the jukebox—even the classics. He nodded his head to the Jodeci song as she hummed along, cleaning up after a pair of customers that had just left. Time should’ve moved slowly, but it didn’t. She kept him entertained even though she sometimes forgot that he was even there. Just when he’d get a little restless, she’d float by.

“You like doing this?” he asked as she slid inside of the booth, sitting across from him.

She had a stack of laminated menus, a towel, and a spray bottle with her.

“Doing what? Cleaning menus?” She took one and sprayed it down, wiping it in big circles.

“Waitin’ on people.” He rubbed his eyes, adjusting himself in the cushioned seat.

“It’s not so bad.” She shrugged and put the menu aside. “The customers make it a little better—well, some of them. Some can be rude, especially when they’re drunk. Some are easy, they hardly want to be bothered.”

She kept her head down, focused on her task while he watched. It was another lull in the night where there were very

few customers, so the staff kept themselves busy with odd tasks.

“Am I easy?” He shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans and slouched back down.

She stopped wiping and looked up at him.

“I’m still trying to decide.” Her head cocked to the side. “Some of my coworkers didn’t like the fact that you snubbed them to wait on me.”

“They should mind they business,” he said with a chuckle.

She shook her head with a grin. It exposed her slight gap.

“How long are you going to hold this booth hostage?” She took another menu and squirted it with the spray bottle.

“‘Til you get off.” He watched her hand stop midair with her pointer finger on the nozzle.

“Is that your way of offering to give me a ride again?” She put the bottle down.

“You want to?” he asked.

He knew her shift was winding down for the night, but he’d hardly got his fix. She was too preoccupied with work to consume him like she did the night they first hung out in his bedroom or when he’d picked her and her friend up from Z-bar.

“Do I want to... what?” Her mouth turned down as she went back to her task, wiping the menu down.

“Come home with me?”

The rag she used made a loud squeaking noise against the laminate menu as she wiped at an area that had already dried. She stopped, looking at him with big eyes.

He wasn’t asking to bring her home to fuck, he just wanted to hang out—even though that sounded juvenile as hell. He hadn’t hung out with a girl since he was twelve.

“Uh... come... co—?” she stuttered.

“I ain’t mean it like—”

“Yes,” she cut him off. “Yeah, just let me finish this and sweep up around my tables.”

He laughed at the way she tried to control the giddiness in her words. She didn’t even let him correct himself. There was something refreshing about the innocence behind her excitement. He could tell she knew he didn’t have any ill intentions behind his words—he just wanted her around.

While she finished up with the menus, he staggered out of the booth toward the bathroom. The glasses of tea she kept bringing him had him ready to burst. He adjusted his jeans, pulling them up while ignoring the stares of her disgruntled coworkers. He sauntered into the bathroom with red eyes and a jittery stomach. By the time he got back, she was sitting in the booth waiting with her backpack on her lap. She looked innocent with her legs swinging back and forth.

“Ready?” she chirped, standing up.

He grabbed her backpack, wondering what was going through her mind. She agreed so easily to come with him, but then again she’d said she trusted him.

He combed through the crumpled wad of money in his pocket and gave her the first thing he pulled out. “Here.”

“The tea was only two dollars.” She frowned while he held the money out toward her.

He looked down at the hundred-dollar bill folded between his fingers.

“So?” He shrugged and squatted down, putting it in her sock like he’d done before.

“I mean if you insist.”

“Come on,” he said, letting her lead the way out of the door.

She waved at Roc, who stood behind the register. He looked at the both of them—his face a mixture of confusion and amusement. Dominic nodded his head toward him and they headed out into the dark parking lot. She led the way to his car as if it were hers.

She had a way of making herself comfortable in his space. It wasn't in an overbearing or annoying way. It was the small things she did that he liked. She toed her shoes off and cuddled up in his front seat like a little girl riding shotgun for the first time. She'd ask him if he were hot or cold and adjust the temperature to appease him.

“What you want to eat, G?” he asked, stopping at a red light and turning toward her.

Her legs were on the seat, tucked at her side, and her eyes were already on him.

“I'm not eating unless you eat with me.” She rolled her head against the headrest, turning away from him.

“I'm not hungry.” He reached out to turn the volume up on the radio.

She came behind him, turning it down. “If we're going to be friends, you have to compromise sometimes.”

The light turned green, and he shot from underneath it.

“What you mean?” he asked.

He'd never known a girl to complain that he didn't want to eat. They rarely noticed things like that—too preoccupied with just being with him.

“When was the last time you ate?”

He huffed and shrugged. “I don't know. This morning, maybe.”

She let out a sigh. “We should get McDonalds.”

Her words were more of a command than a suggestion. He shook his head, trying to recall the nearest McDonalds while she turned the volume back up on his radio and snuggled back into his passenger seat.

In the drive-thru, she ordered for them. She leaned across his lap with her coils brushing against his face. He smiled at the way she maneuvered around him. Everything she did made him warm—ordering their food, eating his fries and hers, chattering about how good they were. He'd never even had

what she'd ordered for him, but he knew he had no choice but to eat it. She was persistent like that.

She watched him move on unsteady feet when they made it to Diane's. He swayed while gathering all of their things from the car. He was buzzed but was coherent enough to get them home. He clutched the food and carried her backpack as they entered the front door of the house. She held their drinks and lingered behind him as if she were unsure if she should go in or not.

"D, is that you?" Diane's scratchy voice called from the back.

She sounded like they'd awakened her from a deep sleep. Her voice was heavy, and the house smelled like she'd just put out her last cigarette for the night.

"Yeah, it's me and Claudette!" he called back.

The words sounded natural, like she was always with him.

"Who?" she asked. "Oh, your lil' friend."

She slurred her words as if she'd said them while falling back into a deep slumber. He turned to Claudette, who was standing beside him like someone caught her sneaking in. Little did she know that Diane wasn't that type of guardian. Girls weren't her worry—his dangerous habits were.

He locked the front door and led Claudette back to his bedroom, ready to see her spread comfortably in his space. As soon as he shut the door behind them both, she did what he'd been obsessively anticipating. She took off her shoes, took the food from his arms and climbed into his bed.

"Hurry, the fries aren't as good when they're cold." She spoke around a mouth full of French fries, making him laugh.

"Damn, you gone eat them all before I even get one."

She stopped chewing—one cheek was puffy and full of fries. "Sorry, I didn't eat before I caught the bus."

He went to the window, taking his own shoes off and dropping her backpack to the floor. He scrolled through the playlists on his phone, looking for something similar to what

played back at the restaurant while she worked. He hooked the phone up to his speaker, finding a random R&B playlist that would suffice.

“Did you leave me something?” he asked, dropping next to her on the bed.

He stretched his long legs out and laid back with her beside him, sitting Indian style. His empty stomach still didn't feel empty. He just itched to smoke the blunt he had stashed in his pocket. He dug through his front pocket, searching for it.

“Here.” A bundle of fries dangled from her fingers in front of his lips.

He opened, accepting them, hoping that it would stop her from fussing over whether he ate. He tucked the blunt into his hand while he pulled his lighter out next, hurrying to light it. Maybe she'd leave him alone since he was occupied.

She didn't.

She pulled out one sandwich she ordered and pulled the wrapper away from it. As soon as he exhaled his first hit of the blunt, the sandwich was in front of his mouth. Her face was relaxed like they shared food all of the time, so he bit into it. It was the blandest thing he'd ever eaten, but he wouldn't tell her that, so he smoked and accepted his bites when she shoved food his way.

Afterward, she laid back beside him, probably floating from the secondhand smoke because she was giddy and even more relaxed than before. He reached over her, pulling out the ashtray he kept underneath the bed and putting the blunt out. They laid similar to the first night he'd brought her there. Maxwell crooned while they laid next to each other. Her attention was his. There was no competing with customers, Roc or the other waiters at her job.

“Are you high?” she whispered, using the same words he'd asked her.

He felt her face turn toward him, but he was still staring at the ceiling.

“Yeah,” he said, laughing at the fact that she remembered him asking her that same question.

He turned toward her. She kept her brown eyes on his. The curl of her lashes made him think back to when he was young and he’d lay with Eve after she’d come home from a night out. He’d watch her long lashes flutter about while she slept restlessly.

“You full, Sunflower?” He reached out, pulling at a coil and watching it pop back into place.

“Mhm,” she hummed, bringing her legs up.

His bed was so small that she was unintentionally curled into his side.

“Why you like sunflowers so much?”

The weed and her being under him like she was, was giving him word vomit.

“My dad used to take me to a sunflower field out in Cumming during the summer. It was our thing.” She let out a yawn between her words. “Guess it’s something that stuck with me after he died. Keeps me close to him.”

Waiting all night for her to be curled up beside him had been worth it. He could wait an eternity for her if she could promise to always have him that relaxed. Her eyes closed, and he thought she’d drifted off to sleep, so he kept staring at her brown face.

“Don’t be weird ‘Nic,” she whispered, her voice laden with sleep.

“‘Nic?” he laughed, surprised by her still being awake and calling him a name that only Eve used.

“Yeah, I was just too lazy to say your entire name.” She smiled with her eyes still closed.

“Okay, Clo’.”

“Clo’?”

“Yeah, Clo’.” He turned his head back toward the ceiling. “It’s cute.”

Just like she was, but he'd never say that out loud though.

He felt her subtly move closer to him. He figured she was getting sleepier, so he said nothing else. The soft rise and fall of her chest was comforting. The tension in his body had been long gone.

“Why d’you get so many tattoos?” she slurred.

“Why you not sleep?” He smiled and turned back to her.

Her eyes were back open and one curl had found itself in her eye.

“Cause I’m supposed to keep you company.” She reached up and her fingers found a new tattoo on his arm she hadn’t touched before.

It was a butterfly that sat on his forearm—one of the first tattoos he’d ever gotten. The design was sloppy because he’d let one of his older neighborhood friends practice on him. Claudette’s fingers traced it, following its jagged lines.

“Why did you get a butterfly?” she asked.

“My mama liked ‘em.” Her finger stopped, and she covered it.

She pinched the skin on his arm, like she was making sure he was real.

“Which one hurt the most?” She let the skin go, rubbing the spot she’d squeezed.

“None of ‘em.”

He wasn’t sober for any of them—even the ones on his neck. In fact, he sometimes liked the stinging sensation. He guessed it was why he tortured himself and went back for more.

She sat up, keeping her eyes on him.

“Can I give you one?” She cheesed like she hadn’t been half asleep just a minute ago.

He laughed and threw an arm above his head, enjoying the look of excitement on her face. She didn’t wait on him to

answer before she got off of the bed and went to her backpack, digging out a permanent marker. She ran back, climbing back into her spot next to him.

“Okay, I need a blank canvas.” She frowned, looking for a piece of him that wasn’t covered in ink.

He turned his head over, exposing one side of his neck that was empty. The honey tone of his skin was smooth with only a dot of a mole there. He was giddy like a little boy as she climbed up next to him.

“You gone tell me what it is?”

“No.” The marker popped as she uncapped it.

Her small hands cupped his neck, adjusting his head to her satisfaction. With gentle, even breaths, she moved close to his ear and placed the cold pointed tip of the marker on his bare skin. One arm stayed behind his head while the other held her at his side.

“Don’t be putting nothing crazy on me,” he said as she traced lines on him.

“Believe me, it won’t be any crazier than what you’ve already got.”

“Hey...” He smiled. “I got some masterpieces on me.”

“True.” She leaned in closer and he felt her hair on his skin. “Don’t worry, you can add this one to your masterpiece list too.”

She stopped and adjusted her position. He held onto her as she stretched her legs out and propped herself up against him. She threw one leg over him and attached her warm body to his.

He’d hardly come across girls that didn’t like to touch him, but Claudette’s touch was less sensual and purer. He could tell she just liked to be underneath him like a little companion—something he wouldn’t complain about.

She concentrated hard on whatever it was she was drawing, filling the role of a pseudo tattoo artist by pretending she had a tattoo gun in her hand.

“Okay, I’m about to shade in the color. Are you ready?” She talked low, still moving the tip of the marker across his skin.

“I’m ready, but don’t go so deep.” He played along, squeezing her side where his hand had been.

“Don’t worry. I’m not heavy-handed.” She pushed the marker hard into his skin and scribbled away.

“Damn, I said not so deep.” She giggled and kept going.

She colored and talked—mostly about nothing, but he didn’t care. He could tell she wanted to dig deeper and ask him more than surface level questions, but she held back. He knew the first time he’d brought her there and let her probe just a little, his abrupt shutdown had hurt her feelings. This time she only asked innocuous things.

“Finished!” She jumped back from his hold and he turned his head to look back at her. “But you can’t look at it until you get back home.”

“Back home from where?” He lifted onto his elbows and watched her climb from his bed again.

“From dropping me off.” She threw the marker back in her bag and put the Vans back on her feet.

This time *she* was ending their night. It caught him off guard because he wasn’t ready to leave her just yet.

“I have a class at eight.” She gathered their trash and scooped her backpack into her arms. “Remember what I said. I’ll know if you peek before you get back.”

“How you gone know if I look?” He stood up from the bed.

“Because I just will. Hurry.”

She rushed them out of the house and back into his car where he granted her wish, dropping her back off on campus. His foot was heavier on the gas pedal on the way back home. He felt silly, but Claudette had a way of making the silliest shit seem cool.

He crept back into the house by himself. Diane didn't bother to call out for him this time—probably in a deeper sleep by now. Hurrying to the small bathroom they all shared, he pushed the door closed, preparing to examine the mark she'd left on him.

It wasn't until he'd saw the swirl and intricate lines of the sunflower that he realized what she'd done. He laughed to himself, touching the ink that was dry. It looked like something she would doodle in her notebook while sitting in class. She scribbled her name underneath it, as if to confirm he didn't have to worry about her going anywhere.

He liked her.

The IT major that owed her money liked her. His name was Eric or Ervin. Whatever it was, Dominic didn't care enough to figure it out. He was lame and everything Claudette should have wanted in a guy, and Dominic hated himself for thinking that. He was clean cut, educated, a fraternity dude—nothing like him.

Claudette sat on the floor of Tony's basement with her legs stretched in front of her with *Ervin's* laptop on her lap. She wore black leggings that molded to her toned thighs and a cropped sweatshirt that drifted higher and higher as the night went on. Eric or Ervin sat so close that he was probably inhaling the coconut scent from her hair and skin.

She had called Dominic in excitement, wanting to meet to talk about some inquiries that sat in the booking email's inbox. Dominic offered to pick her up from campus, but she declined.

“Eric will bring me to you,” she'd said. “He's helping me, remember? You guys can meet.”

Eric. That was his name.

Eric looked at Claudette with starry eyes and teased her in ways that dudes with no game often did because they didn't know how to flirt. He laughed at her corny jokes and leaned in as close as he could when she asked him questions. Dominic could only sit back and watch.

“What you think about this shit D?” Tony asked, breaking his daze.

He stabbed a key on his laptop, and a beat played. He was sitting next to Dominic with a blunt and a red solo cup filled with brown liquor. Dominic had his own cup, awaiting his turn in the rotation they had going. Brown liquor and weed was their secret combination when recording late at night. It was the fuel that kept them going and Dominic could churn out multiple songs in one night while under the influence of both.

Tonight was different. He couldn't focus on the beats Tony had prepared for him. He felt restless and now he had to sit and watch a lame push up on Claudette. The night was turning

into a bust. The brown liquor had made him irritable, and the weed intensified every feeling he felt.

“It’s a’ight.” He hadn’t even been listening to it.

He took the blunt Tony held out and glanced at Claudette out of the corner of his eye.

“Play the one before this one again.”

She pointed to something on the screen of Eric’s laptop and he grabbed her hand to move it from the screen to get a better look at whatever she was referring to.

Dominic blew out a cloud of smoke and leaned back in his chair while Tony played him the beat again.

“Aye... Eric. You wanna hit this?” Dominic asked.

Eric pulled his eyes from Claudette and looked toward him. “Uh, yeah. Yeah. Sure.”

Tony let out a loud guffaw. “You don’t sound sure.”

“I mean yeah.” Eric smirked at Tony’s outburst, and Claudette looked at him while frowning.

Dominic held the blunt out, and he pulled himself from up under Claudette. She squinted her eyes at Dominic as Eric took the blunt from his hand.

“Pull up a chair,” Dominic said.

Eric dragged an extra foldout chair Tony had sitting off to the side and sat it next to him. He took a long pull from the blunt and passed it to Tony, keeping their rotation going.

“What you think about this?” Dominic asked him.

Tony turned the volume up and Eric bopped his head. He would glance up at Dominic now and then as if he had him held at gunpoint, forcing him to listen.

“It’s cool. Seems pretty mellow,” he said as he raked his fingers down the skintight jeans he wore. “I mean, I ain’t a rapper so I have no idea what I should be listening for.”

He rambled as Dominic took two long hits from the blunt. He felt Claudette’s eyes on him, but he ignored her stare.

“You not listening for nothing in particular.” Dominic passed the blunt his way. “I just want to know if you vibe to it or not.”

“Oh. Well yeah, it seems straight.”

Lame.

“Tony, mind if I use your bathroom?” Claudette’s raspy voice called from the floor.

She rose from her spot and stretched, giving Dominic and Eric an eyeful of her taut brown stomach.

“Have at it mama,” Tony said, distracted by the keys and knobs in front of him.

Dominic watched as she floated out of the room, all hair and sass. He turned back to Eric, who still had his eyes glued to her perky ass.

“So, how you know Clo’? You have class with her or somethin’?” Dominic asked.

“Nah, not this semester. I did in the fall though.” He choked out a cough. “She helped me with a few assignments.”

Helped?

“Oh.”

“I was telling her I ain’t know she really listened to rap... let alone knew any rappers,” he laughed.

It was a high-pitched, goofy laugh that made the hairs on Dominic’s arms stand at attention.

“Sounds like you don’t know too much about her then.” Dominic’s head fell back against the chair he sat in as he sized Eric up through heavy eyes.

Eric shifted in his seat and denied the next hit of the blunt.

“Okay, ‘Nic.” Claudette reappeared, unaware of the tension between both men. “Come see.”

His body was heavy from the weed and liquor, but he pulled himself up to follow her coconut scent, leaving the blunt with Tony.

They sank on the floor next to each other and she pulled up a spreadsheet with a list of inquiries.

“These are all the requests we’ve gotten so far. Eric was nice enough to let me borrow his laptop, but I have to give it back, so that means we need to go through everything tonight.”

He frowned at the thought of her having to borrow anything from anyone. He saw Eric out of the corner of his eye, sitting across the room teetering with his phone. Tony ignored him, messing with the intricacies of the beat that had been on repeat since Dominic asked him to replay it.

“I kept the same booking fee if that’s okay with you.” She looked up at him.

“Makes sense.”

“Once you get even bigger and get an actual manager, you can change the price.” She winked, dubbing herself his new faux-manager. “So, what’s the move?”

She spoke as if he was selling records and making copious amounts of money even though he hadn’t made shit.

“Whatever you tell me.” He shrugged with a grin. “It’s your world.”

She laughed. “I think it’s the other way around.”

She took heed to his comment and responded to the inquiries she deemed worthy—which were all of them. She told him she didn’t believe in turning down anything that would give him exposure. This was the part he found tedious and wanted no involvement in.

She and Eric had had some in-depth conversations about him he hadn’t been privy to because she rattled off an intimidating to-do list. They agreed that he needed a Twitter account and unfortunately for him; she created one. He and Claudette bickered over its creation until they decided that she would run the account and use it for promotional purposes only. He refused to sit on his phone and tweet about bullshit all day. It wasn’t him. In fact, none of the things she wanted him to do were things that interested him. He just liked to see her

giddy with excitement and being his pretend manager did that. He'd do whatever she wanted as long as she kept him in the clouds with her like she'd been doing.

Eric's line brother was a photographer and graphic artist who had agreed to shoot promotional pictures and videos for him as long as Claudette paid him in the form of a ten-page Sociology essay. She didn't bat an eyelash at the exchange. Her excuse was that it kept more money in his pockets—not that he cared.

It was close to three in the morning by the time they finished. She showed no signs of exhaustion and had made herself comfortable next to Tony while he showed her how to piece together a beat. Dominic sat on the other side of her, doing nothing in particular, but watching her.

He hadn't realized watching a person learn something could be interesting. But then again, everything she did interested him. He liked to watch her eyes light up with triumph when she understood something Tony explained. His heart pitter pattered when she bit her lip in concentration. It was the tiny things that fucked with his head.

“Claudette, you ready?” Eric asked with a yawn while standing from his seat.

He hadn't interacted with Dominic since their earlier conversation and hadn't said much of anything to anyone but Claudette since then. Dominic determined it was his energy that fucked up the vibe of the night. He wasn't sure why Claudette needed him anyway. She could do it all and more.

She opened her mouth to respond, but Dominic answered before she could.

“I got her.”

“Claudette, are you sure? It's pretty late.” He glanced down at his watch and gripped his laptop tight under the opposite arm. “I really don't mind dropping you off.”

“I guess maybe I should go.” She hunched her shoulders, looking at him and then at Dominic.

“Or... you can stay. I can take you back.” Dominic narrowed his eyes at her and she shrank into her seat.

Eric had moved closer to the door and Tony watched the conversation in amusement. The only thing he was missing was a bag of popcorn.

Claudette blew out a breath and stood.

“Let me just walk you out E.” She rushed through her words. “Nic can bring me back.”

E? She had given him a nickname.

Dominic nodded his head at Eric, who returned the same gesture, before climbing the steps of the basement with Claudette behind him.

“Boy got some fucked up energy,” Tony said with a laugh. “Dude tryna push up on your *girasol*.”

He spun around in his chair and grinned at Dominic.

“She definitely ain’t mine.”

“But you want her to be.”

Dominic laughed and shook his head at Tony. He noticed any and everything.

“Man... don’t start with me.” Dominic waved him off. “Clo’ too smart to fuck with me.”

“A girl that don’t want to fuck with you, ain’t about to waste her time handling your business.”

Leave it up to Tony to sound like a hood fortune cookie. It was true though. In the past he could get girls to do just about anything for him. Boost, fight, put money on his books, pay his phone bill, and they all wanted one thing—him. One of his favorite things to do was to juggle them all. He would fuck one, have one cook his meals, one do his laundry and one run his errands, sometimes all within the same day. But he knew he would never put Claudette in any rotation. Nowadays it was just her that consumed him—nobody else.

“Okay, Tony, Toni, Tone,” Claudette’s raspy voice chirped. “It’s time to play my beat.”

She bounded down the steps with grace and hurried back over to her seat between them.

“Anything for you baby girl.” Tony winked and hit play while she bounced up and down in anticipation.

Dominic looked at her intently. Her energy was through the roof, even though they had been up for the entire night. He thought she would have tapped out by now, wanting to curl into a ball and go to sleep, but she was hanging tough with them without the aid of alcohol or marijuana.

The beat blasted through Tony’s speakers and she turned toward him for approval, making his stomach jump. She was like a little girl wanting to impress the cool kid in school. Her eyes were wide and round while she searched his face for a reaction.

He held back, wanting to keep her on her toes, even though it was the best thing he’d heard all night. The core of it sounded like a trap beat, but she’d slowed it. It had a dark, sexy feeling to it. It was low key, and he loved it.

He nodded his head and she and Tony turned to each other, high-fiving like two nerds.

“Come on ‘Nic, rap over it.” She turned around and clapped.

“Nah...” He tilted his head and couldn’t help but smile at her excitement.

“Come on, why not?”

“Yeah, *why not?*” Tony mocked. “We got to at least lay somethin’ down. You ain’t like nothing I played all night.”

Since Eric left, the wet blanket had been lifted from the room.

“Nah, I just couldn’t vibe.... that’s all.”

“Well, come vibe to this.” She hopped up from the chair and grabbed his hand.

“Wait—here Claudette.” Tony tossed a pair of headphones to her, and she caught them, pulling him toward the booth.

The recording booth he and Tony pieced together was anything but fancy. It was like recording in a broom closet. Tony had plastered the walls with Styrofoam and egg crate mattress toppers to keep the sound contained and make Dominic's vocals as clear as possible. It had one light that was hardly functional that hung above the microphone. He had to push the door closed with his shoulder to make sure it stayed shut.

He turned and found Claudette holding out the headphones for him.

"You keep those," he said, walking toward her.

He saw the rise and fall of her chest, even under the dim lighting in the closet.

"I don't need them... you do." She raked her two front teeth across her bottom lip and he stared before moving toward her.

"Nah." He went behind her and nudged her to the mic.

Tony had the beat on a loop, waiting on him to speak into the mic, but he was too preoccupied with her to say anything, let alone come up with a verse.

"I can't... I'm not rapping," she sputtered out and turned around to face him.

He eased his hands around her waist, and this time he held her in place. His hands roamed up her sides, and he pulled them back before he got too carried away. He wondered if Eric had ever touched her like he had just done? Did he know about her dad? Did he know she liked sunflowers? He didn't even know she liked rap, so what could she see in a dude like him?

"Nic," she whispered.

"Why you bring that dude here?" he asked.

Her face scrunched in confusion. "I told you, he's going to help me with some of the stuff I have planned for you."

"And?" He reached out and ran his hand against the top of her curls she had slicked back. "His energy don't even match yours."

“What are you talking about?” She looked at him, squinting her eyes like she’d done earlier in the night.

He ignored her question and moved his hand from her hair. “Nothin.”

“Can you not do that right now?” She threw her arms up in exasperation.

“Do what Clo’?”

“That stupid thing where you shut down when I ask you too much or push too far.”

The compact space they were in seemed to get tighter. Her eyebrows drew upward, and she had her hands fixed on her hips. He saw the frustration on her face.

Why couldn’t she understand that she had already gotten so much from him? Only she could soften him, make him talk, make him obsess over every inch of her. She just didn’t get it.

“Did he say something to you?” she asked.

He didn’t. But Dominic hated him because of the way he looked at her, the way he spoke her name, and the way he touched her.

“Nah, he didn’t. It’s just....”

“Then what... is.... it?” She dragged her words out.

“Nothin.”

“Just take me home.” She shoved the headphones into his chest and stormed out of the closet.

Fucking Eric and his fucked up energy.

8

“DON’T WORRY, I’LL probably die alone,” Claudette chirped while locking the door to her room.

“Claudette Ardell Goins,” George gasped. “I ain’t ask you about none of that.”

He did—just indirectly. George Marshall Goins’ dying wish was for her to get a BS and an MRS while away at school.

“Well, you asked if I’d met someone grandpa.” She hoisted her backpack higher on her shoulder while walking down the stairs to the lobby of her dorm. “I think I know what that means.”

“Aw hush girl. I was just curious that’s all.” She heard him shuffling around in the background, probably reading the newspaper and drinking his morning coffee. “Now remind me again what time I have to come pick you up on Sunday?”

They were finally on the cusp of Spring Break and she dreaded the week-long vacation. Autumn would be away with her uncle and his new boy toy in Cabo San Lucas and she would be stuck in Marietta helping George toil in his garden and visit his aging friends.

And then there was Dominic. They hadn’t spoken since the night she stormed out of Tony’s basement and demanded he dropped her off. The ride back to campus was quiet, and she’d hardly said goodbye before rushing out of his car. It was only a day ago, but it felt longer. She was still embarrassed about his lukewarm reception to Eric. But that was Dominic—he was confusing.

“Please be here at seven. No pit stops, Grandpa.” She made it onto the sidewalk and shielded her face from the beaming sun.

“Well, I have that old friend out in College Park.” He whistled. “Bertha... Barbara... Damn, I wish I could remember her name.”

“Granny is cursing you out as we speak.”

“She knows I’m a man with needs. Bless her sweet soul.”

She hurried to the science building. The Anatomy and Physiology test she hadn’t studied for was probably being administered as she power-walked across campus while being pestered by George.

“Grandpa, I would love to keep chatting about sex and grandma, but I’m like five minutes from getting docked a letter grade on my A&P exam.”

“Well, it ain’t my fault you’re late girl.” Beads of sweat coated her back underneath the thin white shirt she wore. “I guess I should start giving you my famous wake-up calls again.”

“Please no,” she groaned.

George woke up before sunrise each morning and had made a habit of waking her up whether she was away or at home. He had only stopped because she threatened to block his phone number.

“It sounds like you’re havin’ trouble gettin’ places on time. You know I didn’t raise you that way.”

The age old motto in the Goins household was, *if you’re early you’re on time and if you’re on time you’re late*. Cliché, but effective.

“You’re right old man.” She hurried through the first set of doors that led into the auditorium. “Let’s chat about being on time later. I gotta’ go!”

She hung up before he responded and pushed through the second set of doors.

Thankfully, Professor Gilrich was still administering the tests. She stomped through the aisles in a blood orange pantsuit, flopping tests down in front of each student while Claudette attempted to catch her breath. She slid into an empty seat at the very top of the auditorium.

After saying a quiet prayer she tried to recall the function of the amygdala, but her mind was full of everything but bones, muscles, and the brain. She hadn't studied over the past two weeks, because Dominic had consumed every free moment she had, literally and figuratively. If he wasn't popping up at her job or calling her, he took up the space in her mind that was meant for stupid things like Anatomy and Physiology. Now they weren't even talking because he was being an asshole and he would be the demise of her C in A&P.

Professor Gilrich plopped a midterm on her desk and the sweat that had dried on her forehead reappeared once she read the first question.

“You’re doing what?” Autumn yelled, throwing up her hands.

Her loud screech had garnered some nasty looks from other students in the dining hall.

Claudette’s stomach was already upside down from the midterm she had just failed, and now Autumn was causing a scene while they ate lunch.

She couldn’t win.

“He’s paying me, so it’s not like I’m doing it for free.” She pushed around the dry salad on her plate.

“Well, I would hope the fuck you *are* getting paid.” Autumn narrowed her eyes. “And that’s not even the issue here.”

“Okay, what’s the issue?” Claudette asked with a huff while throwing her fork down on the plate.

“He’s trouble Claudette. I mean, do I have to spell it out for you?”

She knew Autumn would have a less than favorable reaction when she found out she had been helping Dominic, but her reaction was beyond dramatic.

“No, you don’t have to spell it out for me but at least give me the benefit of the doubt. I’m a big girl.”

“Yeah, a big girl who’s never played with big boys.” Autumn leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. “Men like Dominic are full of issues. Issues that you can’t fix. I’m trying not to hurt your feelings here.”

“I think you’ve already hurt them by insulting my emotional intelligence.”

Claudette took a sip of her water and grimaced at the tangy taste of the soda that had gotten mixed in from the dispenser. Autumn was bordering on bitch territory and she could do nothing but stare at her and drink the horrid mixture.

“I’m not trying to insult you. I get it, I was there once.”

Claudette knew the *there*, Autumn was referring to.

They had only known each other for a month when she walked into their dorm room one September night and found Autumn on the floor, hunched over, grasping a plain black t-shirt. Her tears had soaked through the fabric and her eyes were raw with pain. She remembered tip-toeing across the room and dropping to her knees beside an inconsolable Autumn.

The t-shirt she clutched belonged to her high school boyfriend, Jeremiah. He was killed their junior year of high school while arguing with opposing gang members at a party. Autumn told Claudette that she had never felt a pain like she did when he got killed. She said it was like someone split her body open. It was unimaginable. She told Claudette she would never love another boy that clung to the streets, and if she was smart, she would stay away from those types of men too.

“He wants to fuck you.” Autumn splayed her hands over the small table they sat at as if she were laying out a full deck of cards. “And when he does, don’t count on him sticking around to dote on you.”

The blood drained from Claudette’s face. She opened her mouth to respond, but nothing came out.

“Wow... tell me how you really feel.” She pushed her chair back and gathered her belongings and the half-eaten salad. “Thanks for the non-advice.”

Autumn sighed while she stormed off with her dirty dishes in hand and her backpack slung on her shoulder.

“Order up Claudette!” Roc shouted from behind the register.

It was a busy Friday night, and she hadn’t had a break yet. Drunk club-goers filled the diner, talking loudly across the small space. It was the time of the night she dreaded. The clubs had closed and everyone was transitioning to after-hours spots, but not before getting their Waffle House fix.

She hurried from the booth she was cleaning and power walked behind the counter to gather the plates of waffles and bacon for the rowdy bunch of guys who had given her a hard time since they walked in. They purposely dropped forks and spoons so they could watch her pick them up and made suggestive comments towards her.

“About time, damn. I know you can move faster baby-girl,” the one with the gold fronts yelled as she slid their plates onto the table. “Go get me some hot syrup too.”

“I could, but I’m not.” She dropped the last plate on the table and rolled her eyes at him. “Especially not if you’re demanding me to.”

“He just had a little too much to drink ma’am. Don’t pay him no mind,” his clean-cut friend responded. “Could you please get us some hot syrup?”

He smiled at her as if he hadn’t been in on the pestering when he was one of the main culprits. The entire group looked like wannabe thugs dressed in designer knockoffs with empty pockets. Instead of responding to any of them, she headed behind the counter to heat the syrup, although she wanted to do everything but that.

“You a’ight, G?” Roc asked as she passed him in a flurry.

G.

It didn’t sound the same coming from him. She craved to hear it from Dominic because his gravelly voice made her stomach clench with want. It was the second day she hadn’t heard from him, and it was less than twenty-four hours until his appearance at Playhouse. She didn’t bother calling his phone after two of her texts went unanswered. She didn’t want to seem like a pest.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m good,” she replied.

She didn’t know what to do—so she prayed for him. She hadn’t realized what she was doing until the night before, when her brain had been so bogged with thoughts of him that the prayer came out on its own. Her mouth moved silently so she wouldn’t wake Autumn, and she prayed for him until she fell in a fitful sleep.

The syrup she heated in the microwave bubbled as she stood in a trance thinking of her last lonely night on campus with Autumn already being gone and Dominic missing. Shaking the fog from her brain, she pulled the microwave open and hooked her hand around the hot mug of syrup. She maneuvered through the crowded diner with the mug stretched away from her body. Once she made it back to the table full of jerks, she placed the hot syrup in front of the drunk one and left without saying a word. Before she could grasp the broom behind the counter to sweep another dirty booth, a piercing scream caused the chatter in the restaurant to stop.

“That bitch did that shit on purpose!”

It was the drunk jerk with the gold fronts. Hot syrup had spilled onto his lap and he groaned and cursed in a frenzy. Claudette held in a smile as she did her best to force a concerned look on her face. Roc looked back at her and she shrugged in response before he walked over to the table.

She listened as the drunk jerk called her every variation of a bitch that he could think of until Roc stopped him.

“Look motherfucka, call her a bitch again and I’m not comping shit for you or your burnt dick.” Roc squared his shoulders and sized the entire table up.

Their eyes widened at him.

“Aye man, we don’t want no smoke Big Roc,” the clean-cut one said.

They were all quiet.

“Claudette, come over here,” Roc called out.

She almost jumped out of her skin at the way his voice boomed across the building. If he believed anything they said, she had a bridge to sell him. All of the eyes in the restaurant swiveled between her and the table as she dropped the broom and hurried next to Roc.

“I didn’t do anything.” She wrung her hands.

“Bullshit! You dropped that fuckin’ syrup on my lap,” he slurred. “She had an attitude all night.”

Roc looked down at her, and his hardened stare burned deep into her face.

“I’m gone comp ya’ll food but y’all got to get the fuck out.” He gave the table one last *fuck you* look before he walked away with her on his tail.

The drunk one said nothing else. She went back to the broom she dropped and watched as he dabbed his syrup covered lap with napkins that his friends threw his way. They took their time sliding out of the booth, each one giving her a menacing stare before they left for good.

By midnight, the club crowd had subsided. Sweat prickled her armpits as she counted down the last seconds of her shift while sitting in one of the empty booths.

“D bringin’ you home?” Roc asked, while he pushed the barstools up against the counter, attempting to do a few last-minute chores before he left for the night.

They were the last two left in the building and she kept a close watch on the locked door. She wanted to time her departure just-right, so she could walk out at the same time as Roc. Dominic could be a jerk, but at least he would make sure she made it home safe. The one night she needed him, he was missing.

“No, I’m taking the bus.”

“Give me a couple of minutes to finish up. I can bring you.” He pushed the last chair in. “In case them dumb niggas try to come back around.”

She let out a deep breath. He seemed to have read the worried look that was stuck on her face since the group left. The couple of minutes felt more like two seconds, because before she knew it she was looking over her shoulder into the dark parking lot as Roc fiddled with the lock to the door. He jiggled the key one last time and turned to walk toward his truck.

His long locs swung against his back as they walked through the muggy air to his blacked out Tahoe. She looked around, trying to make sure there were no unknown vehicles lurking in the parking lot. As soon as the automatic locks on the truck chirped, she climbed in and slammed the door shut.

“Calm down girl,” he laughed as he got in. “Them dudes ain’t gone fuck with you.”

“You never know. He was really mad.” She held her backpack to her chest. “I swear I didn’t pour syrup on him.”

“I know you didn’t.” The Tahoe crept out of the parking lot, and he turned the air conditioner up. “You one of the few responsible employees I got. I knew they was giving you a hard time.”

At least he realized that.

She did her best to stay out of drama at the diner and was kind to everyone she served, but it seemed as if Roc focused on his most troubled employees the most—like Autumn. She rested her head against the headrest and listened to the soft pitter patter of the wheels against the highway.

“Seem like you got a lot on your mind.” He broke the silence between them, and she tapped her fingers against her backpack.

“I’m good.”

“You good?” He swung his neck to switch lanes. “Sound like you been hangin’ around D too much. Startin’ to sound like him.”

She blew out a raspberry. “Hardly.”

“Trouble in paradise?”

“What is this paradise you speak of? We’re not a couple.” She rolled her eyes. “We were hardly even friends.”

“Damn, he must’ve really fucked up.”

“I haven’t talked to him in a couple of days, actually.”

“So that’s what the foul mood is about?” He smirked, calling her out.

She wanted to pinch herself for talking so much. She didn’t want him to run back and tell Dominic she had been crying over him like a lovesick puppy. Instead of responding, she turned toward the window and watched the passing cars.

“D different—always been,” he said. “He’ll disappear on you for a few days, but he gone always pop back up. Just because he ain’t hit you up in a couple of days don’t mean he not fuckin’ with you no more.”

“That’s hard to believe.” She looked at him from the corner of her eye. “I don’t think he’ll be popping up on me. Maybe you and Mo—not me. He doesn’t owe me anything anyway, so it’s whatever.”

“And that’s where you wrong.” Roc turned up the volume to the radio. “He’ll hit you up. You one of his main priorities.”

She didn’t know what he meant by that, but then she remembered she still had his money. That’s the only reason she could have been one of his main priorities. Other than the money, they had nothing that bound them together.

Once they neared campus, she showed him the way to her building. Campus was almost empty with the last classes being held that afternoon. Most students chose not to go to class at all that day, deciding to get an early start to their Spring Break.

She’d planned to hang around until Sunday because of Dominic’s club appearance, but it seemed as if her plans had changed. She’d call George to pick her up as soon as she woke up in the morning because she needed to get back to Marietta. Dominic had her mind out of whack.

Roc straddled the line of two parking spots—double parking his Tahoe. She hurried and unbuckled her seatbelt,

mumbling a goodnight as she opened the passenger door to climb out. The sound of his lazy drawl halted her movements.

“Remember what I said. He gone pop up, just give him some time,” he called out.

She shrugged and gave him a smile before shutting the door. She knew he was only trying to cheer her up. It was one of those cliché moments where people said what they thought someone wanted to hear to make them feel less crappy.

Dominic was proving to be just what Autumn said he was, and after tomorrow she wouldn't bother with him or his rap career anymore. Anyone that lacked basic communication skills was someone she didn't want to associate with, whether they were an acquaintance or a friend.

Hours later, she had tucked herself deep underneath the sunflower comforter on her bed and fought to make herself fall asleep. She'd forgotten the angry vow she made as she prayed aloud for him again. No matter how much she knew she needed to get him out of her system, he wouldn't leave. Just like the night before, she fell asleep with his name on her lips, asking God to protect him.

But sleep didn't last long again.

She flew up at the shrill ring of her phone. Sweat covered her body and her heart pounded at the unexpected noise. She reached over in the dark and grabbed ahold of the phone, knowing it was most likely Autumn calling from the airport after landing in Mexico from their red eye flight. They had hardly talked since their argument, but she still promised to call once they made it because no matter how much they disagreed, they still cared about one another.

Before she could speak into the phone, a recording sounded from the other end. She pulled it back and looked at the caller ID. Her eyes squinted at the bright screen. It was a local number, so she put the phone back to her ear.

“You have a collect call from,” she frowned, “Dominic DeBlanc.”

Her heart stopped at Dominic's gravelly voice as she fumbled with the comforter that was wrapped around her body like a cocoon.

“An inmate at Fulton County Jail.”

Once she realized what kind of call it was, she moved in a frenzy while listening to the recording. Her fingers trembled as she pushed the correct key to accept the call.

“Claudette.” His hard voice rattled through the phone.

An automated voice beeped in, reminding the both of them they only had two minutes to communicate.

She couldn't move.

“Clo'... listen to me.”

She couldn't talk.

“Clo'... you have to breathe.”

She released the breath she had been holding.

“What the fuck, Dominic?” Her voice sounded foreign to her own ears.

“Clo', I'll let you talk all the shit you want, but you have to listen to me first. Get up.” She listened to his commands. “Call Mo and tell him to bring you to my house. I need you to bail me out. Get a pen and paper.”

She tripped over Autumn's odds and ends she'd left on the floor while searching for the pen and paper. She found a spiral sitting on top of the scattered junk and a pen that had fell beneath her bed.

“Okay. I got them.”

She fell to her hands and knees while he rattled off Mo's number to her and she jotted it down. He explained what she needed to do to get him out. She shook as she took in his instructions.

“Listen to me.” He kept repeating himself. “Are you listening Claudette?”

“I’m listening, ‘Nic.” She blew a breath through her nose, attempting to coax herself into a calmer state.

“You got me, right?”

“Yeah... yeah I do.”

“A’ight, then. You good. Shake this shit off.” The recording beeped in one last time, reminding them they were down to a minute. “I always got you too. Never doubt that.”

9

“YOU’RE NOT GETTING out with me?” Claudette clutched her backpack in one hand and held the handle to the passenger door of Mo’s car with the other.

He ran a hand over his close-shaved head and looked away from her.

“Nah. He gave you the combination.”

She sighed and looked at the front of Dominic’s house. His aunt’s Honda was parked in the driveway and she didn’t know what to do. Walk in and reintroduce herself? Say, *hey, your nephew’s been arrested?*

She got out of Mo’s car and slammed the door shut. After two unanswered calls, he’d finally returned her phone call but only after she texted him saying Dominic was in trouble. Now they were stuck together—with Mo doing the least work.

The house looked just like it did on the nights Dominic brought her there—burglar bars, peeling paint, and the same rose bush in front. It felt familiar, yet strange. Familiar in the sense that she had been there, but strange because of the circumstances in which she had returned.

She hurried across the dark yard and climbed up the steps of the porch. Her stomach flip-flopped the entire way. First, she lightly tapped on the door, but then she tapped harder, thinking no one would ever hear her soft knocks. The porch light flickered as usual, taunting her and making her regret not being brave enough to force Mo out with her.

After a few minutes of her staring at the cracked concrete on the porch, the front door swung open. Instead of Diane, a teenage boy stood behind the screen. He was handsome, with

sharp features and sun kissed brown skin like her own. His hair was cut low like Dominic's with waves just as deep. He had on basketball shorts with no shirt and was built like he spent every waking moment playing any contact sport you could think of.

“Who you?” he asked, pushing the screen door open.

His voice was a deep baritone, like Dominic's.

“Uh... I'm a friend of Dominic's.”

She didn't know how to explain the situation and didn't want to over-talk herself.

“Friend? What kind of friend?” he asked as he looked her up and down with a smirk.

“A friend he called for help.” She hardened her voice and returned the same look.

His smirk turned into a full grin and he looked past her at Mo's idling car parked on the side of the street. His expression changed to one of recognition.

“Oh, you must be the girl with all the heart,” he laughed.

She raised her eyebrows.

“I don't even know what that means, but I'll assume you're related to 'Nic.” She pulled the scrap of paper from her pocket with the information Dominic had given her. “I need you to help me.”

At her request for help, his face softened, and he moved aside.

“Come in and tell me what's goin' on but keep your voice down.”

She eased through the doorway and followed him through the familiar entryway of the house. They took the same route that she was now familiar with and ended up inside of Dominic's bedroom.

“He got arrested,” she said, closing the door behind them.

It was no use in sugarcoating her words. He had been the second person she'd told, and it still felt unnatural coming out of her mouth.

"I need you to show me where he keeps his money at," she added.

"Fuck," the boy swore, but still didn't look as perturbed as most people would in a situation like the one they were in. "You can't get in without the combination."

"Have that." She flashed the paper his way, careful not to expose the numbers on it.

"A'ight, bet."

He walked over to the closet and threw the door open. She came behind him and spotted the large black safe that took up most of the space. Now she understood why Dominic sometimes rummaged through his closet when they hung out. She'd never paid attention to what he was doing.

The boy moved over and she dropped to her knees and began punching in the sequence of numbers Dominic gave her. The door popped open, and she did her best to keep a straight face after seeing what was inside.

There was something unnerving about people's perceptions of someone being confirmed. It made her feel foolish. It was even more difficult when that person consumed her every being.

He paced behind her as she reached a shaky hand inside of the safe. Her mouth had gone dry at the amount of guns and ammunition she saw. She'd never touched a gun in her life and was careful not to even brush a finger against the ones stacked inside. It was like Dominic had been preparing for a war that only he knew about. Autumn's irate voice kept finding its way into her head.

"When he call you?" he asked.

"Just about an hour ago," she responded while picking up an envelope that had her name scrawled on the outside.

She turned it over, feeling it to see if she could figure out what was in it.

After some contemplation, she opened it and found a stack of more one-hundred-dollar bills than she had ever seen at one time. Her mouth opened and then closed. She pulled the envelope back to make sure it was her name written on the outside in jagged letters.

It was.

Her thoughts raced back to their earlier conversation about the money he wanted her to keep, but this was much more than what she had calculated.

“You found it yet?” he asked in a huff.

“Can I ask you something?” She dragged her fingers across Dominic’s handwriting.

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Who are you to Dominic?”

“I’m his first and only cousin,” he replied with his hands plastered behind his head. “Why?”

She dropped the envelope and turned toward him. His handsome face scrunched, and she realized he was the boy from some of the pictures that lined Diane’s hallway. It was him that Dominic and Diane had discussed that first night she came.

“What does he need all this stuff for?” Her eyes were wide as she tried to justify what she was seeing.

“Look Claudette... that ain’t for me to explain to you.”

“You know my name?”

He ignored her question.

“Listen, I’ll tell you this: D been through some shit a lot of dudes don’t even make it out of.” He squatted down to her level and tilted her chin up to look her in the eyes.

She almost melted because it was something Dominic would do, but his brown eyes weren’t as hardened as

Dominic's. They still held a kid-like mystique to them.

“It's easy for people to look at him and the life he lives and judge him, but all that stuff you see in that safe don't define him.” He reached behind her and picked up the envelope she had dropped. “This is the real Dominic. The real Dominic always take cares of his home no matter what.”

“Thank you...” she said, sucking in a breath and looking away.

“My name Josiah, but everybody calls me Jo.”

She mouthed his name while nodding.

“This the money you use to bail him out.” Josiah reached behind her to grab a bank bag that was full and then handed the bank bag and envelope to her. “The money in the envelope is yours.”

She took them, stuffing both in her backpack before shutting the safe.

“Thanks Jo.” She flung her small body into his and he gripped her.

They crept back to the front of the house, being careful not to wake Diane. He watched from the front porch as she hurried back to Mo's car with her backpack hoisted on her shoulder.

Bailing someone out of jail wasn't a quick process like Claudette naively thought.

They were going on hour three and she felt queasy as she sat in the passenger seat of Mo's car. She glued her eyes to the entrance of the jail because it was where Dominic was supposed to walk out.

"I take it you never bailed nobody out?" Mo asked from beside her.

He reclined his seat and shut his eyes.

"Obviously not." She pursed her lips.

She hated that she had to be with someone as grating as him. He hated her, and it showed through his actions and tone.

"Well, you might as well kick back and rest your pretty lil' head because shit like this can take forever." He shuffled around in his seat and threw an arm over his head. "Twelve be quick to throw a nigga in jail over some bullshit but then take they sweet time releasing you. It's fucked up."

"Yeah, I guess," she sighed and checked her phone for the time.

The sun had risen, and she had a series of missed calls from Autumn. She'd been in such a haze from her lack of sleep over the past two days that she'd texted her that Dominic was in trouble. Autumn sent a flurry of texts and called five times after that, but she didn't answer. She didn't want to hear, *I told you so and you should've known better.*

"Bet you ain't never had to worry about dealin' with cops," Mo spat. "Your mama probably kept you under lock and key."

She sucked in the stale air of the car and turned to him. "You don't know anything about me."

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"You right I don't. But I know if D was smart, he'd leave your ass alone." He turned to her with a grimace on his face. "You just a little girl, tryna get some street dick."

She bit her bottom lip so hard she thought it might bleed. Her eyes welled with tears as she pushed the door open and leaped out of the car with her backpack. She refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry over him. She slammed the door closed and went behind the car where she climbed on top of the trunk.

“Hurry ‘Nic,” she groaned to herself as hot tears fell down her cheeks.

Her head lay buried in her lap as she sat with her belongings beside her. She didn’t want to, but she followed Mo’s lead and rested her eyes because there was nothing else to do and no one there to comfort her after their heated exchange.

Two naps later, the cool mid-morning air had turned into a sweltering heat and she rummaged through her bag looking for a headband to push her curls from her face. She had stopped watching the entrance Dominic was supposed to walk out of hours ago because it did nothing but torture her brain. Each time the doors swung open, she’d hold her breath in anticipation, only to be let down when it was someone other than him.

“Why you sittin’ in the heat?” the voice she had craved all morning asked.

She scooped the headband she’d found in her hands and looked up. Her breathing spiked as soon as she saw Dominic’s tired face. He frowned and wiped the sweat from her forehead with his calloused hands, pushing the curls back from her face.

He wore the same clothes from the night they argued and carried all of his belongings in a clear plastic bag. It wasn’t much, because he didn’t carry much with him—just a wad of cash, two cellphones, and a lighter.

“Finally....” she exhaled and looked up at his caramel face.

“Why you out here?” he asked again.

She ignored his question and busied herself with the headband. He held her hair back as she pulled the striped band

up over her face and let it snap into place. The creaking of the car door opening made her body tense, and she frowned at the sound of Mo's voice.

“About fuckin’ time nigga.” Dominic kept his eyes on her for a beat and then moved from in front of her to greet Mo.

She watched as they dapped hands.

“You know they don’t be in a rush,” he said as they released hands with a snap. “Think you can bring me and Clo’ to get my car? It’s at some lot on the fuckin’ Northside.”

She wanted to throw a fit, but she didn’t.

“Yeah. You know I got you.”

She stayed quiet.

In the car, she listened from the backseat as Dominic gave vague details about what had happened since she’d last seen him.

“Some bullshit. He say I ran a stop sign, but you know they be fucking with me ‘cause my car. Motherfucka’ searched my shit,” he’d said.

“Yeah, I got court in a couple weeks. It’s all good though.”

He talked nonchalantly. He didn’t seem stressed or upset—only tired. She wondered how many times he’d gone through that process and wondered if she’d be expected to deal with the aftereffects if it happened again.

He didn’t say much else. It was like he was being tight-lipped because he knew she was there listening.

“You mad at me?” he asked, sprawled across her sunflower covered bed with her sitting up next to him.

He was in basketball shorts and nothing else. It was the first time she’d seen him so bare, and she had to remind herself to keep her eyes on his face. He was skinny, but solidly built, like maybe he’d spent time in the gym. Muscles poked from his long arms—teasing her. She thought she’d seen most of his tattoos, but she’d only scratched the surface.

“No,” she replied as her eyes scoured the mural of a machine gun he had etched right about the waistband of his briefs that peeked from underneath his basketball shorts.

Her eyes burned because she’d been awake for so long. She knew he’d been awake for even longer, but he was alert and staring up at her with a look on his face that she couldn’t decipher. She’d been quiet since his release, and she could tell it bothered him.

“You should be,” he said, turning away from her and staring at the ceiling.

There was a deep scar that stretched underneath his left pectoral. The flesh was bright—brighter than his beige toned skin. There was an intricate tattoo of a heart split into two parts in the center of his chest.

“Why should I be mad at you?” Her fingers twitched, aching to touch each part of him that her eyes explored.

She *had* been mad, but her emotions wouldn’t stick with him. Her anger came and went. It floated off into the clouds once his rough hands had wiped the sweat from her forehead.

“You must go ‘round bailing dudes out of jail all the time then, huh?”

She swallowed, and her small mouth opened a little.

“No.” Her fingers moved to a flower on her bedspread, tracing it to keep themselves occupied so they wouldn’t go off touching him. “I mean, you’re the only guy I ever really hu—never mind.”

She shut herself up and forced her eyes back down to the flower. He didn't need to know that she'd hardly talked or hung out with boys in the way she had with him.

"I'm the only guy that you... what?" He turned his head over, casting a lazy gaze at her.

"Nothing." She smiled, hoping his mind would wander to something else.

"Why you like hanging out with me anyway?" He turned his head back and closed his eyes.

She looked up from the bedspread and went back to exploring his chest.

"You asked me to help you." She shuffled back on the bed, resting her back against the wall while he brooded.

"Yeah, but you ain't got to fuck with me outside of that."

She could say the same for him, but she didn't say it out loud.

"I know you got better shit to do besides be with me."

She let him ramble. He was the angry one and she couldn't understand why, so she let him vent with his eyes closed while she studied the tattoos on his body.

"You ain't in no clubs or nothing?" There were skulls, bones, and numbers. "Yo folks would have a fit if they knew you was bailing niggas out of jail."

She'd spotted a moneybag, a cross, and another gun.

"You don't ever hang out with them dudes you write for?" His eyes were still closed, and he reached up to scratch above his eyelid.

He kept talking as if she were talking back.

"I shouldn't have even called you bro. I don't even know what I was thinking." His pink lips moved a mile a minute and her breathing became shallow. "You hear me?"

She blinked hard, closing her mouth that was slightly open. His tone was so grating she wanted to melt into the wall.

“Why the fuck are—” He opened his eyes.

His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. Her chest was rising and falling so fast she thought she’d start hyperventilating. He sat up with the most menacing frown she’d ever seen.

“Why you not saying nothing?” he asked, moving his face close to hers.

The coarse curls on her head tickled her neck as she smashed her head into the wall. She didn’t know where to look so she kept her eyes on his chest where the mutilated heart stared back at her. She saw his hand raise out of the corner of her eyes and she flinched.

“What’s wrong?” The hand landed in her hair where he tugged, pulling her into him.

He pulled until she was on top of him, with both legs straddling his lap.

“You’re mad and I didn’t know why or what you were go—”

“You thought I would hurt you?” he asked, pushing her body into his as hard as he could.

They were so close together they may as well have been one. The warmth of his body made her tingle and the middle of her spandex shorts had become wet, just like that night he came to her job. She could have dissolved right there.

He let go of her body and his hands went to her head where they buried themselves in her wild mane, pushing it back from her face. She knew he’d never hurt her; she just couldn’t comprehend his emotions.

“Why’re you mad at me?” she asked while his heavy hands still pushed her hair back.

Her raspy voice sounded meek to her own ears, and he smiled, dropping his forehead onto hers.

“I’m not mad at you Clo’.” She inhaled him, savoring the closeness of their bodies. “You make it real hard for a nigga to be mad at you.”

His long arms went back around her, pulling them both down into her bed of sunflowers. She clung to him, trying to squeeze all the anger from his body.

They laid together listening to each other's soft breaths. Their legs intertwined and arms around each other—neither one of them moved. His arms were the physical manifestation of comfort for her. Sleep crept up her limbs and made them limp. Her eyes followed, fluttering closed.

She could tell he was still awake, because his hands found themselves in her hair again.

10

ANGER WAS LIKE his second language. Sometimes it was the only way he knew how to respond to situations. A raised voice here and a curse word there seemed to solve most of his frustrations.

This time it didn't solve shit. It scared Claudette, making her cower in fear. Her baby face had frozen. Her eyes had grown as big as saucers. He thought she'd yell back and curse him out for waking her up in the wee hours of the morning to bail him out of jail for his stupidity, but she never did. The calm she exuded grated on his nerves, because she was supposed to be angry at him. She was supposed to realize that she was too good to even be friends with him.

His anger had pushed her closer to him. She slept peacefully, curled in his arms. He watched her—obsessing over the way her little mouth hung open. Each time he moved closer to get just a slight taste of her, she'd sigh as if she were warning him he'd better not do such a thing.

Her head laid right next to his. Coconut was in everything on her side of the room. It was in her pillows, her blankets, her clothing. She wouldn't let him move, whining as soon as his head would lift. It had been an hour since he'd gotten the urge to pee, but she draped one of her arms across his chest with a hand tucked underneath his back to lock him into place.

That pouty mouth he wanted so bad closed and opened again. It teased him with the cutest Cupid's bow. He wondered if she always slept that way—like she was in perfect euphoria. He wanted to be in her head and experience it for himself.

“Nic?” His name came from her mouth in a whisper.

“What’s up, G?” He moved his face closer to hers, wondering what was wrong.

She hadn’t opened her eyes—the lids were still sealed. He waited for them to open so she could tell him what was wrong. A soft breath tickled his nose, and she said his name again.

“What’s wrong Clo’?” He cleared his throat and raised his voice, thinking he hadn’t been loud enough.

Her eyes still hadn’t opened.

It wasn’t until his name fell from her lips for a third time that he realized she was dreaming. Her eyelids fluttered, and she breathed. Her breathing turned into a soft groan. Whatever he was doing in her dreams had her unwound. Ignoring his urge to pee, he moved closer to her face. His eyes went from her smooth forehead down to her button nose.

“Clo’, wake up,” he said, pushing his nose against hers.

She sucked in a breath and gripped him tighter. No one had ever clung to him like she did. He watched her face slump into a frown—his name was back on her lips and her arm tightened its hold once again.

“Clo’, get up.” His chest tightened.

That pretty mouth of hers closed once again, and this time he ignored its warning. *Fuck it, he needed to taste them.* They were the cutest set of lips he’d ever seen. He didn’t mule over his actions any longer. As soon as they fell open again, he covered them. They were soft and smaller than his. She was still in a deep sleep, so he took his time, pecking them as slowly as he could.

She stirred and her eyes flew open as soon as he went down for another. Reaching up, his fingers found her eyes where he wiped the tiny remnants of sleep from them. Their bodies were so close together that he felt feel the heavy beating of her heart. It was when her lips didn’t pucker back in response that it dawned on him.

He peeled his lips from hers, looking into her uncertain eyes.

“You ain’t never kissed nobody before, huh?” She looked away and his eyes chased hers.

Instead of responding, she rubbed one eye with the back of her hand that she didn’t have tucked underneath him. Deep down, he’d already known. The look she gave him was just the confirmation. She buried her head in the crook of his neck like she was hiding. It had been so long since he’d been someone’s first anything. It was comical, yet there he was, still cradling her in his arms.

“Why you hiding from me?”

“Cause...” Her voice was muffled and her breath was warm against his neck.

“Cause why?” He pushed at her, making her peel her body from his.

She tried her best to stay attached to him. Her face stayed in his neck, but he made her detach the lower half of her body from him.

“It’s embarrassing,” she said jumbling her words together.

He held his arm out, still pushing her body away from his even though it killed him. She was trying to hide herself from him. Coconut coils fanned over his neck and cheek.

“Nah, it really ain’t,” he said, breathing in the smell of her hair. “You wanna’ know what’s embarrassing?”

“What?” she whispered into his neck.

He stared back at the ceiling, still keeping her at arm’s length even though he could feel the want radiating from her body.

“I got this friend, right?”

“Mhm.” Her eyelashes tickled his neck.

“She look at me and see all the potential I got.” He stopped, smiling at the flutters on his neck. “Only my mama ever looked at me like that.”

Eve’s laughter filled his head. It was soft, just like she was. They would laugh until their sides felt like they would split

open. She was his personal hype man, as he rapped around their junky motel room.

“Even after I fuck up, she still be there looking at me like... like I’m the fucking sun.” She brought a hand to his face, brushing her fingers down it. “When really I ain’t shit though.”

She sucked in a breath and flew up from beside him, throwing her legs across his lap. The spandex shorts she wore molded to her thighs.

He was done talking. He had said more than he should have.

“Can you show me?” she asked.

The baby tee she wore rode up, exposing her brown stomach and his hands automatically grabbed her sides.

“Show you what, G?” He knew what she was asking, but he wanted her to say it out loud for his own pleasure.

“You know... how to... how to kiss?” She wasn’t confident in her words, stammering through them.

“Is that what you want?” Her coils rocked back and forth as she nodded.

He smiled and pulled her down toward him. They were chest to chest and face to face. His hands found her hair, entangling themselves in it.

“Wait!” She jolted up, making his hands fall.

“What’s wrong?”

“You *are* the sun—at least to me you are.” She grinned and fell back toward his face, crashing her lips into his.

It was like he was thirteen again. Their bodies ground together like two teenagers forbidden to see each other. Everything about her kisses were urgent, like she was kissing him for the first and last time. She tasted sweet, and he wondered if every part of her body tasted like that.

“Slow down.” He peeled his mouth from hers. “I’m not going nowhere.”

He hadn’t been teaching her like she’d asked—just letting her explore him until she felt she’d had enough. She smiled, sucking on her bottom lip and biting down. That look she gave was the best look. It made him want to do shit he knew he wasn’t supposed to.

“You trust me, right?” he asked, running his hands up and down her thighs.

She nodded, rocking back and forth on his lap. He knew she could feel him through the thin material of his briefs and basketball shorts.

“Good.” He reached forward, grabbing the nape of her neck and pulling her down toward his face. “Let me show you something.”

He stuck his tongue out and traced the outline of her lips while her little body continued to rock against him and squirm in his lap.

“Open for me,” he said, pulling away and talking against her lips.

She listened, and her mouth opened. His tongue found its way inside, sliding against hers. He took his time exploring it—writing his name throughout it. She found his rhythm and their tongues danced in unison. Her kisses were less urgent than before.

She’d had her fun, and now it was time for him to teach.

His eyes wouldn’t stay closed, because he wanted to see how much she was enjoying the way his tongue snaked around her mouth. She whimpered instead of moaning and he pulled away, nipping at her bottom lip.

“Is that what you like?” she asked, closing her eyes and biting down where he’d just bit with a smile.

“You don’t need to worry about what I like right now.” He stole another peck.

She opened her eyes back and let them roam his body.

“Why not?” she asked, stopping at the deep scar on his chest.

“Cause it’s all about you right now.” She touched the scar, dragging a finger across it as if she’d been waiting all of her life to explore him.

“But what if I want to make you feel good too?” Her finger stopped, and she fell forward onto him.

“You already make me feel good.” He followed her lead, letting his hands roam down to her pert butt—squeezing it. “But I can show you what I like if you for real.”

He smirked at the heavy sound of her breathing. Everything about her made his head spin. She was full of energy and curiosity, making him want to say fuck it and give her whatever she wanted. He remembered thinking how much of a sucker her dude would be when he’d first laid eyes on her and now he’d fallen into her trap.

“You want that?” He squeezed again.

Instead of giving him a verbal answer, she nodded, committing her first infraction. He reached for her coils and pulled her head up, covering the front of her neck with his mouth.

“Answer me.” He sucked her neck and pulled at her hair.

She nodded again, whimpering.

“Nuh uh. I don’t like that. I thought you said you wanted to know what I like?” He pulled at her hair again and moved back up to her mouth. “I thought you were my G? You not acting like it.”

“I... I am.” She answered like she was struggling to keep her thoughts together.

His lips teased hers as he held onto a fistful of her hair, enjoying the way she yielded to him.

“I like for my G to use her words when I ask her a question.” He yanked her head closer, still teasing her. “I don’t fuck with that nodding shit. You talk to me. You understand?”

Her head started to go up and down, but she stopped it.

“Ye-yeah ‘Nic. I understand.” She rushed her words out.

He attacked her mouth, shoving his tongue inside and gripping her. She still didn’t moan, just whimpered—something else he’d break her out of.

He sucked and kissed her so hard that by the time he pulled away, her tiny mouth was swollen. He reached out, wiping it clean and checking to see how she’d respond to him taking his lips away. She whined, rocking harder against him. Her mouth turned down in a pout and he wanted her so bad it hurt.

“I guess I got to break shit down to you,” he said, with her cheeks smashed between his large hand.

He let go, shaking his head at the way her arousal had consumed her. She was so turned on that sweat had coated her forehead and her pupils dilated like she’d taken a hit of something.

“Sometimes I like good girls that listen.” He fixed her wild coils that he’d yanked and pulled around. “And sometimes I like bad girls that talk a lil’ shit.”

“I give good girls that listen whatever they ask for, but the bad ones... the bad ones get punished.” He smiled a menacing smile and dragged her from his hardened member onto his taut stomach so he could feel the warmth coming from her shorts.

“Are you gone be a good girl for me or a bad one?” He felt more than warmth—he felt wetness.

It was then that he’d realized that there was no going back. He’d fucked up.

She breathed hard, smiling down at him after he’d asked the question. She looked so good to him, so innocent like

always.

“I’m going to be…” She dragged the sentence out, moving her hips, using him to satisfy herself. “I’m going to be…”

She sighed and continued smiling down at him.

“What you gonna be, G?” He reached forward, placing two long fingers between his skin and the fabric of her shorts. “I’m waiting… and that’s some other shit I don’t like.”

Her mouth opened wide, and she closed her eyes at the feel of his fingers touching her, even though the fabric of her shorts had created a barrier between her body and his fingers.

“I’m going to be,” she hummed to herself like it was just her there alone. “bad.”

She rushed out the word and moved her hips fast against his fingers, but he yanked them from underneath her.

“See, I knew you was my fucking G.” He kissed his teeth and shook his head with a smile.

She didn’t have time to comprehend what was happening before he had both of her arms gripped behind her back and his other hand shoved down her shorts.

He wanted to punish her for making him so delirious all of the time. It was like she’d packed her shit and moved right into his head with no plans of going anywhere. His thoughts weren’t even his anymore. They belonged to Claudette, and she knew it.

She was so wet and so tight that he could only fit one finger inside of her. He massaged her walls, listening as she groaned in a mixture of pleasure and pain.

“You ever touch yourself Clo’?” he asked.

She nodded, and he pulled her arms tighter—warning her.

“Yeah, but I-I never put my finger *there*,” she whispered the last part, almost as if she were embarrassed to tell him.

His thumb found its way to the nub of nerves he knew would bring her the most pleasure. He massaged it in wide circles, watching her jerk above him.

“It’s all good.” He pushed deeper, distracting her with his thumb. “You won’t ever need to anyway, ‘cause I’m a selfish nigga. I won’t share—not even with you.”

She sucked in a breath, and her mouth opened wide at his confession. He was only selfish with her. Just the thought of anybody else making her feel the pleasure he was making her feel made his blood grow cold.

“You see how I punish bad girls Clo’?” His finger moved in and out as fast as her tight walls would allow.

“Nic...” She was pleading with him, probably on the verge.

“What’s the matter?” His eyes fell down to her small breasts pushed against the fabric of her thin t-shirt.

He saw her hard nipples poking out in a rage, begging to be free.

“I-I think... I think...” She was stammering, trying to comprehend what was happening.

“You want to cum?” he asked, leaning forward to catch a nipple between his teeth.

She nodded her head, but he didn’t care. His finger stopped moving and his thumb hovered over the nub of nerves. He let go of her tiny nipple that he was biting through her t-shirt so he could see her face. It was flushed with panic. Her hips kept moving as she fought to rub against him, but he tightened his hold on her.

“Oh, you thought you got to call the shots?” he asked, laughing. “That ain’t how it work. I say when it’s time for you to cum. Understand?”

“Yeah.” She nodded, being a good girl and listening just like he’d taught her.

He flicked his thumb one last time while shoving the remaining length of his finger inside of her. “And when I make you cum, I want to hear my name come out that pretty mouth.”

She screamed his name so loud that the entire building had probably learned that he had taught Claudette what an orgasm

felt like. Her walls clenched his finger in spasms. It was as if she'd felt nothing close to what he'd done for her. Pulling his finger from her cushioned walls made his heart empty, but her satisfied smile filled it right back up. He brought his wet finger up to her lips.

“Open.” She listened, opening them wide and accepting it into her mouth where she suckled on it.

He groaned, knowing that this was the beginning of the end.

“This is why you my favorite,” he said, pulling his finger from her mouth with a pop.

“Bro, what the fuck is going on?” Vaughn’s voice echoed across Claudette’s dorm room.

Dominic wiped the sleep from his eyes and watched as she rummaged through drawers of clothing. The lust and excitement dissolved as they both awoke to his ringing phone. Before that, he had fallen into the deepest sleep he ever experienced as an adult. When he woke up, she had her tiny arms wrapped around him, squeezing him with all the energy she could muster while in a deep sleep of her own. She tucked her legs in between his and he could remember her face being set in a frown.

She pulled out t-shirts and underwear, folding them into a neat pile as he watched her. She was packing for Spring Break—she’d told him in a flurry of slurred sentences before she fell asleep that she’d be leaving the next day for an entire week. His stomach ached like someone had gutted him with a knife.

“Man... if you want to take me off the bill, I get it.” He ran a hand down his face.

He’d fucked up, but it wasn’t the first time he had. It was his life, and he was aware of the consequences of how he lived it. The bad thing about dealing with the consequences was preparing those around him for the aftereffects of his dumb decisions.

“Listen to me Dough,” Vaughn said. “You’re so talented man, but you have to change the way you move brother. Believe me, I’ve been there. The stress of having to feed and take care of your family ain’t nothing nice, but you got to go legit.”

“I hear you.” He listened, but Vaughn’s words didn’t set in.

He was too busy watching Claudette and reminiscing about the way her raspy voice screamed his name in ecstasy just an hour ago. She was bent over, pulling a duffle bag from her closet.

“You at least got a lawyer, right?” She pulled her head from inside the closet and turned to look at him.

“Nah...” He cocked his head to the side at the worried look that passed over her face.

He *had* a lawyer that he could no longer afford after Claudette bailed him out of jail with all the money he’d saved over the past few months.

“Fuck, Dough.” Vaughn’s frustration was evident, even over the phone. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“Look, I appreciate everything man, but it’s all good.”

Wasn’t no use in crying over spilled milk. He’d taken shitty court-appointed lawyers in the past and ate his charges. Sitting in the county wasn’t a walk in the park, but he wasn’t a stranger to it.

“No, it’s not all good. I still want you here tonight, but I want you to contact my lawyer as soon as possible.”

“I appreciate that man, but like I said, it’s all good. I’ll come through tonight if you still want me to, but I can figure out the lawyer situation myself.”

He hadn’t even seen Claudette move from her position by the closet—it’s like he’d blinked and she was there in front of him, peeling the phone from his hands. He reached forward to take it back, but she shoved him and walked off with it.

“Dough, this guy is legit. You need someone like him on your team,” Vaughn stressed.

“He’ll contact him Vaughn, just text him the information,” she blurted into the phone.

Dominic shoved himself up from the bed and walked toward her. She turned her back to him and they wrestled over the phone.

“Autumn’s roommate?” Vaughn asked.

Her unique voice wasn’t hard to pinpoint. She held the phone out, away from Dominic, and he gripped her from behind, reaching for it.

“Yeah, it’s me...” she confirmed awkwardly. “He’ll be there tonight and he’ll contact the lawyer. I’ll make sure he

does.”

She turned back toward him and shoved the phone in his chest.

“Leave it to a woman to get shit done,” Vaughn chuckled. “Dough listen to her. In the thirty-eight years I’ve been on this earth, the greatest lesson I’ve learned is that our women know best.”

The call ended, and he tossed the phone on the bed, glaring at Claudette, who’d gone back to packing like she had done nothing.

“Why you tell him that? I can’t afford that nigga’s lawyer.”

He had no clue what she’d been thinking. He wasn’t about to waste anybody’s time or take handouts from a dude who probably couldn’t even remember what it was like to be broke.

“You don’t know that.” She threw a shirt down that she had in her hand and crossed her arms.

“I’m telling you I don’t have the fuckin’ money. I can’t even afford the lawyer I *had*.”

It was hard for him to admit, but he knew Claudette was pure. She was one of those nonjudgmental souls who tried to fix things for people they cared about.

“We have money.” She pushed herself up from the floor and stomped over to her closet, bumping his hard shoulder on her way.

She dug through it, moving things around and then turning to him with an envelope in her hand. She tossed it on the bed and went back inside where she pulled out a shoebox.

“What’s all that?” he asked, laughing.

He was amused because of her defiance and because she’d taken her promise to him so serious. She brought the shoebox to the bed and sat it next to the envelope. He walked over, already knowing what she was referring to. He recognized his handwriting on the envelope and saw the logo of Vaughn’s company once she pulled the lid of the shoebox open.

“Now, I don’t want to hear anything about not having it.” She stood with her arms crossed. “And there’s still the rest of the money you get from Vaughn tonight.”

They stared at each other in silence. Her eyes were red and her face was full of stress. He knew he’d caused both. It was why he shouldn’t have touched her—shouldn’t have involved her in any of his shit.

“And don’t you dare tell me we won’t use it for a lawyer, because I promised you I had your back and you promised me you had mine.”

He blew out a breath and turned from her, shaking his head.

What could he offer to a girl that was braver, stronger, and smarter than he was?

Rap fans were strange, and rappers were even stranger. They both admired infamy and authenticity. The more nefarious and authentic a rapper's reputation was, the more appealing they were to their listeners. It said a lot about a rapper when he could perfect a bar about the unique ways he could hit a lick or load up a gun and run down on his enemies, but it said even more when that rapper lived that bar.

Vaughn told Dominic that word had spread about his arrest and his ability to bail out quickly. The demand for tickets to see him perform skyrocketed. VIP sections went for outrageous amounts and over a thousand presale tickets sold. It was a sold-out show, hence his eagerness for Dominic to show up even while out on bail.

It was close to midnight and Dominic felt the energy of the club oozing through his pores. Thousands of pairs of eyes staring at him should've terrified him, but it didn't. It fueled him. He hadn't indulged in weed or alcohol per his bail conditions, but he didn't need either of them this time. He stood in front of the entire club wearing jeans, a white t-shirt, and icy white Air Force Ones—no jewelry. He'd always been a dude that could go plain jane and still impress people.

When Mo said his name brought the hood out. It was true. His neighborhood stood thirty deep on the stage with him—Mo, Josiah, and Tony included. They were his fans before he had any genuine fans, so it was only right that they experienced the moment with him.

Once the bass dropped to his most well-known song, the crowd rocked, rapping every word for him. He stood with his mic toward the audience, hyping them up, getting a high from hearing his own lyrics recited to him. The flash from people recording on their phones broke through the hazy atmosphere of the club. It was surreal.

He turned from the crowd with a wide grin on his face, searching for that familiar puff of hair that had become his de facto comfort zone. She stood in a VIP section above the stage with Vaughn, staring at him, rapping along like she was his

biggest fan, when they'd only been strangers to one another just a few weeks ago.

Typically, before a show, he and Mo would get as high as they could. Once, they'd gotten so fucked up that he showed up an hour late to a performance. It was at a local hole in the wall strip club that was more famous for its shootouts rather than its dancers. The promoter refused to give him the money he owed him, even after he'd performed an extra hour to make up for the lost time. He and Mo ended up airing the club out and collecting every cent he owed him.

This time he'd snuck off into a stall in the women's bathroom with Claudette, where they made out until he only had five minutes to get on the stage. The rest of his close friends partied in the VIP section meant for him, where they drank the bottles Vaughn provided and partied—hardly noticing that he'd disappeared.

“They're gonna be looking for you,” she'd said through heavy breaths as he suckled on her neck.

“Nah, them niggas too busy getting fucked up off free bottles.” He gripped her and hoisted her against the stall door. “Let me enjoy you.”

Dominic hated planned parties; especially planned parties thrown in his honor. Not because of pretentious reasons, but because lengthy periods of time being forced to socialize with others drained him.

He stumbled through the Airbnb that Mo had booked to celebrate his performance. He wasn't supposed to drink or smoke, but someone had shoved a Hennessy bottle in his hand as soon as he walked inside and he drank from it ever since.

It was his night, so fuck it.

They were in the middle of North Buckhead, in one of the many McMansions nestled within the gated community. It was full of elegant chandeliers and luxe white furniture that wouldn't be white when they left in the morning. Everything was over the top, like they were on the set of a music video with a house party as the backdrop. The house accommodated up to ten people, but at least fifty were there. Music blasted and a haze of smoke settled into the air. He scoured the property, going from room to room, with the Hennessy bottle in one hand and a blunt in the other.

"Man, what the fuck?" Josiah asked, opening the bathroom door Dominic shook.

The button and zipper of his jeans were open and Dominic saw the curly hair of a girl that giggled behind him.

"My fault," Dominic slurred, wiping the back of his mouth.

"Yeah, yo' fault. What you doing anyway? Why you opening up doors like that?" He moved to zip up his fly.

"Where Claudette?"

Josiah sighed, pulling the girl out of the bathroom while shoving him out of the frame of the door. He was dangerously close to drunk and had been hunting for her. He hadn't seen her since they stepped inside of the house where acquaintances, admirers, and very few friends engulfed him.

"Last time I saw her, she said she was going outside to sit on the deck!" he shouted the last bit over his shoulder as he

dragged his newfound plaything back out into the party.

Although he was tipsy, Dominic knew to avoid the living room where everyone hung out, unless he wanted to get pulled away from his mission. He clutched the blunt and bottle and snuck through the backdoor connected to the kitchen.

After climbing the lit steps up toward the wooden deck, he saw her red painted toes. They dangled from the wicker couch she was stretched across. The white sneakers she wore sat on the ground beside her. Her hands rested behind her head and she laid back. He stood back and observed her. It was his newfound hobby that put him at ease.

Visions of her body thrusting in front of him had haunted him all night. He still couldn't believe that he had probably been the first to make her scream the way she did and climax so beautifully.

“Why're you being weird?” she asked.

Her raspy voice held a hint of amusement.

“I can't watch you?” He approached the couch she laid on from the back and stood above her.

She still hadn't turned to look at him and her eyes were closed.

“It's your world,” she said, quoting him.

He smiled, because she was wrong. It was her world, and he was the simp she had eating out of the palm of her hands.

“You believe that?” he asked.

“Yup.”

He walked around and stood in front of her. Her eyes were still closed, her toes still wiggled. He sat the Hennessy bottle and blunt on the ground and picked her legs up, easing underneath them like he'd done in the past.

“So you just livin' in it, huh?”

“Yup,” she smiled.

“You like it?”

“I love it.”

The smile fell from her face and she bit down into her bottom lip like she had earlier that day when he had his hand down her shorts. If he didn't have any self-control, he would have stripped her naked. His breathing spiked as he thought about the week ahead of him.

She opened her eyes and lifted. A smirk had settled on her pouty lips. He stared as she reached down where he dropped the blunt and Hennessy. He thought she was going for the liquor, but she reached for the blunt instead.

“What you doin'?” He laid back and watched her through glassy eyes.

In one swift motion, she climbed onto his lap and placed the blunt to his closed lips.

“Open.”

His lips parted, and she placed it between them. Her hand snaked into his front right pocket where she found the lighter he kept there because she'd been watching him too. She lit it and he took a long drag. He felt the strain of his member against the jeans he wore. He was like an addict now that he had tasted her. He took the blunt from his lips and blew out a cloud of smoke. She put her face in it with closed eyes.

“A whole week by myself, huh?” he asked as he placed his free hand behind her head.

“I think you'll be just fine without me.”

“You right. I guess I'm gone have to thug it out alone.” His fingers dug into her hair.

He took a long pull from the blunt and pulled her face to his. He was high and still tipsy from the Hennessy, so every movement was slowed, every breath was intense, and it all felt so good. He wasn't sure who moved first, but their lips crashed into each other's, pecking one another—once and then twice. Her lips opened, and he blew the smoke into her mouth in one succinct motion. She kept it closed for a few seconds, remembering what he'd showed her, and then opened it, letting the smoke billow out. He looked through lazy eyes,

enjoying the look of euphoria that washed over her innocent face.

“Why you came out here?” he asked, leaning back with one hand at her waist and the other holding onto the blunt.

She shrugged—her eyes already growing red.

“Just needed a minute alone. I don’t think I’ve ever partied for this many hours.” Her body swayed on his lap like she was dizzy. “Why’re you out here?”

He took another hit and rubbed the spot where his hand rested, itching to attack her lips. His shirt was wound between her fingers and her eyes were closed as they talked.

“Cause you are,” he replied after blowing out another plume of smoke. “I been looking everywhere for you; you know that right?”

“No. I thought you were hanging out with your friends.” Her voice was quiet, and she licked her lips.

“I don’t even know half them folks.” He pulled her in closer. “I thought my partner in crime had left me.”

His body tensed each time he’d left another room that she wasn’t in. It made him chug more and more liquor to make the feeling disappear, and now it was biting him in the ass because his mouth wouldn’t stay shut.

She was glued to his side the entire night as if they’d always been that way. She didn’t cling—just hung by his side like a homie. After his performance they hung out in his section for a while, vibing, making sure every drop of free liquor disappeared. Every now and then Josiah would pull her with him and they’d dance. Her arms would lift and he would suck in a breath at the sight of her cropped hoody rising further up her stomach. Josiah would let her do her, keeping his hands in innocent areas because he knew Dominic was watching. Each time they’d finish, she’d float back next to him.

“I take my friendships serious.” She opened one eye and then opened the other.

“What you talking about, G?” he asked with a laugh.

Getting Claudette high was like rolling dice—he didn’t know what he’d get.

“I’m not one of those part-time friends.” She leaned her head back, exposing her long neck.

“What that mean?”

He leaned forward, running his nose across it, trying to savor every second of her.

“You know—one of those friends you’re not sure about. They’re cool to hang around, but you couldn’t trust them with your darkest secrets.” He moved his face from her neck and leaned back again. “They leave you when you need them the most.”

“Oh yeah?” His eyebrows raised.

“Yeah... that’s not me,” she said matter-of-factly. “So the next time you can’t find me—don’t worry. I’m not too far away.”

“You see this shit?” Mo waved his phone in front of Dominic’s face.

They sat across from each other on two loveseats in the massive living room of the Airbnb. It was past four in the morning and although the party was still in full swing; the atmosphere was less charged. R&B flowed through the speakers and drunken bodies passed out wherever they had found space.

“What?” Dominic squinted his eyes at the face of Mo’s phone.

The brightness of it stung his dry eyes, but they focused after adjusting to the light. It was a picture of Tia dripping in designer with a fresh bag on one arm and Mr. High-roller on the other.

“Fuck she doin’?” Mo asked, his face wrinkling in a grimace.

Dominic should’ve been annoyed too, but he wasn’t. In fact, it was the least of his worries as long as she didn’t run her mouth and gain him a new enemy.

“I’ll hit her up.” He shrugged as his head fell against the back of the loveseat.

“Man, forget that. You need to put some pressure on her ass.” Mo sat forward and pressed a button on the phone to put it to sleep. “You can’t tell me he ain’t found out y’all fuck and you can’t tell me she ain’t crying to this nigga about how you made her do the shit she did.”

Dominic let out an unintended laugh because Mo could be dramatic.

“I don’t know about all that,” he said. “She not stupid bro. I said I’d hit her up.”

And he would. But Tia was smart, sometimes smarter than he was. She wouldn’t fumble such an easy bag.

“A’ight, keep thinkin’ that. Bitches do it all the time.”

“I hear you. I don’t ever know of her to keep a dude around for this long—especially one she helped hit.”

It hadn’t been the first time she’d help him get the drop on a dude. She was so seasoned at it; it was nothing for her to fuck them, set them up, and move on to the next. She kept a solid Rolodex of tricks who she hit up on a weekly and sometimes daily basis. She had one for food, one for designer goods, and one for her hair. There was also her sugar daddy who kept the rent on her condo paid and gifted her the new Brazilian Butt Lift she’d been flaunting.

Dominic didn’t understand why she even still fucked him because she’d moved on to bigger and better things. The only thing they still had in common was their love of money and the nostalgia they shared from childhood. But she still blew up his phone.

“See what I mean? You can’t tell me she ain’t up to something.”

A raspy giggle interrupted their conversation, and he knew who the owner was. She’d just been in his arms hours before fucking up his head just by being her. She was curled in the corner of one sectional, gripping a bottle of water as she talked to Tony. Their heads touched as they watched something on the screen of his phone.

“Leave that shit alone dawg.” Mo looked in the direction he had been staring and waved his hand.

“Shit?”

“You know what I mean,” he responded with a roll of his eyes.

Dominic wasn’t lost on the fact that Claudette avoided Mo each time they were in each other’s presence. She did her best to hide her hate for him, but Dominic had become somewhat fixated on becoming an expert on her. She avoided eye contact and her brows furrowed when forced to interact with Mo. Her usual bright persona was dim around him.

“Nah, I don’t get what you mean. I’m still tryna understand how *what* and *who* I do is your business.”

He didn't spare feelings with his personal business, regardless of who it was that showed concern. Diane told him it would fuck him over one day.

But what did she know?

Mo grit his teeth instead of responding and Dominic knew it was time to leave.

PART TWO

CLAUDETTE HAD NEVER seen a grown man sleep so peacefully. Even in his sleep though, he looked angry. She smoothed Dominic's furrowed brows for the third time since he had fallen asleep on top of her in his small twin bed. He threw his head back against her breast, with one hand shoved down his basketball shorts, and the other splayed across his shirtless abdomen.

If George knew she snuck and slept over at a guy's house, he would have a stroke—although she didn't sneak per se. She came in with Dominic and Josiah to use the bathroom before he dropped her back off on campus, but he suckered her into what he called a *power nap*. The power nap had turned into a four-hour slumber and instead of sleeping she watched him.

The sun rose, and she needed to pee again, but he wouldn't move. If it hadn't been for the occasional deep breath he took, she would've thought he was comatose. Her mouth felt chalky, and she needed a shower but he didn't seem to care. There was also Diane—Claudette hoped she was a late-riser.

She would let Dominic sleep for another hour and then wake him to smuggle her out of the house, but until then she guessed it wouldn't hurt to get some rest herself. As soon as her shoulders sagged in relief, the loud tenor of gospel music flooded the house and she almost jumped out of her skin. Her belly toiled, and she shook Dominic's shoulder, but he was like a boulder of dead weight. Instead of waking, he groaned and mumbled. A loud knock on his door did nothing to move him either.

"Please don't open the door... please don't open the door," she whispered to herself.

“Clo’, shut up,” Dominic said in a hoarse voice. “She not gonna—”

“D! Get up!” Diane’s heavy hand smacked the door again. “I’m going to assume your ass ain’t coming to church with me.”

“Man... I’m up!” he shouted back.

He still hadn’t moved from his spot on top of her.

“Yeah, whatever. I know your lil’ friend is in there too.” Claudette gasped and covered her mouth. “You can wash up in the bathroom and meet me in the kitchen lil’ girl... I’m in a damn house full of heathens. Ain’t that a bitch?”

Claudette heard her shuffle away from the door as Shirley Caesar belted throughout the house.

“You better go before she come back with a switch.” Dominic chuckled and stretched his arms above his head before bringing them down and gripping her by the neck.

She wiped her hand down her face. She should have insisted that he took her back to campus.

“Move.” She shoved him forward. “She probably thinks I’m fast.”

Dominic rolled over onto his stomach and laughed into a pillow.

Thirty minutes later, she was dressed in one of his sandalwood scented t-shirts and a pair of Josiah’s basketball shorts from when he was probably a prepubescent teen. She’d tied the t-shirt at the hip to keep from swallowing her small frame. Instead of breakfast, Diane was cooking Sunday dinner at nine o’clock in the morning. Claudette was to chop the bacon, garlic, and onion for the cabbage while Diane seasoned the chicken. It was the first time she’d been in the small kitchen. It was quaint, with dim lighting and smelled like a culmination of every soul food meal she could ever think of.

“You cook?” Diane asked as she watched Claudette chop the ingredients into tiny chunks.

“Sort of.” She wiped the excess onion from the knife she used.

“What you mean *sort of*?”

“My grandpa says I’m a survival chef.”

“What’s a survival chef?” Diane rested a hand on her hip and looked at her.

Her arched eyebrow raised, and a frown settled on her straight lips.

“You know... like I know enough to survive—the basics. I can make rice, I can chop vegetables, and I can fry an egg.”

Diane tsk’d and shook her head. “D know you’re a lousy cook?”

She giggled at Diane’s bluntness.

“No.” She raked the chunks of onion into a bowl and moved on to chop up the garlic. “It stays between me and you.”

“He don’t eat much anyway.” Diane shook the bowl the seasoned chicken was in and then used her hand to massage the seasoning into each chicken leg. “Never have. Don’t sleep much either.”

A worried look passed over her face as her fingers worked back and forth over the chicken. Claudette didn’t respond. She didn’t want to pry and give off the impression that she and Dominic were in a relationship, because they weren’t. After he gave her clothes to put on, he showered and disappeared outside. Josiah still hadn’t emerged from his room after getting his own wakeup call from Diane.

“You know they think I’m deaf, dumb, and blind,” she added. “I know everything that goes on around this house though.”

She left the bowl of chicken and moved to the sink to wash her hands.

“Is that so?” Claudette asked.

Diane seemed like a wildcard, and she wanted to tread lightly around her.

“Yep.” She took a grocery bag and poured flour in it from a mason jar. “That nephew of mine always been wild—just like his mama. Bless her soul... he look just like her, act just like her, and talk just like her. Broke my heart when she ran off to California.”

“By herself?”

“Might as well have been. She went with a sorry ass boyfriend who left her as soon as they made it to Los Angeles.” Diane shook the chicken she had placed in the flour.

“Why didn’t she come home?”

She was so engrossed in Diane’s openness that she stopped dicing the garlic.

“She had big dreams... wanted to become a singer or an actress. Things never played out like she wanted them to and she was living pillow to post.” Diane dropped a few specks of flour in the grease she had heating on the stove. “That loser came back long enough to get her pregnant and leave her again.”

Claudette had so many questions she wanted to ask, but she knew better. It was best she took what was being given. Images of Eve and a young Dominic flashed through her mind. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t picture the two in a happy or safe environment. She only pictured dysfunction and turmoil. Sometimes she could see it in Dominic’s eyes.

“Wow.”

“Yeah... my poor Eve. Life was never the same when she left.”

It got quiet between the two of them and Claudette went back to chopping her garlic and Diane continued to fry the chicken. Once Claudette finished chopping the ingredients for the cabbage, Diane had her mix the batter for the cornbread. She took her time explaining in significant detail how many eggs and how much sugar she added to make the cornbread cake-like. She said it was Dominic’s favorite thing to eat when

he *did* eat. Claudette whisked away, wanting the batter to be as smooth as possible before she put it in the aluminum pan for baking. Diane finished the chicken and hovered over an enormous pot preparing the cabbage.

“So, y’all just fuckin’, datin’, or both?” she asked.

Claudette choked on her spit and moved away from the bowl of batter to cough. Diane didn’t flinch at her reaction and even let out a chuckle.

“Uh, none of the above,” she responded after she’d gained control of her breathing.

“Interesting.” She chopped the cabbage into large chunks and dropped them into the pot. “Well, D ain’t never brought no girl in my house, not even as a teenager.”

She didn’t know what to make of Diane’s observation, just like she didn’t know what to make of Dominic and his decisions. She moved to transfer the batter to the pan, getting every drop inside of it.

“Don’t worry about it being perfect,” Diane said. “As long as he know you made it, he’ll love it. Men are simple like that.”

She winked, and Claudette smiled at her.

Dominic walked around the kitchen shirtless with a Black & Mild tucked behind one ear and both of his phones stacked together in his hand. Claudette watched him from her seat at the table as he picked up one piece of chicken and dug through the rest of the pots. Her conversation with Diane made her examine his actions with more scrutiny.

“Now you being weird,” he said as he bit into the piece of chicken.

Her food sat untouched. She didn't know how Diane cooked so much food by herself every Sunday and still had enough energy to eat.

“I am not.”

He walked behind her and sat the clean chicken bone on her plate. His hand reached for her cornbread and her head fell back as she watched him from her seat. She squirmed as he bit into the sweet yellow bread.

“Claudette made the cornbread, it's good huh?” Diane asked as she glided into the kitchen dressed for church in a classy black wrap dress, stockings, and low sling back heels.

Dominic chewed and looked down at her with a smirk on his full lips. She didn't realize her head was still back, exposing her neck. His hand snaked around it as he swallowed.

“Yeah, it's perfect.” He moved to smooth her hair back.

Diane hummed as she fixed plates with different portions of food.

“You ready?” he asked with his free hand still pulling at her hair.

She wasn't, but she nodded anyway.

“Yeah, I better go finish cleaning and get some rest before my grandpa comes.”

“You leavin' us lil' girl?” Diane asked, wrapping the plates she fixed with foil.

“She on Spring Break.” Dominic answered for her, moving his hand from her hair and walking away.

“Well, you better not be a stranger.” Diane fluffed out a plastic grocery bag and stacked the plates inside it. “Hope you don’t make a habit of only poppin’ up when D gets himself in trouble or when he performing at one of those fancy clubs.”

Dominic kissed his teeth as he walked out of the kitchen.

It was true, Diane knew everything that went on in her house.

“He need to get his shit together. The streets don’t spare nobody. Didn’t spare his mama and they ain’t gone spare him,” she added, stomping over to the refrigerator and pulling out five cold sodas.

“You seem like a smart girl, so I’ll give you this tip for free.” She turned around and pointed at her with her free hand. “Don’t get caught up in his bullshit and this is coming from somebody that loves him like I birthed him. But there comes a time in all of our lives when the Lord stop givin’ us second, third, fourth, and fifth chances. He think I need his damn street money, but I don’t.”

She kicked the door of the refrigerator closed and grabbed the bag of plates in one hand while she clutched the sodas in the other. Claudette stared at her with wide eyes at the sudden change of her energy.

“But what do I know? I guess I should just grin and bear the bullshit, because street money is better than no money, right?” She hunched her shoulders. “I ain’t ask him to pay all the bills or buy me a car. He thinks he need to do that. He think his purpose is to take care of and control everyone, but it ain’t.”

She walked toward the entrance of the kitchen with her hands full.

“Take care of yourself lil’ girl. Come by and see me sometime!” she yelled the words over her shoulder as if she hadn’t just bared her soul to Claudette in her own kitchen.

She'd finally gotten a glimpse into the side of Dominic's world that he tried to shut her out of. She could see why he did—it wasn't pretty.

“You never talk about your mama,” Dominic said.

He was back in her bed, but this time he watched her clean. Claudette thought he would drop her off and leave, but he’d done the opposite. He came in and made himself at home on her side of the room, in her bed. She secretly liked how his tattooed body looked stretched across her girly sunflower comforter and pillows.

She still hadn’t gotten any rest because Diane had turned her energy upside down and she tried to calm it by cleaning, but even cleaning had done nothing for her.

“Don’t have one,” she replied.

“Everybody got a mama.” He laid back with his legs stretched out like he was having a therapy session.

His long legs dangled from the bottom edge of the bed.

“Okay, maybe I should rephrase—I never knew my mother.” She removed the makeup and textbooks from the desk on Autumn’s side of the room.

“Did she die, or is she like a deadbeat or some shit?”

She chuckled at his less than eloquent way of asking why her mother was an absentee parent and took a Clorox wipe from the container she’d sat on Autumn’s bed.

“I have no clue if she’s alive or not, my dad told me she just wasn’t ready to be a mother.” She shrugged.

“So she just popped you out and dipped?” He rose from his position and looked at her in disbelief.

She fell over and gripped her stomach in a fit of laughter.

“No... from what I understand she was there the first few months of my life and then she woke up one day and decided it wasn’t for her—so she left.” She turned and wiped the desk in perfect circles. “My dad didn’t chase her and her family never reached out to connect with me.”

“How you decide that being a mother to your own child ain’t for you?” He laid back down and stared at the ceiling.

“Tell me about it. You decide whether something like a job or a dress isn’t for you, not a whole human being you gave birth to.”

“You ever think about her?”

“Sometimes. I used to think about her a lot back when I was younger. I mean, I had my grandma, but that’s different.” She turned the wipe over and studied the dust particles that had accumulated on it. “I couldn’t really talk to my grandma about stuff like boys, getting my period for the first time, or friends. My grandpa tried, but he’s a man, you know? Those were the times I needed her the most.”

Dominic turned on his side and stared at her, but she kept her back to him. Silence stretched between the two of them and she tossed the wipe in the trash. She sorted through the junk she took off of the desk.

“Fuck her,” Dominic said abruptly. “She did you a favor.”

She giggled at his outburst because that was what her twelve-year-old self would utter each time she craved the woman that had abandoned her.

“Maybe so.” She placed the items back on Autumn’s desk. “It taught me a thing or two.”

“Like?”

“To cherish every moment with my own kids and to never leave them, even when I want to give up.”

She turned to face him. His eyes were full of curiosity. He looked at her for a while and a smile formed on his face replacing the scowl that was often there.

“So, what do you have planned for this week?” she asked, deviating from the depressing topic. “I won’t be around to pester you. So you’ll be Clo’-free.”

His frown returned, and he shrugged his shoulders. She thought back to those last tense moments she had with Diane. As the days went by, she found out more and more about the intense mystery that was Dominic.

She walked toward the bed and leaned on the edge, being careful not to encroach on his personal space even though he had seen some of the most intimate parts of her.

“That’s not good,” she said while picking at a loose thread on her comforter. “There’s so much you can do. You can contact the lawyer Vaughn recommended... work on your music... maybe look for a job.”

“Can I tell you something?”

“Yeah.” She looked up, and he was looking at her with a look she’d never seen on his face.

“I’m not gonna make empty promises to you.” He rolled over and stared back at the ceiling. “Never let a nigga feed you lies or promise you shit he can’t deliver to keep you happy. I can sit here and tell you I’ll do all of that while you gone. It’ll be a lie though.”

Her face fell. He turned back to look at her, grasping her chin between his thumb and index finger.

“With the record I have ain’t nobody gone hire me. I need money so I gotta’ do what I gotta’ do.” He gave it to her straight with no chaser and it burned. “I’ll hit up dude, but don’t get too excited. I know he’s more than what I can afford, so I’m gone hit up my old lawyer too.”

“Is your old lawyer any good?”

He bit into his lip and exhaled. “He was decent.”

“And the music?”

She knew she was walking a thin line between wanting him safe and out of trouble and being overbearing. He wasn’t her responsibility, and she had to keep reminding herself of that.

“It’ll be there. I got to handle this first, though.” He flicked her bottom lip with his thumb and sat up.

She moved from in front of the bed and watched him climb down. She tried to appear unbothered, but worry was written all over her face. He shoved his sock covered feet into the slides he left on the floor beside her bed.

“It’s only a week. I’ll be here when you get back,” he said as he approached her, gripping her sides. “Stop lookin’ like that.”

She wished she could, but the events that had happened over the past couple of days scarred her. There was this constant gnawing in her chest that wouldn’t go away no matter what he said.

“I’m fine... really.” She flashed a smile and he pinched her sides where his hands rested.

“If you say so.” He let go and turned toward the door.

12

WHAT WAS THE cliché saying—a zebra never changed its stripes, or was it a tiger? However it went, Dominic hated it, because it was true.

It was Wednesday, his third day without Claudette, and he had hit the ground running. With every performance he had lined up being months out, he was back to doing what he did best.

He was at Tee's looking into the same camera he looked in before, but this time he was desperate. It had been a while since he experienced desperation, but he was well versed in it. Desperation was dangerous, because it made him do things he said he'd never do or things he had no business doing. He and Eve lived and breathed desperation when she was alive.

Tee unlocked the countless locks that lined the door and stared at him with a grunt.

“What up?” he asked, looking him up and down.

Dominic nodded and eased inside the door once Tee turned around to head back inside the musty house. This time it reeked of mid-grade weed and cigarette smoke. He kept his gym bag tucked close because it held his own personal stash. He wanted to get rid of every gun, except the one he had shoved in the front of his pants.

Tee's crew was absent, and the silence of the house was so unsettling that Dominic kept his arm dangling close to the front of his pants. He tossed the bag on the same foldout table from last time and looked toward the backdoor of the house.

“Heard you killed that shit the other night,” Tee said. “My boy Dante said you had that bitch jumpin’. Mad I missed it.”

He walked toward the rusted sink in the kitchen and pulled the torn blinds back to look into the backyard.

“Preciate it.” He watched as Tee moved from the window and walked toward the bag. “That shit was like a movie.”

The loud noise of the zipper being unfastened pierced the silent air.

“So you serious about that shit now?” Tee asked, referring to the part-time way in which Dominic had always approached his music.

“I’m tryna be.”

He brushed the top of his head as he thought about his hasty decision to live right—whatever the hell that meant. Claudette’s scared expression haunted him since she’d left, and he’d woken up that morning with her on his mind. She was the only thing he could think of as he pulled the guns from the safe and shoved them into his duffle bag.

Tee pulled out his most prized possessions one by one and a heavy box of ammo.

“I see.” He took out one of the semiautomatic weapons and examined it. “You lettin’ all this go?”

“Yeah. All of them.”

“Bet.” Tee laid each gun on the table. “They all clean?”

“Hell yeah.”

They were from his personal stash, so he’d made sure of that.

“How much for everything?”

“For you? Ten bands.”

Dominic respected Tee’s loyalty. As long as he’d been doing business with him, he’d never strayed and he respected that.

“I’ll give you fifteen for everything.” He wiped the sweat that had formed on his bald head. “I fuck with what you tryna do. You a solid nigga Dough.”

Dominic did his best to keep the neutral expression on his face, because Tee had never been the type of dude to help anyone.

“I appreciate that bro,” he responded, holding out his hand.

Tee reached out without hesitation and gripped it. He let go and took a fat wad of one-hundred-dollar bills from his pocket, counting the money out and banding it up for Dominic to take. As he handed it to him, his face lit as if he had just remembered something important.

“Say... you know a nigga named Marco?”

Dominic took the wad of money and shook his head with a frown. “Nah. Who that?”

“He from Memphis, but he been out here for a minute. Got a crazy ass grill—he stay flexin’.”

He shook his head again and shoved the money in his pocket.

“Nah. Don’t sound like nobody I fuck with. Why?”

“My boy Zo say he been asking around about you.”

Dominic paused and looked at Tee, frowning. “What about me?”

It was never good when he got word that someone was asking about him.

“Asking where you be at, talking reckless, saying you got some shit that belong to him.” Tee shrugged. “He say he know your girl work at that Waffle House off Fulton and if he don’t slide you, he know where to find her.”

“My girl? I don’t have no gi—” He stopped.

His mouth grew dry, and he swallowed the lump in his throat. “What you say his name was again?”

His entire body throbbed at the thought of somebody even touching a curl on Claudette’s head.

Tee watched him closely. “Marco.”

“Bet. Tell Zo, that if the nigga ask about me again, he can hit my line.” He flashed a nonchalant expression at Tee, although his stomach sank to his toes. “I appreciate the info and the investment big dawg.”

He turned and gave Tee one last handshake.

Dominic sat on Diane's front porch with his long legs stretched in front of him. A lit Black & Mild dangled from his hand as he scrolled through Instagram on the hunt for one person. He didn't need to go around asking people to confirm Tee's information, because it hadn't been the first time his actions had caught up with him.

He was on Tia's profile which was nothing but a cesspool of designer bullshit, wigs, and club promos. There was an occasional picture of her vacationing somewhere exotic thanks to her sugar daddy who she conveniently cropped from the pictures. He tapped on the most recent picture she'd posted of herself bent over. She wore an all blue dress that matched her blue weave, and a hand that flaunted a diamond-encrusted watch gripped her ass. Neither their face nor body was visible, but she tagged the owner of the hand. He clicked on the tagged page and nodded as the first image loaded.

It was Mr. High-roller from Pleasures and The W. His name was plastered in his Instagram bio, just like Dominic knew it would be because Marco was all flash and corny.

Dominic had a special hatred for so-called men that brought women and children into their beefs. It was pussy for him to bring Claudette into their situation, and he hoped Marco had enough common sense to make peace with his maker before he ran into him—and he *would* run into him. He would make sure of it.

He had a target on his back, and now Claudette did too. It was the sole reason he didn't do serious relationships and why he kept her at arm's length or at least tried to. But he had blurred the lines between the two of them.

He didn't blur the lines between the two of them on purpose, but the way her brown eyes lit up at just the sight of him made his stomach do somersaults. He avoided labeling their situation and made no mention of exclusivity to her. In his mind, it made sense. She would eventually get tired of the obscureness and seek someone she deserved, someone who had no qualms about giving her the title of wife or girlfriend.

He was just a placeholder that selfishly cherished her attention, admiration, and beauty for the time being.

He'd found himself back on her profile. They hardly talked since she'd been away and just like when they first met, she had weaseled her way into his thoughts daily. A song, a smell, or even a color would pull her image to the forefront of his thoughts and she would stay there for long periods of time. Her raspy giggle would ease his worries, and sometimes he would lie in his bed and imagine her arms wrapped around him.

She had been active on Instagram since she'd left. He figured it was because of her newfound free time. She didn't have to worry about school, a job, or keeping him out of trouble. He saw three recent pictures that hadn't been there the last time he went searching for her round face. One of them was a picture of himself that she uploaded the day she left to go home.

It was a candid photo of him performing at Playhouse. He stood with confidence with the mic held toward the crowd as they all looked at him in adoration. He didn't recognize the look on his own face. He grinned wide and his eyes were bright with excitement. She'd captioned the image with a simple sentence: *My favorite being amazing as usual.*

His cheeks rose at her reference to the intimate moment they shared the day she'd asked him to teach her how to kiss. He had been so engrossed in her it fell from his lips with ease. He double tapped the picture and scrolled to the most recent one she'd posted only an hour before. Her wild hair was styled in braids that went straight back and fell to her waist in layers. She smiled but hid behind her outstretched hand as if she was telling the person behind the camera not to take her picture.

He snuffed out the Black & Mild and pulled the phone closer. Her lips were glossed and her brown skin glistened, because whoever took the picture had gotten her at just the right angle so the sun enhanced her golden glow. It was the first time he had seen her in a dress. It was a bright yellow and clung to her soft curves. It had no straps and fit perfectly across her small breasts.

He thought she'd be the one pining for him from Marietta, but she wasn't.

He double tapped that picture too and went to leave a comment—something he never did for anyone. She made him do silly shit like stalk her social media activity, wonder what she was doing and who she was with, and replay their most intimate moments together over and over.

My favorite sunflower was the comment he left.

“I’M CONVINCED YOU like to get hurt,” Autumn said, staring at Claudette through the phone with large sunglasses perched on her face.

“Are you calling me a masochist?” Claudette rolled over on her side and held her head up with her free hand.

“Girl, if it means you like to get hurt by ain’t-shit niggas, then yes I am!” Autumn sat forward from her relaxed position on the chaise lounge she had been sunbathing on.

The cloudless, sunny skies of Cabo made for a perfect backdrop behind her as they debriefed about the saga that was her and Dominic’s nonexistent relationship.

“Aren’t you supposed to be having fun instead of worrying about little old me?” Claudette asked as she pulled the comforter from her childhood bed over her bare legs.

“Believe me, I’m having a damn good time, but I can be worried about my best friend—especially when she’s bailing dudes out of jail and professing her love for them on Instagram.”

Claudette threw her head back in laughter.

“My spirit is disturbed.” Autumn huffed and raked her fingers through the wet and wavy wig she wore.

Claudette had to admit she looked amazing in the neon-colored cutout swimsuit she wore. Her pore-less caramel skin was tanned with a red undertone. She looked every bit of the privileged vacationer she wanted to portray.

“Why is your spirit disturbed? I most definitely didn’t profess my love for anyone on Instagram.”

“*My favorite?* I mean it sounds very love-like to me.” Autumn snatched the sunglasses from her face. “Next thing you know you’ll be one of those pathetic girlfriends holding her dude down while he serves ten years. Crying when you miss his collect calls and putting all your money on his commissary every week so he can share it with his boys locked up in the same pod as him.”

“You have such a vivid imagination.” Claudette gave her a tight-lipped smile. “Anyways, that won’t happen because we’re not dating.”

“But you’ve kissed.”

“And you know that how?”

“No offense Claudy, but you’re green. You’re a virgin, never been kissed, never had a boyfriend, and it’s very obvious.” Autumn reached out to grab a fruity mixed drink from a waiter that approached her. “You’ve done something with him, it’s written all over your face. You look different.”

She rolled her eyes at Autumn’s flawed logic.

“We’re not dating, so none of this even matters.”

“It matters and I’ll tell you exactly why it does and then I’ll let you play with Dominic in criminal Lalaland.” She took a long sip of her drink. “He’s reckless—a straight crash dummy. It doesn’t matter if y’all are boyfriend and girlfriend or just friends. A title don’t mean shit to dudes like him. When people see him, they see you, and that says everything. He looks at you two as one.”

Claudette sat up and wrinkled her forehead.

“And guess what? So do all the bitches he used to fuck and still fuck, all the niggas he’s beefin’ with, and the cops,” she added. “They will use, abuse, and harass your ass to get to him. Period.”

Her mouth grew dry, and she swallowed the lump that formed in her throat.

“I get it,” she replied, letting out a sigh as she rubbed her forehead.

“Nah. You don’t. I’m just wasting my breath.”

She stared at Autumn through the phone who had laid back in her relaxed position and continued to sip her drink.

“Did you even get my souvenir or is that canceled because you’re mad at me?” she asked, attempting to lighten the mood.

“One—I’m not mad at you. Two—I got your gift the first day I was here.”

“I guess I’m still loved.” Claudette flung her hand across her chest.

She put on a great show but was still reeling from the way Autumn slaughtered and dissected her friendship with Dominic.

“Don’t start with me.” Autumn rolled her eyes.

As soon as she opened her mouth to respond, her bedroom door flew open.

“Claudy, the food’s done. Stop all that yappin’ and come eat,” George said, poking his head through the doorframe and leaving just as quick as he’d came.

With salt and pepper hair and ebony skin, he looked just like Bryson. Both men had boisterous personalities and attracted people wherever they went. It was a trait she wished she inherited.

“I’ll talk to you later.” She rolled her eyes. “Love ya.”

“Love ya too,” Autumn replied, and they both ended the call at once.

She threw the blanket from her body and stuck her feet in the beat-up house shoes she kept beside her bed for easy access. One of George’s rules was that dinner was nonnegotiable in his household. Claudette had a love/hate relationship with the rule when she was a child, but now she realized the importance of it. Although she wanted to chat with Autumn for the rest of the evening, her time with George was limited and she wanted to cherish her last few days with him. She hadn’t realized how much she’d missed him or her home.

The old bungalow was just as she had left it two months ago. The sneakers she would toe off after her early morning walks still sat by the front door and the scent of cedarwood lingered in the air. Her room was untouched, still full of hidden knickknacks from her childhood. She'd strung drawings of sunflowers she had sketched as a child and her favorite pictures of Bryson, Autumn, and George across the walls on string and clothespins. She always kept the white curtains on her bedroom window drawn open, allowing the natural light from outside to filter in.

When she entered the kitchen George had already set the dining table for two. He had a beer for himself and water for her. A bowl of salad sat between the two plates of smothered pork chops, greens, and his homemade macaroni and cheese.

She took her seat at the table. Their seats hadn't changed over the years. George always sat at the head of the table, Bryson to his right, Claudette's grandmother Mary sat to his left, and Claudette across from George. They hardly had dinner guests, so Bryson and Mary's seats were always empty, like unintentional shrines.

"I got your favorite for dessert," George said, walking to his own seat.

He was dressed in paint-splattered overalls and busted sneakers that had seen better days.

"Chunky monkey?" She pinched a piece of porkchop.

"You know it girl." He fell into his seat with a deep breath that made her grimace.

"Don't you think you should take it easy the next couple of days?" she asked.

"Absolutely not. Paul say he need that barn done by Sunday and I'm just about finished. It would go by a lot quicker if you'd come help your old man out."

"We could spend my last two days home doing something more enjoyable, don't you think?" She tilted her head to the side.

"What's more fun than painting? You used to love it."

“I was also twelve.” She pursed her lips with raised eyebrows. “Let’s bless the food. I’m craving mac and cheese.”

They bowed their heads and George blessed the food, himself, Claudette, and every ailing friend he thought of. He would’ve kept going if she didn’t stop him by giving his leg a gentle kick under the table. That used to be Mary’s job, but it had now turned into hers. Once he wrapped up the long-winded prayer that had turned into a sermon they both ate in silence. She went straight for the macaroni and cheese, and he went for his porkchop.

“How’s school? I ain’t heard a word about it since you been home.” George chewed with his mouth open and smacked with each bite he took.

She shrugged.

“Must not be goin’ too good then,” he replied.

“No. It’s fine.”

There was so much that had happened over the past few weeks that she wanted to talk about, but she knew he wasn’t the person to confide in. She had so many questions about lust and life stuck deep within her since she’d met Dominic. He brought feelings out that she’d never knew she had and brought up questions she’d buried in the past.

“Is my mom still here in Georgia?” she blurted out.

George almost choked on the beer he was chugging. He pulled the can from his mouth with a grimace and slammed it on the table.

“Why you want to know that?”

“Someone asked me about her.” She poked at the greens on her plate, swirling them around on her fork.

“Lord, I don’t know if Bryson would want me to talk to you about that.” He sat back in his seat.

“What does it matter? He’s gone and so is she.” She sat back in her own chair, matching his body language. “I’m not going to go track her down or anything. I’m just curious.”

He took a napkin from the table and wiped the grease from his lips. He wouldn't look at her and kept his eyes on the fake ivy plant in the center of the table.

“Bryson don't be mad at me man,” he said, talking as if he were at the table with them.

It was something he did often.

“Grandpa stop being dramatic.” Claudette crossed her arms. “At least tell me if she's still alive.”

“Well...yeah. She's still alive and kicking. At least she was about three years ago when I saw her.”

“You saw her?” Her arms fell from her chest and she leaned forward.

“Yup. In the grocery store.”

“Did she speak? Was she by herself? What did she look like?” She could hardly contain the questions she asked.

“Hold on now.” George leaned forward and held his hands out to hush her. “Slow down.”

She forgot her food and he held her full attention. He'd saw her mother three years ago and hadn't uttered a word about it to her. Three years ago, she was a junior in high school and would have been able to handle the news. Why hadn't he said anything?

“Okay. What happened?” Her armpits prickled with sweat, and her leg jumped up and down under the table.

“We didn't even speak,” George said, grabbing the can of beer again. “She walked on past me and I walked on past her.”

“Did she look at you at all?” She tried to pull out any information she could about the strange woman from him.

He cleared his throat and the aluminum can in his hand crunched from the pressure of his fingers digging into it.

“She...she,” he stammered and looked away from her.

Her leg moved faster and she heard the loud beating of her heart. “She what?”

He tipped the beer can to his lips and swallowed the last bit in one gulp.

“She had her other kids with her.” He slammed the empty can on the table. “She left you and Bryson for another man. Got married to him and had kids with him.”

Her leg stopped. “She has another family?”

He nodded his head in confirmation and sat back in his chair with a frown.

She shoved her chair back from the table and stomped off. Hot tears coated the rims of her eyes while she walked through the narrow hallway that led to her bedroom. He called her name from the kitchen, but his voice only made her move faster.

How could she have left her and Bryson like they were nothing; as if they weren't good enough?

She closed the door to her bedroom and crawled underneath the blanket she'd just left. As soon as her head hit the pillow, the tears dripped down her face, leaving streaks of wetness on her cheeks. She was unwanted by the very person who gave birth to her, and it was like a punch to the gut.

She wasn't just crying over the woman that abandoned her, but she cried for Bryson. She wondered how it must have felt to be in love with someone who didn't love him anymore—someone who had the gall to abandon a newborn for another life.

When she'd cry as a child Bryson would cuddle her and wipe the tears with the rough pads of his fingers. He would whisper, *don't cry Sunflower*, while he pulled at her coarse puff of curls. She needed that.

The soft glow of the setting sun peeked in through her bedroom window as she whimpered to herself. She heard the wooden floorboards of the house creaking as George did his best to quietly enter her room.

“Claudy.” His voice was scratchy.

He sounded as if he had been crying too.

Instead of responding, she sobbed harder into the pillow she mashed her face into. She felt him next to her. He hovered above her, probably unsure of what to do. He had never been good at consoling or kissing boo-boos.

“Listen to me,” he said. “Stop that crying.”

He gathered the braids that fanned around her head and pulled them to the side to expose her wet face. She sniffled and attempted to catch her breath.

“Sit up.” He placed his hand on her sweat soaked back and squeezed.

She sat up in a robotic trance as he shoved a napkin toward her that was balled in his hand. She used it to wipe her runny nose and attempted to stop the fresh set of tears that threatened to fall.

“Sorry Grandpa,” she choked out.

George held his hands up and sat next to her on the bed. “What you apologizing for?”

She shrugged and blew her nose. She could only imagine how she looked.

“I’m crying over a woman that wants nothing to do with me while the man that’s sacrificed so much to raise me is right in front of me,” she said, looking down at her lap. “You should be offended.”

He rubbed his chin and looked away from her.

“I’m not offended.” He rested a hand on his knee. “I’m sad, because you’re sad.”

“I feel stupid.”

“Why?”

“I thought I could handle the truth about her. I had painted this picture of her in my head as some overwhelmed new mother that was probably a little sad and had no clue what to do with a new husband and a new baby,” she said. “But she was none of those things. She just didn’t want us.”

George swallowed and ran his hands down the length of his jeans.

“Maybe she *was* that woman you pictured. She could’ve been a little overwhelmed, a little sad, maybe a little regretful.”

“But that didn’t give her the right to leave us.”

“No. It didn’t,” George sighed. “But she’ll have to answer for that. Karma don’t spare nobody.”

She balled the napkin in her hand and fingered the rough texture with the pads of her fingers.

“How many more kids does she have?”

“Well... she had two with her when I saw her, but I know she has another one—a girl.” He turned and looked toward a picture of her and Bryson strung on the wall. “She’s a year younger than you are. Bryson told me that before he passed.”

Her chest caved, and her eyes swelled with tears again. “A year younger than me?”

The woman had no redeeming qualities.

So she just popped you out and dipped? Dominic’s words danced around in her head, because her mother had done just what he said. George nodded his head in silent confirmation. He would never be adamant about something he was unsure of, so she knew it was a cold, hard fact.

The two of them sat in silence. She picked apart the napkin she held, and George still stared at the picture of her and Bryson.

“Who asked you about her?” he asked, turning away from the picture and looking at her.

She stopped pulling at the napkin and hunched her shoulders. “A friend.”

“She has more kids. Three of them.”

Claudette played with the ends of her braids and watched Dominic’s eyebrows raise in surprise. His plump lips were juicy from whatever concoction he sipped from the coffee cup he held on to.

It was late, but he answered her FaceTime call after the first ring. She saw the front door to Diane’s house behind him, and the chirping of crickets acted as the background music to their late-night conversation.

“You been cryin’?” he asked, ignoring her previous statement.

He sat the cup down and rested his head in his hand. She huffed and pushed the button down on the bedside lamp that lit her room.

“So you mad?” He still looked at the black screen as if he could see her.

She didn’t respond and sank deeper underneath the blanket she laid beneath. She wanted him to be as mad as she was and validate her feelings of angst, but all he was worried about was if she had cried or not. His inability to see her was his punishment, but he was unbothered by her antics. He picked up the cup and took another sip while staring into the black screen.

“If I tell you a secret, will that make it better?” he asked.

Her ears perked at his question.

“Maybe.” She brushed her finger across the screen of the phone, wishing she was with him or he was with her.

“Maybe?”

“It has to be a real secret. Something you never told anybody.”

“I pinky promise nobody else knows.” He held up his tattooed pinky finger and wiggled it in front of the camera.

She smiled in the darkness.

“If I tell you, you have to do something for me though.”
He still looked into the camera and a smirk settled on his face.

“And what’s that?”

He took another sip from the coffee cup and dragged it from his mouth.

“You can’t ever cry over her again.”

She was quiet as she thought about his proposition. She had cried so much that evening that her eyes swelled with redness.

“I can’t promise you that.”

“Yeah, you can.”

He was so sure of it; it made her believe she could actually do it.

He sat the phone down and she looked at the top of Diane’s porch. She listened to the clicking of his lighter. Her stomach jumped as he picked the phone back up, showing her his caramel face.

“My dad left when my mama was pregnant with me,” he said.

She had already been privy to that fact because of Diane, but she stayed quiet.

“Well, at least that’s what she told me and whoever else asked.”

“What do you mean?” She sat up.

His gaze drifted away from the screen and he looked into the distance, inhaling from the blunt and blowing out smoke.

“She ain’t know who my daddy was.” He still wouldn’t look at her. “She had me believing the nigga she ran away to L.A. with had knocked her up and abandoned us.”

His voice was hard and scratchy from the smoke. The inflection in it told her it was the first time he’d ever admitted Eve’s secret out loud.

“She was funny like that,” he said, bringing the blunt back to his lips. “That was the only time she ever lied to me and she did it because she’d rather me be mad at a stranger than figure out how fucked up she really was.”

She watched him take a long drag and then snuff the blunt out on the concrete step of the porch. He stared off in a daze.

“How’d you find out?”

He sighed and picked the coffee cup back up.

“She got fucked up one night.” The cup made its way back to his lips, and he sipped again. “When she got fucked up, it wasn’t ever good. She’d say some messed up shit to me.”

“You ain’t shit. If I knew who your daddy was, I’d tell him to come fuck you up lil’ nigga.” His voice rose an octave, mimicking a woman’s.

She cringed at the harshness of his words and tone. She pushed the comforter back and hurried to turn the bedside lamp back on because he was stuck. He stared ahead, probably transported back to the day Eve said those ugly words to him. His red eyes blinked slowly.

“Nic...”

He still hadn’t moved from his position.

“Nic... look at me.” She grasped her phone with both hands. “Look at me.”

His Adam’s apple bounced as he swallowed and attempted to pull himself from the memories that probably haunted him daily. His head turned back to the phone and she saw the shift in his brown eyes once he saw her staring back at him.

“I promise I won’t cry over her again.” She rushed the words out, attempting to coax him out of the trance he was in.

Whatever he had been sipping while they talked had intertwined with the marijuana and had his shoulders sagging.

“Did I make it better?” he asked.

She frowned and nodded, although he had done the opposite.

She wanted to hate Eve, but she couldn't. She couldn't hate the woman that gifted the world with him. The more she found out about her, the more conflicted she became about her feelings toward her because she was the one who had hurt Dominic and turned him into the troubled little boy he was.

"Of course you did," she lied.

"Good. I can't have my favorite out here crying over motherfuckas that don't matter." His words slurred and his movements were slow. "You got people in your corner that would go to war for you."

She thought about George, Bryson, and Autumn. It was true, she had a support system that a lot of people would kill for.

"You're right." She pulled her long braids over her shoulder and sighed. "I just feel betrayed."

He rubbed at his red eyes while staring at her. It was the first time since they'd been talking that she had inspected him. His golden complexion looked dull and dark bags sat beneath his eyes. His cheekbones were more pronounced than usual.

"I did too." He looked away, but she couldn't pull her eyes from him.

"Is there anything you miss about your mom?" she asked.

"Yeah. Despite all the messed up shit she said and did, she loved me hard. She loved me even when I was hard to love."

"How could you have been hard to love?" she asked.

"It's easy to hate your own seed when you ain't got a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. You in a strange place with no family or friends and with a child you responsible for feeding. It's real easy to resent that child you gave birth to."

She blew out a breath and attempted to absorb all the unwanted revelations he and George bombarded her with that day. She fell back onto her pillows and tried to ignore the lull of an impending headache.

He chewed on his bottom lip and rubbed at his eyes again.

“I should let you get some rest,” she said, noticing the time on the digital clock that sat on her nightstand.

“Nah, I’m good. I’m enjoying this.” He laughed and scratched his low-cut hair.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I was lettin’ you enjoy your time away from me and my bullshit. Lettin’ you be you. But you called...” He smoothed his hand on top of his head and brushed the waves of his hair forward. “And I just want to hear your voice... look at you... hear about your life at home—shit like that.”

“Oh.”

She couldn’t think of a witty or flirtatious response on the fly, so *oh* was the only thing that came out.

“But I’ll hang up.”

“No! I mean... no. We can keep talking.” She tried to control the urgency in her voice and he chuckled.

“Chill gangsta’. I’m not goin’ nowhere.”

She slapped a hand over her face but peeked at him through the spaces between her fingers.

He was smiling.

“YOU HAVE A lengthy criminal record for a twenty-one-year-old.”

Dominic wasn't sure how to respond to Quentin Fullner's observation. For starters, he looked nothing like the pit-bull of a lawyer Vaughn described over the phone. He was a white hipster with a slicked back crew cut and a lumberjack's beard. He was neither friendly nor rude, and Dominic couldn't get a good read on whether he could trust him to get him out of trouble.

“Yeah,” he responded while shrugging.

Quentin shuffled through the papers on his desk and stopped with a frown once he found the specific paper he had been searching for.

“You had a fully loaded 9mm Glock in your vehicle with a defaced serial number and less than an ounce of marijuana.” He stopped reading and looked up. “Oh, and he gave you a moving violation for supposedly blowing through a stop sign.”

“Yeah, I was there. Remember?” Dominic sighed and adjusted his body in the rigid leather chair he sat in across from Quentin. “I know what my charges are. Can you help me or what?”

Quentin raised an eyebrow and sat back in his chair.

“It depends.”

“On what?” Dominic's scratched at his eyebrow in annoyance and sat forward.

He was seconds away from walking out of Quentin's luxe midtown office.

“On you.” He threaded his fingers together and crossed his legs behind his chestnut colored desk.

“Shit, obviously it depend on me. I’m payin’ you for this and you ain’t cheap.”

He chuckled and unthreaded his hands, going back to the stack of papers on his desk that probably laid out Dominic’s criminal history as an adult and maybe even as a juvenile.

“You’re not following me Dominic,” he said. “I don’t know how much Vaughn shared with you about me, but I pride myself on having a solid relationship with my clients, guilty or innocent.”

“Okay?” His Jordan clad foot tapped the hardwood floor while he waited on Quentin to get to the point.

Quentin squinted his eyes at him and leaned forward.

“All bullshit aside. I’m not talking about the exchange of currency for my services.” He gave Dominic a hard look. “I’m talking about your life.”

The tone of his voice changed and the foul language he used drew Dominic’s attention.

“I googled you by the way.” Quentin turned the iMac on his desk toward him where the Google search was still on the screen.

There was a collection of some of his best mugshots under the Google Images tab and several news articles about his various run-ins with the law. His hardened face stared at the monitor, still unmoved by what he saw. Quentin went back up to the search bar and typed in his street and rap moniker *Dough*. He hit the enter key on the keyboard and they both watched the page load.

A picture someone grabbed from his Instagram was the first thing that loaded. He was labeled as a rap artist underneath the picture and a list of streaming platforms where his music could be found were underneath. All of his new social media handles that Claudette created were listed as well as the Instagram profile he already had. Quentin clicked on his Instagram profile.

It loaded, and Dominic shifted in his seat.

“The judge will love this shit.” Quentin clicked on picture after picture of him brandishing guns and money for his thousands of followers. “You’re a young black rapper with an arsenal of guns. You know what these pictures say to the court?”

He bit down on his lip and swallowed. Deep down he didn’t care what the court thought about him or anything he did, but he couldn’t show that to Quentin. This white man was enthralled in a speech that he had heard thousands of times from judges, probation officers, and caseworkers. He was so impassioned that he was turning red.

“I get it,” he said, trying to stop him from wasting anymore of his breath.

“This says to the court that you don’t give a fuck.” Quentin answered his own question. “And I get it. You don’t care what they think.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, surprised by the expert way Quentin had read him. He guessed he was a lawyer for a reason.

“Scrub it,” he added. “Delete every image of you holding a gun and money. If you want to live to see twenty-two, you need to move smarter.”

“A’ight man.”

The possibility of turning twenty-two was foreign to him, he wasn’t even supposed to live to see twenty-one. It was no one but Eve petitioning God to keep him amongst the living.

“You’re probably wondering what some white dude from the suburbs knows about the streets,” Quentin replied. “Not much, I’ll tell you that. But I know that the allure of fast money is tempting and the unwillingness to change your life isn’t on purpose. This is a dangerous game you’re playing, and it’s a game that systematic racism and the criminal justice system want to see you lose.”

He sighed and leaned forward.

“I’m a damn good criminal defense attorney, but if we’re going to work together, I need you to hold up your end of the bargain.” He exited out of the browser and turned the iMac back to its original position. “If I’m Curry, I need you to be Thompson. You feel me?”

Dominic snorted out a laugh at his unexpected remark. He knew Quentin didn’t understand his lifestyle or his decisions, but he respected him as a man and made him feel as if his life held some value at least. It was more than any of his other attorneys had done.

“I can fuck with that,” he replied with a smile.

Quentin reached his fist across the desk, awaiting him to complete their partnership. They bumped fists, but they both knew him staying out of trouble would be no easy feat. He had too much working against him. He had people to take care of, enemies that wanted to make sure he didn’t see his next birthday, and now another case to fight.

Pleasures was different during the daytime. It didn't hold the same illicit vibe it did when the sun went down. It was cold and uninviting; the music was less raunchy. The rappers, ballplayers, and dope boys were absent. Instead, local businessmen lounged around holding meetings while the dancers hung around in their sections being seen and not heard.

Dominic leaned against the bar, sticking out in his casual attire. The sterile daytime atmosphere made the hairs on his arm stand up. He thrived in the chaos of Pleasures after dark.

"She ain't came out from the back yet?" Monique, the bartender asked.

She brushed her long wig over one shoulder and leaned forward, giving him a good look at her cleavage. She slapped a wet rag on the bar and wiped at an already spotless area.

"Nah. I'm not in a rush. I got all day." He held up the free shot of brown liquor she'd given him and took it to the head.

Tia was avoiding him. It had been almost an hour since he sent one of the other dancers in the locker room to get her.

"Usually she'd be running out here to see you." Monique smirked, fishing for information.

He shrugged and turned back to look at the club's entrance while she took the empty glass from behind him, probably preparing to fill his cup with more brown liquor. He yawned and moved to sit on a barstool, scanning the club for the third time since he'd been there.

He always smelled Tia before he saw her. The strawberry scent was always in her hair, her clothes, and even her underwear and bras. The once enticing scent now made him nauseated. It was too pungent and too sweet.

"What you doin' here D?" she asked, easing between his spread legs.

She wore a throwback velour jogging suit that fit snugly around her ass and thighs. The cropped jacket exposed her flat stomach. He didn't respond right away, examining her instead.

Her makeup and hair were immaculate as usual, but she looked worn. She looked tired and beat down. Her feisty spirit was dim.

“Why you think I’m here?” He reached out and touched the silky hair she wore.

Tia could be a loudmouth, a thief, and a drama queen, but she’d never betray him without a solid reason—at least that’s what he hoped.

She sighed and caught his hand. Her eyes lingered on every object behind the bar as she put it around her waist.

“Listen...” she started.

“I’m listenin’.”

“I ain’t say shit,” she said, easing her face closer to his.

The makeup she wore was thicker than usual.

“I thought he was different.”

He moved to lift her chin, but she moved her face away.

“So then what happened? Why he asking about me?”

She turned and scanned the club, just like he’d been doing before she came out. She turned back around and glared at Monique, signaling her to get lost. He didn’t realize how close she had gotten to the two of them in the brief span of time they had been talking. Monique rolled her eyes and walked away, leaving the shot glass and half empty bottle of liquor on the bar.

“He beat my ass as soon as y’all left.” She looked down. “I don’t know what made him suspicious. We vibed that whole night, D. You know I would never bring bullshit to your doorstep.”

“I know.”

“I ain’t tell him shit. Whatever information he got came from loose lip niggas on the street. I swear on everything. They the ones that told him me and you fuck around. When he confronted me about it again, I still denied everything.”

She held her right hand up like she was under oath. He felt her trembling beneath his hold. She kept glancing over her shoulder every so often, like she was expecting Marco to storm in at any minute. He'd never seen her so scared.

“If he did all that then why you still fuckin’ around with him? I ain’t never know you to like niggas that put they hands on you—and why would he still fuck with somebody he think set him up?”

“I ain’t never experienced this.” She looked away. “And it’s not like I can just quit him. If he whooped my ass just for thinking that I set him up, then what you think he gone do if I stop answering the phone? It ain’t that simple.”

He thought back to Eve and the tumultuous relationships she had when she was alive. Leaving *wasn't* simple. It often resulted in beatings that left her clinging to life. When he was old enough to interfere he started taking the lashings himself, hoping they would spare her. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't.

He sighed and rubbed at his face.

“You tell him about Claudette?”

“Who?” Her eyes shot from over her shoulder.

“Don’t play with me.” He kept the same impassive expression that had been on his face and pulled her in closer to him.

“I swear I don’t know who the fuck you talkin’ about.”

“You think I’m stupid?” he asked.

“No.” She attempted to push from his hold, but he gripped her waist tighter.

“Then don’t play with me like I am.”

She blew out a breath through her nose and rolled her eyes. “You talkin’ about that lil’ bitch you follow on Instagram?”

Dominic drew his head back and narrowed his eyes at her.

“Man, you better watch your fuckin’ mouth.”

One thing about Tia that he loved and hated was her nosey nature. As busy as she portrayed herself to be, she kept tabs on anybody she was attracted to or threatened by, and both he and Claudette fit that criteria. Her nosiness and clinginess toward him made for a lethal combination.

“Whatever D.” She backed out of his grasp and fanned her hand at him. “I ain’t tell him shit about her. It’s not like I needed to anyway.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” His nostrils flared.

She flipped her hair over one shoulder and stuck a blue acrylic nail toward his face.

“You think you Mr. Mysterious or some shit, but you an open book nigga.” She pushed the nail closer to his forehead, and he reached up to grab it. “Don’t touch me. Ain’t nobody stupid. I didn’t have to say shit about her. You told it all by parading her around after she was probably down on Rice Street bonding you out. You following the lil’ girl all on IG, commenting on her pictures. You the one acting like you stupid.”

“Man... get the fuck out my face with all that. Ain’t nobody parading nobody around. You need to find you something productive to do and stop trying to keep up with everything I do.” He tried to keep his voice low, but she knew how to get under his skin.

She always did—especially when she felt he and his dick were being more attentive to someone else.

“Yeah, keep talkin’ all that shit. You bein’ more loyal to a girl you barely even know while I been down for you since you was little.” Her voice rose an octave and her face contorted into a frown. “I got my ass whooped and still ain’t snitch on you, but you more worried about her than me.”

His chest rose and fell as she ranted. Her caramel face was red with anger. She was halfway right, but he would never say that out loud to her. He had just met Claudette, but his attraction to her had nothing to do with looks or personality,

those were just the icing on top. Her spirit consumed him and touched every part of his being that was neglected. Tia only fulfilled a physical need that any girl that could get his dick hard could fill.

Thankfully, their argument had drawn very little attention. Business meetings still went on as usual, dancers still roamed around, and bubblegum trap music still played in the background.

He blew out a breath. “Come here.”

She crossed her arms and gave him the nastiest glare she could muster. He reached out and gripped her arm, pulling her back between his legs where she once was.

“I let you talk shit. Now listen to me.” She didn’t respond and pursed her lips, avoiding his gaze.

“Fine. Fuck it.” He gently pushed her forward, and she stumbled back when she realized he was leaving.

Her eyes rose in panic and she moved to stop him from getting up.

“Okay, okay.” She pushed him back. “I’m listening.”

“Nah. I got shit to do.”

“D!”

He shoved his hands deep in the pockets of his jeans and watched as tears welled in her eyes. His face softened.

“Look... I can’t make no promises on what’s gone happen,” he said.

Her face dropped, and his shoulders slumped.

“He whooped my ass, and you not gone take care of it?” Tears fell, leaving streaks in her makeup.

“I ain’t say I wasn’t going to.”

“Well then, what the fuck are you trying to say?”

He didn’t know. It was like there were two Dominics. One wanted to lie low and stick to the deal he’d made with Quentin, while the other wanted to handle Marco with no

hesitation. He'd always been the type of dude that handled situations without contemplating the aftereffects but hanging with Claudette and hiring Quentin now made him think twice.

Her lip quivered and her hand had become entangled in the black shirt he wore. He shook his head while avoiding her gaze.

“Just let me figure it out, T. I'll figure it out.”

“I SAID BRING me back a souvenir, not pieces of strings,” Claudette chirped while holding up the bikinis Autumn brought back for her from Mexico.

They lounged around in their dorm, unpacking and sharing the details of their Spring Break. Autumn shared the most, while Claudette sat back living vicariously through her tales of drunken trysts on the white sand beaches of Cabo.

“This stuff is better than boring ass shot glasses and magnets girl.” Autumn dug one more shopping bag out of her suitcase and tossed it to Claudette.

The orange and blue hue of the bag caught her eye. Her eyes gleamed as she saw the designer logo embossed on it.

“What the heck?” She gripped the bag and ran her hand over the hard paper. “How’d you get this?”

Autumn stopped digging through her suitcase and looked up.

“It turns out Uncle Kel is the boy-toy in the relationship.” They looked at each other and then fell over the designer goods in laughter.

“You’re kidding me.” She peeked into the bag moving the tissue paper to the side to get a glimpse of what was inside.

“Nope.” Autumn looked on with a close-lipped grin as she pulled out two totes. “We both have one.”

She rose from her position on the floor and took the bag from Claudette, throwing it over her shoulder. She stomped across the clothes and accessories scattered across the floor like a supermodel on a runway in Milan. The bag looked like it

belonged on her arm. It meshed well with her curvaceous body and the high-end loungewear she donned. Claudette grinned as she reached forward, pulling her from the floor.

“Here.” Autumn gathered her braids over one shoulder and shoved the bag on the opposite one. “You look so cute.”

She pulled her to the full-length mirror that hung on the back of their bathroom door. Claudette looked at her reflection. She looked like a child playing dress-up with her mother’s accessories. Her lean body wasn’t as voluptuous as Autumn’s and her makeup-less face made her look almost prepubescent.

“I look twelve.” She pursed her lips and turned to the side to examine the bag on her shoulders.

“You look the fuck good.” Autumn rolled her eyes and walked back to the mess on the floor.

She hunched her shoulders and took the bag off. She was grateful for the expensive gift, but deep down she knew it wouldn’t get much use. She would still shove her money deep into one of her socks despite Autumn and George’s disdain. She walked back to her seat on the floor and sat back as Autumn rummaged through her bottomless suitcase.

“Supposedly we’re going to the Bahamas this summer,” she said, tossing a worn bikini into a pile of dirty laundry. “I’m already petitioning for you to come. Kel better not fuck this up.”

Claudette giggled and pulled a blanket with the Mexican flag stitched onto it over her legs. It was the only traditional souvenir she had brought back.

“Don’t say that. I’m sure they’re in love.”

Autumn stopped digging and held a shirt up midair.

“Girl please. Kelvin is very much a ho. He changes dudes like I change wigs.” Claudette gasped at her bluntness. “I’m just hoping this one lasts a little longer than the others. I’m enjoying the trips and lavish gifts.”

Although she had met none of Kelvin's boyfriends, Autumn kept her updated on his action-packed love life. His and Autumn's relationship had intrigued her ever since she learned he'd adopted Autumn at only six months old.

Kelvin was the type of parent who approached parenting as a partnership. He gave Autumn room to make her own decisions but made her aware of the consequences of the decisions she made. Their conversations were just as intriguing. They would gossip like girlfriends and then transition into back-and-forth banter about her grades and extracurricular activities on campus.

"Hoes can fall in love." She snuggled deeper under the blanket.

"Claudy..." Autumn tsk'd and shook her head. "He's a hoe with a wandering eye. He'll never be satisfied. They're always on the search for someone better, more exciting, or more attractive. I don't know which guys are worse, hoes or broken ones."

"Broken ones?"

"Yeah, the dudes with mommy and daddy issues, trauma, bullshit like that." Autumn rolled her eyes and zipped up the suitcase she'd finally emptied.

"So what's your theory on those types of guys?" Her curiosity was piqued even though Autumn's theories on love and life were probably Kelvin's theories that she regurgitated like proven facts.

"Just as bad as dating a hoe. They're emotionally unavailable. I'd rather have to deal with a wandering eye than a grown ass man that would rather put a wall between me and him. It's mentally exhausting having to peel back layer after layer just to get to the cause of all of his damn issues."

"Interesting."

Dominic's butterscotch face appeared in her thoughts. He was one of the broken ones Autumn was talking about. He was hard, distrustful, full of layers—a puzzle that she constantly worked toward solving.

“But, what if both of you are broken?” She didn’t look up when she asked and busied herself with the fringed ends of the blankets.

“Two broken people don’t need to be involved with each other,” Autumn replied.

She hoisted the empty suitcase in her hand and shoved it under her bed, which was surprisingly bare.

“But if they’re both broken, wouldn’t that make them closer? Make their bond tighter? They finally have someone that understands their pain.”

She tried to control the passion that weaved its way into her words. She didn’t want to seem too invested in the conversation.

“Bond? More like codependence.” Autumn scooped the pile of dirty laundry in her hands and tossed it into the worn mesh hamper they shared. “Bonding over trauma will put you in a revolving door of bullshit. Both people should seek therapy, not each other.”

She organized and folded the rest of the junk she pulled from her suitcase. It was a mixture of swimsuit coverups, loungewear, wigs, and makeup. Claudette stared ahead, running her fingers over the blanket.

“Was Jeremiah broken?” she asked.

The air in the room seemed to thin, and Autumn’s motions became rigid at the mention of her late boyfriend. She folded and unfolded a white spaghetti strapped tank. Her face held no expression, not even a frown.

“He used to have these fucked up dreams.” She folded the tank top again and smoothed out the wrinkles. “I remember I used to sneak out to spend the night with him. His mama had kicked him out, so he was crashin’ on an air mattress at his friend Shad’s. That thing had the worst slow leak in it, I swear.”

“Anyways...” She shook her head like she was pulling thoughts she had suppressed long ago back to the forefront of her mind. “I ain’t never heard a scream like his. That shit

would make my skin prickle with goosebumps. He would sit up like he was possessed and we both would be covered in his sweat.”

Autumn’s eyes wouldn’t move from the thin tank. Claudette’s arms had goosebumps of their own. She pulled her knees to her chest underneath the blanket.

“Did he ever talk about them?”

“Not exactly.” Autumn sat the tank top to the side and picked up a t-shirt. “He only told me that his friend was shot and killed in front of him when they were little. I just assumed maybe he relived that shit every night.”

“That must’ve been hard for both of you.”

“It’s life.” Autumn shrugged. “I try to imagine that he’s big chillin’ up in heaven with his friend, looking down on me.”

“I bet he is. Like a guardian angel or something.” Claudette smiled.

Autumn nodded and looked up at her. “You think Dominic is broken?”

Claudette’s eyes got big, and she looked away from her. He was, but she wouldn’t tell anyone.

“You care about him, don’t you?” she asked.

Claudette only nodded her head and rested her chin on her knees. Dominic had the unique ability to make her feel several things all at once. With him she was needy, full of lust, infatuated, and mad at anyone who didn’t see the greatness in him.

Autumn nodded, finally acknowledging her burgeoning feelings for him.

“You can care, just don’t forget what I told you. Just as much as he can make you feel invincible, he can strip you down bare and make you feel pain like you never felt.”

Her stomach sank at Autumn’s gory prediction.

“I took you off the schedule a week ago, baby girl,” Roc said, sweeping up a clump of hash browns.

“What do you mean you took me off?” Claudette pinched her eyebrows together as sweat leaked through the dark collared shirt she wore.

Her raspy voice sounded more hoarse than usual and she had a dry cough that wouldn’t leave no matter how much cough suppressant she downed. The noisy chatter inside the diner made her head throb in painful thumps.

“I thought D chopped it up with you about it?” He stopped sweeping.

“No, why would he need to talk to me about my work schedule?”

She let out a deep cough that rattled her chest, and Roc frowned. Her body felt warm. The heat started from her head and ended at the soles of her feet.

“Look, why don’t you go in the back and call him real quick. You don’t look good.”

She sighed and rolled her eyes. It took her an hour to get there on a bus with a busted AC unit full of screaming babies and disgruntled afternoon commuters. She wasn’t getting back on another bus *and* going back to campus because Dominic told her boss to take her off of the schedule.

Stomping into the breakroom, she collapsed on the frayed couch they used for naps. Another cough rattled her chest as she pulled her phone from her bag and punched his name. It was barely on the second ring before he answered.

“Why would you tell Roc to take me off the schedule? Do you know how long it took me to get here?” She rattled off the questions in between coughs.

She heard static and the rustling sound of him moving around wherever he was.

“Chill out. I’m outside,” he responded.

She pursed her lips at his response and hung up. A cough mingled with a sneeze exploded from the depths of her chest as she threw on her backpack and stormed out of the breakroom.

Roc watched her as she left. He tilted his head and rested his arm on the broom, chucking up two fingers when she breezed past him and out of the front door. The sticky heat greeted her as she strode outside, looking for Dominic's black Charger. She wiped a coat of sweat from her neck and let out another cough.

The small toot of a horn gained her attention. It was Dominic in a car that wasn't his. It was a compact white Honda that looked familiar. Her heavy feet moved toward the passenger side. He hit the locks to let her in and she collapsed into the passenger seat.

"What the hell? Why did you tell Roc to take me off the schedule?"

She wiped at her watery eyes and reached forward, turning the air on full blast. Her manners had disappeared amid the chaotic bus ride and impromptu schedule change.

"Damn, no *hello? How you doin?*" He raised an eyebrow at her.

"Hello," she responded sarcastically. "Thanks for making a decision for me that nobody asked you to make. You seem to be just fine, so no need for me to ask."

She shoved the buckle of her seatbelt into its latch and let out a series of coughs.

"What's wrong with you?" His foot hit the pedal and the tiny Honda shot out of the parking lot like a race car.

"You. You're what's wrong with me right now."

It was a combination of things, but in that moment, he was the only person she could direct her anger at.

"Fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Her body trembled underneath the chill of the air conditioner.

“It means why’re you telling *my* manager to take *my* name off of the schedule at *my* job?”

He weaved the car in and out of the rush-hour traffic that lined interstate forty-five. There was no music playing and her heavy breathing filled the space.

“Man, I ain’t seen you in a week and you want to talk shit to me about some bullshit ass job?”

They were having their first real argument on a busy interstate and she didn’t know whether to laugh or scream. The other disagreements they had were minor compared to this standoff. Their voices rose and the cars that surrounded them blurred. Time moved quicker than normal.

“Yes! It’s my job! Why would you do that?” She coughed out the last few words and rolled the passenger side window down to inhale the outside air.

“Because I had to!” His deep voice boomed and his caramel face turned red.

The veins in his arm protruded because of the rough way he gripped the steering wheel. He jammed the turn signal on and exited off the highway.

“You didn’t have to do anything! What does my job have to do with you?”

“Fuck this. I’m not about to go there with you right now.” He stopped at a stoplight and maxed the volume out on the stereo.

Loud rap music pierced her sensitive ears. She turned the volume back down.

“We most definitely can go there.” She folded her arms and turned in her seat to face him.

The breeze from the open window tickled the back of her neck as he sped off from the stoplight. He didn’t glance her way and kept his focus on the road. He made sharp turns and hit the brakes of the car with so much force; it jolted her forward.

“Why you comin’ at me like this over some bullshit? Talking about you want to go there? Okay, we damn sure can!”

Her eyes ballooned, and she fought the urge to open the door when he stopped the car at another red light.

“You can be so ridiculous! I swear!” she screamed.

“I fuckin’ robbed somebody!” Her body steeled in her seat. “I robbed a nigga, and he threatened to pull up on me! You happy now?”

Her mouth was dry and for once since she had been sick, she had no urge to cough.

“I... I don’t understand. What does that have to do with my job?”

The car came to an abrupt stop, and he shoved the gear in park.

“You want me to break the shit down to you Claudette? Want me to draw you a fuckin’ picture?” He faced her, and she shuddered at the redness of his eyes. “It means he wants to kill me and if he can’t get to me, then he’s comin’ for you.”

Her mouth opened and then closed. She still didn’t understand anything he said. It sounded like something out of a movie.

“But I didn’t do anything?” she whispered and looked away from him.

Her eyes went toward the windshield where she noticed they were at Diane’s house in her empty driveway. She finally realized they were in her car.

“Nah duh.” He dragged his hands down his face. “But the nigga know you be with me and he knows where you work. That’s why I told Roc to take you off the schedule. *Damn*. I wanted to tell you in person, not over a fuckin’ text or FaceTime.”

Somebody wanted to kill her?

Her mind couldn’t even comprehend that notion. She shook her head and reached forward to grab her bag.

Autumn was right.

“She was right,” she said, shaking her head.

She hadn’t even realized the words had slipped out of her mouth as she reached for the door handle in a daze.

“Who?” he asked. “What you talkin’ about?”

“Nothing. I can walk to the bus stop from here.” She pulled the handle of the door and it popped open, but he reached over her to pull it back closed.

“Nah, what you talkin’ about?” he asked again.

She shrugged and shook her head. She had to leave. She needed to get out. She needed to get away from him, that house, that car.

“Autumn.”

She didn’t care if he knew who she was talking about. He didn’t care enough about her to realize that his every move affected her, so why should she spare his feelings?

Why was she even still there?

She needed to leave.

“Oh, that’s why you leaving? Your hateful ass homegirl finally got in your head? She ain’t never liked me anyway. I guess she got her wish, huh?”

She hacked out another cough and moved to open the door again as Autumn’s words rewound and played on a loop in her head. *He’s reckless. A straight crash dummy. When people see him, they see you.*

“Fuck her!” His voice was strained, and he sounded defeated. “Leave then!”

She was in a whirlwind. Everything she wanted to say to him sat in the back of her throat. He was lashing out and she couldn’t bring herself to face him. She knew if she turned around and saw his face, she wouldn’t be able to leave.

One of her legs dangled out of the car while she attempted to climb out again.

“Next time your so-called friend is sitting there bashing me and talking shit about me, you tell her I’d fuckin’ kill for you!” His chest heaved up and down. “You tell her I’d lay down and let a nigga kill me before I let them lay a hand on you!”

She gasped at the rawness of the words he yelled. She had never seen or heard him as open as he was in that moment. She didn’t remember closing the door to the car or letting her bag fall from her hands. She didn’t even remember climbing over the middle console and flinging herself into his chest. Her vision was blurry with tears that fell so fast they soaked her face and lips. She straddled his lap, sobbing. His chest still rose and fell, and he *still* hadn’t touched her.

“You don’t mean any of that ‘Nic... don’t talk like that.’” She spoke into his chest through her sobs.

She moved her face from the bunched fabric of his shirt and looked up at him. His head rested on the headrest of the driver’s seat and his hands sat at his sides.

“I meant every word.” He raised his head from the headrest and looked at her.

He reached up, wrapping one hand around her braids and shoving his mouth onto hers. His tongue caressed hers roughly. He had her emotions scattered all over the place and her body on fire. The headache she had was only a gentle thump that was no longer a worry. His rough hands shoved up her shirt and his mouth on hers were the only things she could focus on.

He took his mouth off of her lips and moved to her face where he kissed the tears that continued to fall.

“Stop cryin’,” he whispered in between kisses.

She tried to catch her breath while his soft lips pecked each wet spot on her face. She took a deep breath as his fingers followed his lips, wiping whatever he couldn’t kiss away. As soon as she caught her breath, his tongue was back inside of her mouth, kissing her even harder.

She was so enthralled in his kisses she hadn’t realized that he’d maneuvered the driver’s side door open. One long leg

stuck out while she still straddled his lap. He pulled her in closer and hoisted his hands under her legs while he stuck the other leg out. Before she knew it, they were outside the car, his tongue still in her mouth and her arms wrapped around his neck.

The beaming sun on her forehead brought back her awareness, and she pulled her lips from his. She stared at him through swollen eyes and he stared back. Her mouth opened to question his actions, but instead of the question, a sneeze barreled through her mouth and into his face. He didn't flinch, but his eyes closed in surprise.

“Ugh,” she groaned. “Sorry.”

She slid from his arms and covered her hot face. The cough she suppressed throughout their kisses was now back with a vengeance. It was so rough that her chest ached. His heavy hand moved to her forehead while she wheezed for air.

“You got a fever,” he said. “Come in and lay down.”

She hadn't realized how much she missed him or his touch. She missed him so bad that even the act of him checking her temperature made her drip with need. She was a mess. A sick, horny, crazy mess. She had to be insane to still want someone who did something so stupid that it put her life in danger.

“I don't want to bother Diane and Jo with my coughing. Just take me back to campus... if it's safe.”

He ignored her and went back into the car to grab her bag.

“They gone.”

His words were clipped. The tension from earlier was still there. He was still mad, and she was too weak to fight him. They said nothing else while they made their way inside the house. She followed him into his bedroom where he left the door open behind them. The room was spotless as usual. It still smelled of him and she savored the sandalwood and marijuana scent before her sense of smell disappeared from the sickness she fought.

He dropped her backpack and approached her. The closer he got to her, the further she moved away. He looked like he was on a mission.

“Nic...” The back of her legs touched his bed.

He reached out and clutched the bottom of her shirt, pulling it from her frame in one swift motion. Next, his hands found the button of her jeans. He unbuttoned them without hesitation and squatted on the floor where he pulled her sock covered feet from her sneakers.

“Nic...” She let out another cough. “What’re you doing?”

“We need to break the fever. Help me take your pants off. You got too much shit on.”

She didn’t question him and shoved the jeans from her legs. She stood in front of him with a warm body in nothing but a bra and panties. No one had ever seen her so bare and her lanky arms crossed each other to hide herself from him. He ignored her, gathering the clothing in his hands and folding each item.

Maybe he *was* on to something. She felt cooler without the layer of clothing stuck to her limbs.

Her body shook as another chill hit her. There was a chalky taste in her mouth mixed with the minty flavor from his tongue. She grew weaker the longer she stood there.

Instead of waiting for him to say something, she turned and climbed into his bed. The heaviness of her dry eyes was getting harder and harder to control. Her body no longer had the fuel to go.

The only solace she got was that she was in his room, in his bed, watching him. His small room felt familiar—like she was back home in Marietta, but different. The familiarity and comfort she felt wasn’t because of the room, it was because he was there.

The last image she saw before falling asleep was him placing the pile of her folded clothes at the foot of his bed.

“Stop Clo’,” Dominic said.

She swatted his hand away for the second time and buried her head back beneath his blanket. He wouldn't leave her alone and let her sleep cocooned in his scent. Her sleep was fitful. Each time she fell into a deep slumber, images of a faceless person chasing her would wake her. The heavy beating of her heart and the fear of the unknown figure would cause her eyes to jolt open.

The sun set hours before, and the only light in the room was the light from the hallway that snuck in through the open bedroom door. Diane and Josiah still hadn't come home.

“Come on... let me feel your head again.” He pulled the blanket back.

“No.”

She heard him sighing and swearing underneath his breath. He quieted, and she waited for him to get up from the bed to leave, but he didn't move. Instead, he kissed the lobe of her ear.

“Come on. Let me see,” he whispered.

She knew he'd been watching her sleep. Even while in a deep slumber, she felt him holding her in different places. He would hold her tight around the waist until she got restless and then he would pull her onto his chest where he would cradle her like a newborn. His phone rang often, forcing him to constantly leave and come back.

Her skin felt sticky and there was a chalkiness in her mouth.

“I need to shower,” she said hoarsely.

She tried to rise, but her arms gave out and she collapsed back onto the bed instead. He stood and left the room. She heard water running and the thud of cabinets closing. Seconds later, he was back. He was shirtless and black basketball shorts hung from his tapered waist. She tried to rise again.

“Be still,” he said.

He approached her, pulling the blanket off of her, exposing her bare legs and midriff. She closed her eyes as he pulled her panties down and moved to unhook her bra with ease. He had no trouble unfastening the hooks, doing it with one hand. He scooped her in his arms, leaving her bra and panties on the bed.

They moved through the quiet house, entangled in one another's arms. In the bathroom, he eased her into the tepid water that felt like silk against her clammy skin.

"My hair." She moved her heavy arms to salvage the braids.

"I got you." He pulled an elastic band from the pocket of his shorts and scooped the braids in his hand, twisting them into a bun.

She crinkled her nose up at him.

"What?" he asked.

"How'd you learn to do that?"

He chuckled and grabbed a towel that was lying on the side of the bathtub.

"My mama had a lot of nights where she got fucked up. Somebody had to take care of her the next day and make her look decent in case the CPS worker popped up."

"I see." She looked down at her naked body in the water, thinking of Eve and her antics.

He submerged the towel in the water and lathered it with the Ivory soap that he had sitting on top of the towel. She wanted to cover up, but her limbs couldn't move. Thankfully, his eyes didn't linger on the intimate areas of her body for long.

"You was doing a lot of talking and moving in your sleep." He dragged the towel across her shoulders and down her arms.

"I don't sleep too well when I'm sick."

She didn't. She also couldn't sleep well knowing there was someone who wanted to end her life.

“You need to sleep or you won’t feel better.”

His hand moved the towel along her stomach and down her waist. She held her breath while he swiped it between the lips of the most intimate part of her body. Just as quickly as his hand moved there to wash, it left. It moved down her legs, in between her toes. He even pulled her up and wiped her backside. She was glad he couldn’t see the heat of embarrassment radiating over her body.

She stood while he pulled the plug to let the water drain from the bathtub. Her teeth chattered against one another.

“I’m coming,” he said.

His movements became quicker as he gathered the cotton towel that was resting on the lid of the toilet seat and flung it around her body. Before she could protest, he hoisted her back in his arms and carried her back to the bed where he laid her in the spot she was in before. This time her body sank into the bed comfortably because there was no clamminess or sweat coating her limbs.

“Be back,” he called over his shoulder, leaving out of the room.

Seconds later, he returned with a glass of orange juice and two pills in his hand.

“Here. It’s Tylenol.”

She held her hand out for the pills and he dropped them, waiting for her to swallow the pain relievers. They had a hard time going down because of the dryness of her throat, but in a desperate attempt to feel better, she forced them down.

He pushed the glass of orange juice into her hand. “Drink it all.”

There was something different about him since their argument. He was more pensive. All the lust from his eyes was absent.

She gulped down the orange juice and handed the glass back to him. He took it and walked over to his slides, sliding his sock covered feet in them. He was leaving.

“Can you stay in here with me, please?” Her voice sounded meek and scratchy. “At least until I fall asleep?”

The situation felt eerily similar to her interactions with Bryson when she was young and bedridden with a cold. He would sit up with her for hours until she fell asleep. George would fuss, saying he was making her too dependent on him.

Dominic didn't even look at her before he eased the slides back off and set the glass down on the windowsill.

“What's wrong?” he asked, walking back to the bed and pulling the blanket back, exposing her nude body.

“I won't be able to fall asleep if I'm by myself.”

He sighed, looking at the bedroom door and then back at her. This time his eyes lingered on her body, making her shift around to reach for the blanket he still held in his hand. He moved it away from her opened hand and placed a knee on the bed. Her legs fell open, calling him to her. He fell between them and her arms took their rightful place around his solid body.

“Can you breathe?”

“Yeah,” she lied.

She didn't care. She just needed him close.

“Where's Diane and Jo?”

It was even later, and they still hadn't come home.

“Gone.” She squeezed his body with the little strength she could muster. “Jo stayin' with his friend and I paid for Diane to go to some church conference.”

“Oh.” His shoulders relaxed underneath her touch. “And your car?”

“Parked at Tony's.”

“Jo and Diane know what's going on?” she asked.

“Jo do.”

Her hands found their way onto his head where she scraped her fingernails through his coarse curls. She was sure

Diane knew too, but she wouldn't bring it up.

“Is he threatening them too?”

“No.”

She took a deep breath and studied the ceiling, listening to his even breaths above her. She wanted to ask more questions, but his tone warned against it. She needed to know more about the person who thought it was okay to threaten her life for something she had no hand in. *How could she have been so stupid to let herself fall into the very situation Autumn warned her against?*

She stopped raking her fingers across his scalp. “What made you do it?”

“Do what?” he asked.

His tone was grating.

“You know... rob that person?” She sighed after getting the question out.

It sounded surreal coming out of her mouth. His body tensed underneath her hold and he buried his face deeper into her chest like he was trying to hide from her.

“A lot of shit made me do it.”

“Like?” He shoved his arms beneath her.

He squeezed her. “You ever go days without eating?”

“No.” She sucked in a sharp breath.

“The longest I ever went was five. My mama used to make up little dumb games when we ain't have food. My favorite one was the music game.”

“How'd you play that?”

“She'd sing a song, and I had to guess the singer and the name of the song. We played all five days.” She moved her fingers across his head again. “I ain't never been so hungry in my life. By the third day, I hated that fuckin' game.”

“I'm sorry 'Nic.”

“Yeah... me too.” He moved down, burying his face into her stomach. “The next day I went into a grocery store and shoved anything I could get my hands on in my backpack and ran out that bitch. They didn’t catch me that time, but I got caught plenty of other times after that.”

She heard the torment in his voice.

“But what about with Diane? She was stable, right? She wouldn’t let you go without food.”

She stared up at the picture of Eve, wondering how someone could put their child through those experiences.

“When I moved here, I started going to juvie. First time I was there, the lights got cut off. Second time I went in, the lights *and* the water was cut off.” He paused. “My aunt like to talk a lot of shit about me and my life, but when I’m home, she don’t want for nothing. I just can’t trust her to hold shit down for Jo without my help.”

They both went quiet, retreating into their own thoughts. Her fingers brushed the top of his head again.

“Baby?”

His deep voice broke the trance she was in. She didn’t respond right away, unsure if he had called her that by mistake.

He lifted, resting his weight on his forearms.

“I won’t let nothing happen to you.” He shoved his forehead against hers, forcing her to look him in his eyes. “You know that right?”

She still didn’t respond, but his lips found their way back on hers, anyway. This time he was gentle, taking his time. They’d never kissed in that way. His soft lips smacked against hers, pecking her lips. These kisses were slow and full of pent-up passion that they’d both been holding on to. The bun he’d tied up came unraveled and her braids spread around the pillow beneath her. He stopped and gripped her round face in his hand.

“You’d never fold on me. Right?” He pecked her lips again and pulled back to stare at her.

Her body ached for him in ways she didn’t know existed.

“Right.”

“Even when I’m gone?” His pillowy lips pecked hers again.

Her eyes ballooned, and she tried to raise from beneath him. “What do you mean? Where are you going?”

He didn’t reply, but his eyes told her everything she needed to know. He was preparing her for the worst—subtly letting her know that in his world she couldn’t physically have him forever.

“Just promise me.”

She nodded while he caressed her face.

“I need to hear you say it.”

“I promise Dom—” His lips crashed into hers, rewarding her.

She pulled her mouth from his, and he chased her lips, trying to capture them again.

“Wait.” She tucked her bottom lip under her teeth to get his attention.

“What’s wrong?”

“Promise me something too.” She leaned forward, pushing her forehead into his like he’d done to her.

“What’s that?”

“I want to give you something, but you have to promise me you’ll take it though.”

He narrowed his eyes but nodded.

“I don’t know what you trying to give me.” They chuckled together. “But I’ll take it and guard it with my life. For real.”

“Good.” She moved her head from his and fell back onto the bed. “It’s something nobody else will ever get to take—

only you.”

His head tilted and she saw his expression change once he realized what she was referring to. If she couldn't physically have him forever, then she would make sure they were bound together in some way.

His hands moved to her thighs where he rested them. “You think I deserve that?”

“You're deserving of me and so much more.”

She didn't have to say another word before his mouth was on her neck, her breasts, and back on her lips. She closed her eyes in elation. The ache in her limbs was no longer a problem. The looming cough that rattled her chest all day had hidden itself for the time being.

He left a trail of wet kisses down her stomach until he reached the part of her body that craved him most in that moment. He spread her legs wide, pecking her there repeatedly until her hips squirmed, begging for him to stop his teasing.

“Nic... I swear if you don't...” Her words came out in a hoarse whisper.

She felt his mouth spreading into a smile against her.

He pecked her there again and laughed as her hips floated above the mattress, chasing his tongue. She wanted him everywhere in every way possible.

“Nic!”

He granted her wish as he shoved his tongue where she wanted it. A deep gasp erupted from the depths of her chest as she threw her head back. He swirled and sucked so much that it made her dizzy. She tried her best to control herself and give the illusion that she'd had someone explore her in that way. It didn't matter though, because he already knew that he was the first.

He unlatched his mouth with a loud smack. She hadn't even realized that she'd been chanting his name like a prayer the entire time.

“Fuck,” he said, laying one last sensual kiss on her soaking wet core. “You know I love to hear you.”

Before she had time to react, he’d already climbed from the bed, leaving her panting with spread legs. She almost protested his departure until she saw him digging through the drawer of his nightstand.

The aluminum wrapper he pulled out gleamed under the dim lighting in his room. She thought its appearance would stop her plan, but it only made her heart drum knowing that in a few more minutes he would finally be inside of her.

Her breathing increased as she watched him turn and pull down his baggy basketball shorts and take off his socks. He was naked for her, and he was more beautiful than she’d imagined with all of his tattoos and scars exposed. She watched him open the package and sheath himself with the condom. He did it with such ease that her mouth grew dry. Everything intensified. His bare feet slapped against the hardwood floor as he approached her needy body.

“You sure you want to do this?” he asked, climbing back between her legs.

She was more than sure. There was nothing that she wanted more in that moment than to give herself to him. Her braids brushed against her back as she nodded, biting her bottom lip. He looked at her like she held his life in her hands. She saw his chest rise and fall underneath the glow from the light that still trickled in from the hallway.

“You so fucking beautiful. You know that right?” He said it with so much conviction, as if he dared her to disagree.

His words knocked the air from her lungs. They made her body shake.

She didn’t have time to respond before he buried his face between her legs again—something that never got old. He took his time sucking, teasing and getting her lubricated once more. One calloused hand palmed her breast while he worked. The stimulation was almost too much to bear.

Once again, she transcended awareness, chanting and swearing to God that she belonged to Dominic. Right when she was on the cusp of coming undone, he stopped, raising on his knees and easing inside of her. Her body clenched in response, rejecting the foreign object. He stopped and fell forward, taking her lips into his.

“Relax,” he said with his lips plastered on hers. “It’s gone hurt, but I promise I’ll make it better.”

Tears coated her eyes as she tried to breathe through the stinging sensation. It was a bittersweet feeling full of pain and very little pleasure even with the excess wetness from her arousal and his tongue. He didn’t push any further, kissing every surface of her distraught face instead.

“Let me make it better... let me make it better,” he whispered over and over again. “You my G, right?”

“I... I am.” A tear fell, and she fought to keep her eyes from closing.

“Then brush that shit off and look at me when I’m taking care of you. Don’t I always make it better?”

She forced her eyes open while nodding.

“Keep going,” she responded with her mouth hanging open, staring into his dark eyes.

At her command, he inched forward. Starting and stopping. Working slowly. Going in and out. The pain was still present, but she welcomed it. The mere thought of him being buried deep inside of her kept her aroused amid the pain.

“I’m almost there.” He pecked her lips.

Growing impatient, she wrapped her arms around his body, hugging him as tight as she could, forcing the last few inches inside of her. She needed all of him, right then, even if she felt like she was being split wide open.

“That’s my favorite girl... I knew you could take it.” He pumped, keeping eye contact with her.

There was no immediate mind-blowing pleasure for herself, but she noticed the gradual slump of his eyelids. It was

a look she secretly loved; it was the same look he got after smoking. He was high off of her and she could watch him enjoy her for the rest of her life. His mouth hung open, and he cursed beneath his breath as he pumped in and out.

“Are you okay?” he asked, pushing his forehead against hers with wide eyes.

“I’m okay ‘Nic.”

The pain subsided, but it still didn’t feel earth shattering. She moved her hips in unison with his anyway, mimicking what he did. Their sweat soaked bodies slid against each other, creating a friction that made her nipples harden. They rocked together until he let out a groan that made her toes curl.

“Fuck... fuck... fuck.” He maintained eye contact with her.

The pulsating feeling of his climax inside of her made her world stand still because she’d gotten exactly what she’d wanted.

16

DOMINIC'S FAVORITE THING about making love to Claudette was the way she blossomed right before his eyes.

The sun had yet to rise and his bedroom was still coated in darkness. He had lost track of how many times he had rolled out of his sleep and into her. Each time she would welcome him without care. She let him lead, following his movements. The confidence in her body that she lacked before was now an afterthought.

He didn't even believe there was such a thing as making love before she came along, or at least that's what he thought they were doing. To him there was only sex and fucking. Sex was a monotonous chore reserved for girls he entertained often. He didn't take them serious enough to date them, but he refused to let them go because they benefitted him in some way. Fucking was for girls like Tia. It was toxic, rowdy and good, but he would always feel restless afterward—like she had turned his energy upside down.

It was different with Claudette.

Making love to her was like taking the first hit of a blunt he'd been waiting to spark. It was like feeling the sun on his skin after being locked in a dark cell for months. He'd never be the same after being inside of her.

“Oh, my fucking.... don't stop,” she rasped out in quick breaths.

She only cursed on two occasions—when she was mad at him and when he buried himself so deep inside of her, that it was damn near impossible to keep her eyes open.

He had never been a missionary type of dude, but he realized it was the best way to take her. She would hold him as tight and hard as she could while her nails clawed into his back, leaving deep scratches. Her hoarse voice would whisper sweet nothings in his ear when she was being his good girl. She'd forgotten the pain of losing her innocence and experienced nothing but pure ecstasy from then on. That had been his only concern.

“Nuh uh, open them.” He kissed her fluttering eyelids. “You know I got to see you.”

He pulled out, leaving her empty and soaked. Their disconnect was her punishment from depriving him of her eyes. She opened them in a panic, searching for him. Her craving for him was something that never got old.

“Come back, they're open.” Her arms stretched out to him, while her lips pouted.

He couldn't get enough of her, so he gave her what she wanted. He plunged back in and her arms wrapped around his sweaty body once again.

“Don't do that again,” she whispered in his ear before pulling its lobe between her teeth—she'd turned into his bad girl just that quickly.

After hearing those words, his hips moved faster, slamming into hers. Her little body took the pounding without complaint—something else he loved. Her only focus was consuming every fiber of him in any way possible, despite her comfort level.

They held each other's gaze. The blissful look on her face was unbelievable. He never thought he'd be the one to put such a look on anybody's face.

He slammed into her one last time, feeling her walls clench around him while he held out. He would never grow tired of watching her climax beneath him.

Her eyes rolled into the back of her head and he finally let her close them.

When she was spent, he pulled out, giving himself permission to finish because he'd taken care of her.

Dominic's throat was scratchy.

The smell of the bacon Diane fried made his stomach turn in disgust. She hummed along to Bobby Womack's heavy crooning that played from the stereo sitting on their cluttered kitchen counter. It was midweek, so she enjoyed the secular music that she would shun on Sundays.

The small kitchen felt smaller than normal. When he was younger it felt huge, like a gourmet kitchen. It was bigger than any kitchen he'd ever seen at the time. The 80s style decor was never upgraded. Ugly wood paneling and dark wood cabinets covered the walls. The lighting in the room was always dim no matter how much Diane tried turning on all the lights and pulling the blinds open.

"You better take you something before you get in front of that judge tomorrow," she said, flipping the pieces of bacon over in the skillet.

He held in a cough that fought to come up as he sat at the dining table.

"I'm good." He brushed a hand across his warm forehead.

She looked over her shoulder with one brow raised and then turned back to the bacon. He watched her move across the kitchen, cracking eggs and mixing batter. Watching her cook was something that relaxed him. He started doing it when he was younger. When shit got too thick, he'd creep in and watch her whip up meals like a trained chef. He guessed it was the monotony and the normalcy of it that calmed him.

"I talked to Pastor Johnson yesterday." She poured batter in another skillet that she'd greased.

His eyes rolled behind her back. "For real? About what?"

"You."

That wasn't surprising. His fingers drummed against the table.

"What about me?"

She whisked the remaining batter left in the bowl and sat it back down.

“I want you to get baptized.”

The cough he fought to suppress finally expelled itself.

“For what?” he choked out.

He paid the bills, went to church like she asked, and tried to keep trouble from her house. Now she wanted Pastor Johnson to dunk his overgrown ass in a tub of water because he was in trouble again? It was possible she was losing her mind.

“You ever repented for your sins?” Her back was to him when she asked the question. “Ever asked God to forgive you for any fucked up shit you ever did?”

He thought back to his youth—the stealing, fighting, shootouts, and bullshit. God had never crossed his mind during those times. God hardly crossed his mind now.

“Nah...” He scratched at his eyebrow.

“You ever accepted Jesus Christ as your savior? You ever accept him into your heart?”

He barely knew how to pray, so when would he have possibly had time to do that?

“No.”

She flipped the pancake she had in the skillet, before turning to him. Her eyes were dull. She looked like she hadn't slept the night before, or like she was overworked. It was odd, because her youthful glow was never absent as long as she'd been in his life.

“I'm getting old D. I can't fight this fight with you no more.” The mucus in his chest rattled as he cleared his throat.

She turned back to the skillet and scooped the pancake out with a spatula held together by tape.

“I'm not asking you to fight with me. I don't ask you for no money. I keep the lights and shit on here.” He leaned back in his chair.

It seemed like everybody had been on his head. Everybody had something to say. The only person he'd found solace in was Claudette, and it was no telling how long she'd put up with him before growing tired of his shit.

“That’s not what the fuck I’m talking about.” She threw the spatula on the counter. “You so busy running the streets you never stop to think about what it does to the people around you.”

She left the counter and inched closer to him at the table. They both eyed each other. Her face twisted in torment.

“Man... I’m the one that’s gone have to answer for the shit I do. Not you.”

The wrinkles on her forehead he had never noticed became the focal point of her face as she pointed a long finger at him.

“See, that’s where you got it all fucked up.” The finger she pointed shook.

His mouth grew dry.

“I answer too. My knees should be bloody as much as I stay on them praying for your hardheaded ass. The only time I’m at ease is when you back in that damn cage because at least I know I’m not having to bury you.”

“I don’t ask you to pray for me.” His shoulders slumped, and he pushed back from the table.

“No, but it’s what you do when you love somebody and want better for them. Eve ain’t get a chance to make it right, but you do.”

Eve’s name seemed to conjure up her spirit. He felt her energy in the kitchen, pictured her pacing around the small room. It was all fucked up. She made him the way he was and now everybody wanted to come down on him like he chose to be that way.

“How you even know she wanted to make anything right?” He rubbed at his eyes that watered.

She took a plate from a cabinet and shoved it on the counter with a loud clank.

“One of the last times I talked to her, she told me she was scared.” She picked at the strips of bacon that soaked a paper towel covered plate with grease. “She said your eyes was looking different. You was getting cold with her—distant. She thought it was her fault.”

Maybe that was why she was so tormented in her last days. He still smelled the rancid odor of her unwashed body that laid tangled in their bedsheets. Bathing Claudette brought back memories of him scooping her from their sweat soaked bed and placing her in the bathtub. Her favorite body wash was Calgon’s Hawaiian Ginger. He would steal bottles of the sweet-smelling wash from the local drugstore and wash her from head to toe to shake her from the drunken stupor she’d be in.

He gnawed on his bottom lip.

“If you don’t do nothing else for me, at least do this,” she added, piling the cooked food on the plate. “I need to know you settled your spirit with the Lord. I think it’ll put our minds at ease some.”

“Our?”

“Me and Claudette,” she replied.

A lump formed in his throat at the casual way she spoke her name.

“You been talking to her or something?” His body relaxed back into the chair.

“No, but I know she pray for you.”

He didn’t know what he was doing, but his head shook in a back-and-forth motion, dismissing Diane’s claims. She could make outlandish comments when the Holy Spirit made its way into her body.

“How you know that if she ain’t tell you?”

She walked to the table with the plate in her hand and sat it in front of him.

“She don’t have to say a word. It oozes off her. That baby pray hard for you. Almost as hard as I do.” She sat across from

him and stared, silently urging him to take a bite. “I knew she wouldn’t listen to me and stay away from you. She too far gone, too in love. Too busy begging God to have mercy on you when you ain’t even repented your damn self.”

Saliva coated the insides of his mouth as he pushed the plate away from his face. His throat contracted while his empty stomach gurgled, trying to force up nothing, because lately his diet only consisted of dark liquor.

Diane’s face remained neutral as he shoved back from the table and ran toward the bathroom.

“NICE DRIP. FUNERAL?” Eric asked.

Dominic stared at him before turning to Claudette. His eyes were hard.

“Nah, court,” he replied.

She cleared her throat to break the awkward silence between the three of them.

“Oh.” Eric twisted the short dreads that sprouted from the top of his head.

They sat in a private study room in the school’s library. She called the meeting, hoping it would evoke some inspiration for Dominic because the dead look that had been in his eyes made her ill.

“You didn’t tell me you had court today,” she mumbled from across the table.

He tossed the black blazer he wore on one of the empty chairs between him and Eric. Beneath it he wore a white button-down and slacks. Instead of dress shoes, he wore a sleek pair of sneakers. Oddly, it worked. The tattoos on his neck played peekaboo from underneath the button-down. His hair had grown out a little and the soft curls were lined up. It was obvious he was out of place on campus. Girls’ stares lingered longer than what was socially acceptable and the boys either mugged or looked on in awe, recognizing his face.

Instead of responding to her observation, he looked at Eric. She got what he was insinuating. They weren’t supposed to talk about that in front of him, so she swallowed the rest of her words.

“We noticed you deleted everything off of your IG,” Eric said, typing on his laptop. “Trying to start clean or something?”

Dominic shrugged and rolled his eyes. “Lawyer told me to.”

He rolled his head to the side and looked out of the floor to ceiling windows that encased the room. She rolled her own eyes at his blasé disposition.

“Well, maybe he was on to something. This could be a fresh start. We could shoot some promo pics. Claudette came in clutch with that paper and my boy got an A. He’s down to shoot whatever you want.” Eric grinned at her.

Dominic turned just in time to see the look of admiration on his face.

“I think that’s a good idea.” She shrank under Eric’s gaze.

Dominic’s eyes bounced between the two of them. They stopped on her, burning holes into her warm face.

“We could maximize on all the hype from the Playhouse performance. Shoot some promo pics, maybe a video for that joint you got. Quise is real tough with the camera. He shoots all the frat’s promotional stuff.”

Eric rambled about Marquise’s photography expertise, unaware of the silent war brewing between her and Dominic. His tired eyes roamed her face while she ignored him, trying to look interested in Eric’s words. Her teeth dragged against her bottom lip and she squirmed, picking up a pen on the table in front of her. Her armpits sweated underneath the baby tee she wore.

“Yeah, bro.” He cut Eric off. “It’s whatever.”

Her ears burned as she slammed the pen on the table.

“I’m gonna’ go get a snack. Anyone want anything?” She laughed nervously, pushing back from the table.

Dominic pushed his chair back too, his eyes stroking her deep brown legs as she walked toward the door.

“Yeah, I’ll take a grande green tea matcha latte,” Eric said, clicking around on his computer.

She rolled her eyes at him and walked out of the room with Dominic trailing behind her—uninvited.

“You don’t have to walk me to Starbucks. I’m a big girl.” She walked through the rows of books.

“Did I fucking say you wasn’t?” he hissed.

She stopped, and he ran into the back of her, stepping on the heels of her sneakers. The ends of her braids smacked his face as she turned and shoved his hard chest. He didn’t move.

“Don’t curse at me.” Her words came out in a sharp whisper. “I’m trying to cheer you up and you’re being a jerk. You weren’t even gonna tell me you went to court today.”

He brushed a hand across his head and looked away. “Nah, I wasn’t.”

“So we keep stuff from each other now?” She backed away and shook her head.

His face balled, and he reached for her, pulling at her T-shirt.

“No.” He yanked her closer, looking around at the stacks of books that surrounded them. “For real Clo’?”

She wanted to hit him and hug him all at once. He sounded congested, no doubt because of her. His face remained in a frown. He stretched the bottom of her shirt in his hand as she looked up at him.

“What?”

“You really think I’d keep anything from you?” he asked.

The look on his face was the same look he had when he bared his soul to her that day in the car. Her heart knew everything he told her was true.

“Then why wouldn’t you tell me?”

“Cause I don’t want you keeping up with my court dates or any other nigga’s. You too good for that. You need to be

worried about school.”

She pushed back from him, but he tightened his hold on her shirt.

“Do you honestly think that’s possible for me?” Her hands covered his.

“I’ll make that shit possible.” He let go of the shirt and her hands fell. “Let me stress over that. That’s not for you to worry about. I’m a grown man. I can handle it.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?”

He pushed her deeper into the row of books and covered her mouth with his, biting her bottom lip.

“Keep being you.” He kissed the stinging spot where he bit. “Keep being the light I need.”

She groaned and sucked her swollen lip inside her mouth, massaging it with her tongue.

“Can you do that for me?” he asked.

She nodded, reaching for his belt, ready to unbuckle it in the middle of the quiet library.

Nobody ever told her that sharing her body with him would make her go insane. She would have given anything to have him bend her over in the middle of the dusty rows of books they stood between.

“Clo’.” He reached behind her and gripped her butt hard, palming it in his hands. “I think you know better than that.”

She thought back to the different ways he contorted her body and made her beg when they made love. He liked to hear her voice. He liked to make her promise crazy things, like never letting anyone else touch her the way he did. It was how he punished her when she was bad for him.

She knew better.

His fingers found their way between her legs from behind, rubbing at the fabric that separated him from one of his most favorite parts of her body.

“But you know I always give you what you want,” he added. “I can never tell you no.”

This time he nipped at her neck. She squealed and arched into his fingers.

“You’re right. I... I know better.”

He laughed and pulled his fingers back and his mouth from her neck.

They were so hot and cold that it made her question her sanity. It was the same old push and pull, but amped up a notch. They exchanged words, energies, and feelings. It was a muddled mess that should have driven them apart, but it only made them closer.

“Come on... let’s go get your boyfriend his tea.” He stole one last kiss, focusing on her swollen bottom lip. “Next time make him pay up.”

“Boyfriend?” She smirked. “You think he likes me?”

“He like you. Your head just too in the clouds to notice.”

She studied his movements as he delivered the news to her. He wiped at his mouth and turned away from her.

“I think he’s just nice, that’s all.”

His face contorted into a *yeah, right* expression. His observation was funny to her. She didn’t notice Eric’s crush. If Autumn were there, she’d scold her for being clueless and thinking every nice guy only wanted to be her friend.

“Are you jealous that somebody else wants to be my friend?” Her head cocked to the side and her eyes lit with mischief.

“No.”

She shrugged off his answer. It didn’t matter if he was jealous or not because they were nothing more than friends at that point in time. Although he confused her with his actions, it was obvious he didn’t do girlfriends or relationships. What she knew was that she had somehow found her way into his head and maybe even into his heart, so she’d take the bits and

pieces of him he doled out to her in rations knowing she was getting the short end of the stick. She'd take whatever she could get as long as she had a part of him.

"I think he's corny enough to keep you out of trouble," he said, pinching her on the cheek.

She knew out of trouble meant further away from him and closer to safety—away from gun toting rivals that associated her with him, away from jails and courts.

He walked off without another word and she followed behind him to the elevator where they piled on with a group of sorority girls who ogled his every move, talking loudly, hoping he'd notice them. He ignored them, leaning against the back wall of the elevator.

At Starbucks, his finger curled through one of the belt loops of her denim shorts, keeping her in place in front of him. He paid for her iced coffee and Eric's green tea. He was less guarded and more relaxed, keeping her as close to him as he could.

"Are you going to be nice now?" she asked as they rode the elevator back to the floor they were on.

He snatched her drink from her hand and took a long sip.

"You want me to play nice with that nigga?" He pulled his lips from the straw and raised a brow, testing her.

She thought back to what he'd told her while holding her in the middle of a dusty row of books.

I always give you what you want.

She nodded her head, testing him to see if there was any truth to his admission.

"Then I'll play nice." He gave the drink back to her as they exited the elevator.

“Don’t buy another pint of that crap,” Autumn said, snatching the Chunky Monkey from Claudette’s hand and shoving it back into the deep freezer.

Claudette reached behind her and pulled it back out. They were in the middle of the frozen food aisle in Walmart on a Saturday night, arguing over her ice cream obsession.

“Why is my ice cream choice bothering you so much?” She tossed the pint back in their cart.

“It’s not the choice. It’s the fact that you’ve gone through four pints in the past three weeks.”

Claudette shrugged and grabbed the handles of the cart, preparing to go around her.

“It tastes good.”

“Nah shit, but you’ll also be four hundred pounds come summer if I keep letting you inhale ice cream every night while you binge watch *The First 48*.”

Maybe Autumn’s concerns were valid or maybe not. She didn’t know. Binging on ice cream and reality television had been the only things that kept her sane. She’d tried and failed at studying for Professor Gilrich’s A&P quizzes so much that she was sure her brain would ooze out if she attempted to memorize anymore muscles or bones. The furthest she traveled from campus was to Walmart. There had been no pop-up visits from Dominic, only weekly Cashapps to replace the money she was losing from not working. The last time they talked he’d agreed to let Marquise shoot footage of him that upcoming weekend. He hadn’t reached out to cancel, and she didn’t know if that was a good or a bad sign. She could never be too sure with him.

“If it happens, it happens,” she said flatly, pushing the cart away with the pint inside.

“I’m sorry Claudy, but ain’t no way in hell I’m letting you fuck up my IG pics this summer.” Autumn trailed behind her. “This has to stop.”

She was right; it had to. The binge eating, the nightmares, the ache in her stomach, looking over her shoulder every time she was in public. It all sucked. But she would rather fight over ice cream than admit to Autumn what was really going on.

“Then just leave me out of them.”

“Do you hear yourself right now? You’re my better half. I can’t leave you out.”

They weaved through throngs of people shuffling around the store and parked in one of the three checkout lanes that were open. Claudette pulled out her phone, ignoring Autumn. She checked for Dominic’s name for the second time since they’d been there.

“Why don’t you just call him?” Autumn said coyly, while thumbing through the groceries they picked out.

“Because he’s busy, obviously.” She shoved the phone back in her pocket and leaned forward against the basket.

“Or maybe he’s waiting on you to call him or something.” She stopped organizing the items and looked up.

“He doesn’t wait on me to call. He’s not some dude from campus trying to play hard to get. When he wants to talk, he calls. When he wants to see me, he comes. He’s busy. It’s not that deep.”

“Well, excuse me. I ain’t know you had it like that sis.” Autumn held up her hands. “He needs to do something so you can get out of this funk you’re in.”

She could call, but she wouldn’t. She wasn’t his girlfriend, and girlfriends did things like that. He’d clarified that there were certain aspects of his life that she’d never be privy to. He’d even gone as far as practically pushing her toward Eric, and he *hated* Eric. At least those were the excuses she’d made up in her head as to why it’d be a horrible idea to call him and ask why he’d dropped her like old news.

She shoved the basket forward in line. They loaded the conveyer belt with their groceries. Claudette threw one last box of cereal on the belt and skipped ahead of Autumn.

Ignoring the total, she fished her debit card from her pocket and swiped.

“I thought Roc took you off the schedule?” Autumn asked, loading the bagged groceries in the basket.

“He did.”

“Okay... I know you not balling from writing papers. What’s tea? Where’s the money coming from?”

“Eric put me down with some of his line brothers. I got more clients.”

The lie rolled smoothly off of her tongue as she tossed the last bag into the basket and they pushed the cart out into the parking lot to wait on their Uber.

Truthfully, she didn’t know where the money came from that Dominic sent. The last time they talked about money, he desperately needed more of it. Now, he had hired Vaughn’s lawyer, kept her afloat weekly, and was probably still paying the bills at home. It was coming from somewhere in abundance, and she was sure his disappearing act had something to do with it.

She knew better than to question it. Picking her battles with him was still proving to be difficult. After their blowout she learned that sometimes it was better not to ask or push too hard unless she wanted to hear about the ugly side of him she liked to pretend didn’t exist.

Now she’d become one of his responsibilities, and it left a foul taste in her mouth. The pennies she made from waitressing were laughable compared to the amounts he sent. She only spent a small portion of it for necessities and hoarded the rest. He sent the money every Sunday like clockwork, but always at odd times. It was the only sign she had that he was still alive and free. Sometimes, the notification would jolt her from her restless sleep.

The Uber ride back to campus was quiet. Their driver attempted to make small talk, but Autumn was too busy scrolling through her phone and she was too busy looking out

of the window into the dark streets, wondering where Dominic had gone this time.

Back in their dorm, Autumn primped for another night out. She did an elaborate shimmy, squeezing into the tightest pair of denim jeans she owned. Claudette sat back in her bed, with the Chunky Monkey between her crossed legs, looking in amusement.

“And you were worried about me gaining weight? You’re a biscuit away from busting out of those jeans.” She shoveled a scoop of ice cream in her mouth.

“Shut up. These make my ass look fire.”

“You look like you can’t breathe.” Autumn glared at her over her shoulder. “Where are you going anyway?”

“I told you the Nupes are having a house party tonight.”

“Oh.”

“I swear you’ve been in a daze lately. I would ask you to come, but I already know the answer.” She huffed and brushed the wand curls from her wig.

Claudette had already tuned her out, engrossed in the opening credits of *The First 48*. It was an episode she had probably already seen. Images of detectives crowding around a gruesome crime scene flashed across the tiny flat screen they had on top of Autumn’s dresser.

“Eric keeps asking about you.”

The spoon of ice cream she held in her hand stopped midair. “Why? I just saw him a few weeks ago.”

“You did? Or you *and* Dominic did?”

“Well, all three of us were together.” Claudette rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, he told me you had roped him into helping Dominic.”

“Roped?”

“Well, those are my words, not his.”

Claudette didn't respond and turned back toward the television. She had already missed some of the most crucial details of the investigation. Chunks of fudge melted in her mouth while she listened to the investigators go over the evidence found at the crime scene.

"Any reason he's been asking about you so much?" Autumn moved in front of her, blocking her view of the television.

"Really? You're interrupting my show."

"Yeah, because I want to know why he keeps asking about you." She placed her hands on her hips.

Claudette huffed, throwing her head back. "Why does it matter?"

"Because every time he sees me, you come up. Either he's worried or interested."

She started eating her ice cream again, uninvested in the topic. She had more important things to do than dissect Eric's feelings for her.

"Interested, according to 'Nic. Now move, please."

Autumn's eyes grew, and she moved closer to the bed. "Don't tell me y'all have some tragic love triangle going on?"

"You sound ridiculous."

"Right and you're being ridiculous sitting in this room binging on crime shows and living off of ice cream." She walked back to the mirror and picked up the brush again.

"Let me save you the energy. Tell Eric if he's so concerned about me or wants to talk, he has my number." She fished the remote from underneath the Mexican throw blanket and turned the volume up on the television because she'd be damned if she missed anymore of the show to discuss boys.

Autumn finished getting ready in silence and gave her a nasty glare before tossing a crossbody across her torso and slamming the door shut to their room. Claudette let out a breath and relaxed against the pillow she'd stuck behind her back. Autumn's questioning was too much to handle. She

wanted to know too much—dissect too much. She wanted answers that she didn't even have herself.

Dominic had pulled a disappearing act on her and Eric was sniffing around trying to insert himself into a space someone had already filled. She didn't care if that someone went against everything she knew that was moral. She'd given her body to him and her heart had followed it, tugging at him, begging for him to take it too.

She tried to concentrate on watching the show, but it watched her instead. Her hand moved from the carton of ice cream to her mouth in robotic motions until her stomach felt like it couldn't hold anymore. Once the episode ended, she crawled from the bed and put the rest of it in the freezer of their mini fridge.

On her way back, she glimpsed at herself in the mirror and grimaced. She looked a mess. She hadn't detangled her hair since she'd taken down her braids a week ago, chipped red nail polish coated her fingers and toes, and she didn't remember the last time she'd shaved. She needed some self-care, or at least that's what she assumed. Wiping the smeared fudge from her mouth, she yanked the tank she wore above her head and peeled her jeans from her body.

Hours later, she felt lighter. Maybe George and the scientists that touted self-care as a cure-all were on to something. Or she was just dirty and needed a good shower. When she would feel down, but couldn't pinpoint the reason, George would force her to go shower and send her straight to bed. He'd tell her *a clear head started with a clean body*. She'd sleep like a baby afterward.

She moisturized her hair and styled it into flat twists that she pulled into a bun. Tupac rapped to her about unconditional love while she set up a poor-man's nail salon on the floor between her and Autumn's beds. The night didn't seem as grim as it did before.

Just as she got the Chunky Monkey back out of the freezer and sat down, two solid knocks on the door stopped her. Groaning, she sucked a spoonful of ice cream into her mouth

while dragging herself to the door. They had almost made it an entire week without Autumn losing her keys.

“I swear, you’d lose your head if it wasn’t attached to your body,” she spoke around a mouthful of ice cream, pulling the door open.

“Damn, I ain’t realize I was that forgetful.” She swallowed the ice cream in one big gulp at the sound of the voice on the other side of the door.

“This what you been spending all your money on,” Dominic said, laughing and reaching out to wipe the glob of sticky ice cream stuck on the side of her mouth. “You said you needed a laptop, not ice cream.”

He took the pint from her hand and walked forward, forcing her back into the room. He looked tired, wearing wrinkled clothes that reeked of weed and liquor. She could hardly smell the normal sandalwood scent that typically clung to his body.

“You’re okay?” She finally forced the words from her mouth, watching him close the door behind them.

He fingered the twists on her head in fascination before moving around her. She stared as he toed off his shoes like he lived there and surveyed her mini spa.

“You thought I wasn’t?”

She dragged her hands down the boy shorts she had on and nodded her head.

“I haven’t heard from you in a while.”

“Then why you ain’t call?” he asked in a rigid tone before shoveling a large chunk of her ice cream into his mouth.

“I didn—” she started and stopped herself. “Nothing, never mind.”

She sat back on the floor, not wanting to discuss the many reasons she hadn’t called him. It didn’t matter anymore, because he was there in front of her. Although a weight was lifted from her shoulders, she wondered if she could continue living the way she had been. The uncertainty of his freedom

and safety was crippling. Fear because of his actions had made her a recluse.

He stared at her while she picked up a bottle of nail polish from the floor and shook it. Tupac no longer preached about unconditional love and was now brooding on the bleak outlook of his life.

“You need tissue paper.”

“Huh?” She opened the bottle of clear polish, preparing to prep her toes with the clear base.

He handed her the ice cream to hold and disappeared into the bathroom. Seconds later, he reappeared with squares of folded tissue in his hands. He hiked up his jeans and sat on the floor with her, pulling her long leg into his lap.

She held in her laughter while he tore at the tissue and used it to separate her toes. His movements were delicate—tattooed fingers pulled her toes apart. She thought he would be done after making the impromptu toe separators, but he snatched the clear polish from her hands and started painting smooth, even strokes on each toenail.

“You gone tell me what’s wrong?” He didn’t look up after his question and for that she was glad.

Instead of answering, she went back to eating the ice cream. If she could have made time stand still at that very moment, she would have.

“How do you know something’s wrong?” She sat the ice cream down and rested her weight on her hands as he blew soft breaths on her toes to dry the wet polish.

“I think I earned my masters in Clo’-ology by now.” He moved to pull her other foot in his lap while she giggled. “You must ain’t know that I study you.”

“Do you really?”

“Yeahhh,” he dragged out, looking up from her feet. “I take notes and shit. I be memorizing formulas, you know?”

“What formulas?”

“I can’t give away my secrets,” he whispered. “But I keep ‘em in my back pocket. I got to be ready to whip ‘em out on you. I got one for every occasion—when you mad, sad...”

Her limbs relaxed. She was full of ice cream and laughter. Her heavy heart was lighter. The uncertainty didn’t seem so damning anymore, because he always made it better.

“Hold up... are you using one now?” Her stomach was sore from the constant giggle she emitted.

He looked up mischievously and squeezed her ankle. “I’m telling you, I graduated with honors.”

He reached for the orange-colored polish she had set out and rolled it between the palms of his hands, prepping it before pulling the cap off. He painted nice and even orange strokes, just like the clear ones he painted before.

“I don’t feel like myself.”

He stopped mid-stroke and looked up at her. “What you mean?”

“I’ve been a mess—eating like crap, scared to leave campus, binge watching television shows that are probably contributing to my paranoia.”

He started painting again and swiped a line of orange on her pinky toe. Afterwards, he cleaned around the edges with his thumb.

“Since you have a masters in Clo’-ology, tell me how to feel normal again.” She blinked back tears, forcing them away.

He took a spiral notebook Autumn had left underneath her bed and fanned at her wet toes. He wouldn’t look at her.

“I don’t got a formula for that. I wish I did.” He stopped fanning and took one foot between his hands. “Sometimes I wish shit was different. I wish I could’ve been some college nigga that met you in class and we’d be worried about dumb shit like what parties we gone hit up over the weekend or what movie we might go see.”

Her foot fell from his hands and he grabbed her by the legs, carefully dragging her onto his lap, so she wouldn’t

disturb her wet toenails.

“If I had all the answers, I’d give ‘em to you with no hesitation. If I had the power to make this shit go away, I would. I just want you to understand that I won’t ever let nothing happen to you. I put that on everything.”

She buried her face in his neck. The heaviness was back.

“You ever been scared before?” Her voice was muffled, because she had stuck her face so deep into his neck she wanted her body to dissolve into his.

“Hell yeah.”

“Tell me about it. Tell me so I won’t feel so crazy.”

His arms squeezed around her as he rocked her back and forth like a mother trying to soothe an irritable baby. The music that played throughout the room was a distant hum of beats and melodies.

“She killed herself,” he whispered.

She shoved against his chest to move from his hold, but he held her in place. She didn’t know how, but she already knew who he was talking about.

“It wasn’t like what they show on tv. It was worse.” He pulled her in tighter, squeezing the breath from her body. “She did that shit in front of me. Looked me in my eyes and pulled the trigger. I can still smell the blood, see her brains on my favorite blanket. I was so scared I pissed myself. I was only ten man.”

She couldn’t hold her sobs in any longer. His neck was wet with her tears. Eve had struck again, perpetually disappointing her for her mistreatment of him, but this act went beyond mistreatment. It was cruel. It had left him broken and stuck.

He finally let her pull back from his arms. She needed to see him. His eyes were glassy with tears that he wouldn’t let fall.

“It’s okay to cry.” She gripped his head and pulled it closer to her face.

“Sometimes I be battling with myself. I wanna’ hate her, but I loved her so fucking much.” Their noses touched, and he closed his eyes. “I’ll never understand why she did it.”

Her face was wet with tears that fell for him because he refused to let himself cry. He was so hardened that not even the tragedy of Eve’s brief life could make him shed a tear.

“Did she at least say anything before she did it?”

“Fuck no.” He choked out. “Bitch didn’t even tell me she loved me. She left me to fend for myself. I stayed with her body for two days until I finally left to get somebody.”

Claudette dragged her face across his, unsure of how to comfort him.

“I took care of us, you know? I ain’t have no choice. We would’ve starved if I ain’t do what I had to do. She was stuck fucking with a nigga that turned her out and barely paid her shit for it.” His voice grew hoarse. “She couldn’t even stay sober long enough to get a real motherfucking job and she left me to pick up the pieces. Ain’t that a bitch?”

His chest rose and fell in a panic while she squeezed him.

“Nic.” Claudette moved to look him in his eyes.

They were like black pools of despair. Full of anger and hopelessness.

“My Aunt stay talking shit like her own flesh and blood ain’t make me this way. Like her sister ain’t the one that fucked me up. Talking about I need to go to church and talk to the pastor. Fuck that nigga. He wasn’t there when I was hungry, when I was locked up, when I had no clothes, when we slept on the streets.”

She gasped, pulling him down onto her chest.

“Shh... shh.” She tried to calm his angry outbursts. “Nic, it’s okay. I know you’re upset. You have every right to be mad. You’re right, they failed you.”

His head popped up from her chest and she saw the wetness on his cheeks. She wiped the tears from his face.

“Baby?” he asked in a panic.

“Yes?” She kept wiping the tears that fell.

Her stomach fluttered at the term of endearment that seemed to slip out when he was so caught up in their intense moments together.

“You pray for me?”

She stopped wiping, moving her hand like he was on fire, wondering what had made him ask.

“All the time.” She pushed the words out and nodded her head up and down.

She hadn’t stopped since the night he called her from jail. It was almost as routine as brushing her teeth.

“Why?” he asked.

“I think you know why.”

His lips crashed into hers with so much force that it almost knocked the wind out of her body. Salty tears coated her tongue as she gripped onto his biceps, holding on as tight as she could. It was an urgent kiss—another first for them.

“I’ll never stop,” she said, with her lips still stuck to his.

“I’ll always be here.” She placed a hand on his chest, covering his heart.

“And here.” She moved to kiss the temple of his head.

“I thought you said he knew we was coming?” Marquise turned and looked at Claudette, frowning.

She’d been sitting in Diane’s empty driveway with Marquise and Eric for an hour with no sign of Dominic. She sighed, ignoring Eric’s smug look and looking down at her phone. Five unanswered text messages and seven unanswered calls taunted her.

“I talked to him yesterday, and he said he was still on.” She tapped the window of Eric’s Maxima with her knuckles.

She wanted to scream it was unlike him to not answer the phone, but she already looked foolish enough.

It was a bright, cloudless day, perfect for capturing Dominic on film. Marquise and Eric loaded the trunk of Eric’s Maxima with more expensive photography equipment than she’d ever seen. Marquise said he was prepared to shoot photographs and video. He wanted to take advantage of the day, hoping it would open the door for an opportunity to shoot other musicians—specifically rappers.

“Man, this shit weak as fuck,” Marquise said, blowing out a raspberry and scratching at the long strands of hair that sprouted from his head.

“How long we gone sit and wait?” Eric chimed in, making her teeth grind.

She unlocked her phone, checking for any sign that he had tried to reach out. Nothing. Her head pounded as she tapped his name one last time. This time, he picked up on the first ring.

“Nic, I swear you better have a damn good excuse,” she muttered through gritted teeth. “Marquise has been waiting on you for an hour.”

She heard the loud ticking of a turn signal and the whooshing sounds of cars.

“I’m down the street.” The revving of his engine made her ears ring. “Don’t trip right now. I ain’t mean to be late.”

“Whatever.” She ended the call.

Her nerves were shot. His evasiveness remained even after their heart to heart in her dorm room earlier that week, and that was the most frustrating part of all. She'd thought they'd made a breakthrough, but she was silly like that. What he shared didn't magically make him cling to her like she did him. They laid sprawled on her floor with her body on top of his until she fell into a restless slumber. She hardly remembered him tucking her into her bed and kissing her head before disappearing back into the night.

"This him in the Hellcat?" Marquise asked, looking through the rear-view mirror.

"Hellcat?" Claudette opened the backdoor. "If it's a black car, then yeah."

She pushed out of the backseat, watching him speed into the driveway and hit the brakes. Without thinking, she walked over to the driver side with the urge to yank him out of the car. He opened the door, looking just as disheveled as he did the last night they spent together. This time he only smelled of weed, and her favorite sandalwood scent still lingered on him.

"You can't be running up on me like that." He laughed, getting out and tugging at the tight bottoms of the athleisure set she borrowed from Autumn.

"You're not funny." She crossed her arms. "How do you know he didn't have somewhere to be? Don't be inconsiderate."

"Aye, cut that shit out." His voice was gruff. "I heard you. I know I'm late, but I'm here."

She knew she had rattled his nerves. He walked around her and approached Eric's car, stooping down to the passenger side window where Marquise sat. She only heard bits and pieces of their conversation—mostly Dominic's responses.

"My bad bro, you know how it is," he said.

"Just tell me what you need and I'll make that shit happen."

"Hell yeah. I can do that."

“I got you.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just get set up. Let me go shower and shit.”

He reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a clear baggy tied into a knot. Marquise’s dark arm reached out of the car and they slapped hands, making an exchange. Dominic slapped the top of the car and turned back, waving for her to follow him with a scowl.

They stomped off to the house with her close on the heels of his sneakers. He unlocked the front door and pushed it open, gesturing for her to go in first. She stepped in and inhaled the comforting scent of Diane’s cooking stuck in the walls and fabrics of the house. She felt more comfortable there the more she came with Dominic—becoming familiar with the layout, the smell, and the coziness of it. Diane and Josiah were absent once again.

Dominic made a beeline for the bathroom while she kept walking ahead to his bedroom.

“Nuh uh, where you going?” he asked, reaching out and grabbing her waist.

“I don’t know. I guess to go wait on you.” She shrugged and tried to move out of his hold, but he squeezed her harder. “Even though I’ve been doing that for the past hour.”

“Hell nah. You was talking big shit outside.” He hoisted her up against his chest, making her squeal.

Ignoring her laughter, he carried her with ease into the bathroom with him.

“Stop making me laugh! I’m not playing with you ‘Nic.”

He sat her on the small vanity and kicked the door to the bathroom shut. The last time she’d been in that same bathroom, she was disgustingly sick and he had soothed her while bathing her.

“You not about to be laughing for long.” The drawstring to her joggers became entangled between his long fingers.

“They’re waiting on us.” She sucked in a deep breath as he used his other hand to pull the zipper down of the cropped

hoodie, exposing her dark breasts already swollen with desire and spilling out of the bra she wore.

“They good. I took care of it,” he replied in a trance. “I need to take care of my favorite girl before I do any fucking thing else.”

“Take care of me?”

“Yeah. You can’t talk to me like that and not expect nothing in return. You forgot what I taught you already?”

He didn’t waste a moment before pouncing on her, maneuvering them around the tiny bathroom. Their tongues danced as he undressed them both with urgency—pulling down her pants and his, shoving her breasts from her bra.

“Turn around,” he grunted, pushing her against the vanity and shoving a hand in her fluffed hair.

Their reflections taunted her in the mirror. He wanted her to watch. Her mouth opened in awe at the sight of them together. She was so aroused that she felt her own wetness. He wasted no time, burying himself deep inside of her without warning and pulling out.

He slammed back in again.

“Oh my God,” she whispered, looking at his reflection through hooded eyes.

He focused on making her pay for her angry outburst outside. It was all a part of her punishment. She hadn’t forgotten any of his lessons and he knew it.

“You supposed to talk to me good baby. I already told you I ain’t mean to be late. You acting like I’m lying to you.” He pulled out again—his voice went from sugary sweet to gruff. “You hear me?”

She couldn’t even articulate what she wanted to say. She didn’t trust herself enough to answer him without screaming so loud that Marquise and Eric would hear. His hand raised above her and flew down before she could utter a sound. She hadn’t realized what he did until a stinging pain rippled across her butt.

“I asked you a question.” He raised his hand to do it again, daring her to ignore him.

His face was serious—top teeth stuck into his bottom lip; eyebrows cast downward. She nodded her head instead, hoping it would suffice. It didn’t, and she had no clue why she thought it would, because another thwack followed. This one was sharper than the first. He stroked himself with one hand and reached out to yank her head back with the other.

“You know I got to hear your voice. Tell me you hear me. Tell me you understand.”

She squirmed underneath his hold, wanting him back inside in his rightful place where he belonged.

“I...I... understand.” Her words came out in a low stutter. “Come back, please.”

“You understand what?” He let go of her hair, and his hand rose again, waiting on her to defy him.

“I understand ‘Nic. I understand...” She tried to turn and face him, but he pushed her back toward the sink. “I understand you didn’t mean to be late.”

He smiled, approving of the answer she gave. She was so aroused that the swell of her breasts was almost unbearable. Each time her rigid nipples rubbed against the cold laminate top of the vanity; her eyes rolled back in ecstasy.

“Put it back inside ‘Nic.” Her head fell forward. “Please, just come back.”

And just like that, he was back inside of her. Sometimes he’d get her so worked up that she forgot that if she was good, he’d give her what she asked for. Her teeth slid against her bottom lip as they ground together in unison. She followed his rhythm, keeping up with every stroke he gave.

“I wasn’t trying to be inconsiderate,” he said out of breath. “I was taking care of some shit and my phone died.”

“The same shit you’ve been taking care of these past few weeks?” she spat back. “Disappearing and worrying me. Sending me money that came from who knows where.”

Before she could take the words back, his hand was back on her bottom. She took the stinging pain and his rough strokes.

“You still being bad, Sunflower? Still talking shit to me?”

He laughed at the way she grunted and nodded through his wild pounding—confirming that she *was* being bad for him.

“This why you my G.” His hand found her hair again, yanking her head back. “You know you the only one that got me like this? Why you got to fuck my head up baby? If I could, I’d have you every day. You’d let me have you every day Clo’?”

His lips latched onto hers and she nodded as he laughed against them.

“Nuh uh. I don’t hear my favorite voice.” He unlatched his lips and started to pull out of her again, but she reached back, holding him in place.

“Yes... yes... yes!” She couldn’t hold her screams in any longer as her walls clamped down on him.

Just like before, he let her ride out her waves of ecstasy before pulling out and leaving his mark on the backs of her bare thighs. They panted together, attempting to catch their breath. He pulled her back into his chest.

“And just so we on the same page, I won’t ever send no dirty money to you through the phone. I already fucked up enough by putting you in harm’s way. I ain’t gone have the cops coming after you because of some stupid shit I did. You understand me?”

His hand found its way back into her hair where it pulled her curls.

“I understand.” Her raspy voice squeaked out the answer.

No matter how much she challenged him, he always ensured her he was running their show and it would always be his world.

Dominic's definition of taking care of the situation was getting Marquise and Eric blazed out of their minds while he got lost inside of her. Afterwards he bathed and re-dressed her before sending her back outside as if nothing had ever happened. They forgave his lateness, because according to Marquise, Dominic had the best *gas* he'd ever smoked.

"Clo'-Clo', come ride," Josiah shouted from behind the wheel of one of the four wheelers someone brought to Diane's.

It didn't take long for the entire neighborhood to notice Marquise roaming around with a camera, capturing every move Dominic made. They showed up in groups, bringing ATVs and dirt bikes to ride and their cars to blast Dominic's music. Josiah popped up with a mixture of neighborhood boys and members of his football team, being loud and reckless like most teenage boys were, while Marquise filmed everything.

Claudette looked at Eric, who stood next to her with wide eyes. He laughed, pushing her forward toward the quad.

"I'm scared." She shook her head with a grin.

"I'm not gone let you fall. Come on." She sucked in a breath and tiptoed toward the Josiah. "Aye! That's my girl!"

She climbed on, wrapping her arms around his middle as he took off. The force from his heavy foot had her curls flying in every direction as they zoomed down the street.

"I'm gone pop a wheelie!"

"You better not!" She squeezed his hard stomach and closed her eyes. "Don't!"

"Yes! You know I ain't gone let nothing happen to you." His boyish laughter made her grin through the harsh wind that slapped her face. "Hold on as tight as you can."

"Jo!"

She didn't have time to prepare herself before the front wheels of the bike were off the ground and her stomach felt like it had fallen to the bottom of her feet.

“See! You know D would kill me if I let anything happen to you! Now keep looking cute!”

Laughter burst from her chest as they zoomed passed Marquise’s camera, still rolling on two wheels. He made a sharp turn, spinning them around and shooting back toward Marquise.

Eric was beside him, watching the raw footage from behind the camera. The stammering of her heart slowed as he hit the brakes in front of them.

“That shit was hard as hell,” Eric said, reaching out to pull her from behind Josiah. “Come see.”

He pulled her off of the bike with ease and pulled her in close to show her the shot. His arm wrapped around her shoulders from behind. Marquise hit a button to playback the footage, and she hardly recognized herself. It was the sun or some other force that had her glowing while wrapped around Josiah. Her coils seemed thicker and fuller with a sheen that had to have been natural because she had done nothing different in her routine.

She looked happy for the first time in weeks but being around Dominic and his family made her crippling fear a distant memory. She believed him when he reassured her he’d let nothing happen to her. It wasn’t his words that made her believe him, it was the desperate look in his eyes each time he’d promise her.

“I thought you were scared?” Eric asked, smiling when she looked up at him.

“I was.”

Marquise glanced between the two of them with a lopsided grin of his own. His beady eyes were bloodshot red from the blunts the neighborhood guys kept passing him.

“I need to get a shot of the dream team,” he said, turning the camera on them.

They looked at each other at the same time and burst into laughter. Eric threw up two fingers while she grinned, latching onto his side, clinging to him like an old friend.

“How cute,” Marquise mocked. “Looking like two lovebirds.”

Her cheeks heated, and she looked away from them both.

“Man, shut up!” Eric swatted at him and Marquise took off with the camera after getting a glance of Dominic cradling someone’s toddler who rapped along to his music.

Dominic looked so comfortable in his element, because nothing but family surrounded him. He had shed his shirt hours beforehand and walked around in a wife beater and jeans that hung from his waist. She tried to stay as far away from him as possible because their rendezvous in the bathroom hadn’t been enough for her.

“Claudettee.” Eric drug the syllables of her name out.

She hiccupped, tearing her eyes from Dominic.

“Yes?” She turned, smiling, pretending not to stare.

“You good?”

“Of course.”

“You was zoned out for a minute.” He arched an eyebrow and turned in the direction she’d been staring.

“My bad.” She pushed her hair from her face. “I’m still loopy from Jo acting like he was some kind of biker boy.”

She saw his eyes roaming between her and Dominic, trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together—moving them around, trying to make them fit. He gave up, shaking his head.

“Yeah, that was wild.” His tone was airy. “Autumn told you I been asking about you?”

She had been waiting on him to bring *that* up, because she didn’t want to and wasn’t going to.

“Yeah and I’m confused about it.” The right side of her cheek rose in a half smile.

He thumbed the short dreads on his head, twisting his fingers through them. He looked down, avoiding her gaze.

“What you confused about?” he asked, looking back up.

She admired his baby face.

“You have my number. Why didn’t you just text me?” She rocked back and forth, realizing that there was some truth behind Dominic’s words.

He liked her.

“I just wanted her to... you know, pick your brain first. See how you respond to me asking about you. I’m not the type to just hit up a female, demanding her time.” He reached out to move a piece of hair that was covering her eye. “Me and you talk, but it’s always about Dough or class. I want to hear about you.”

She wasn’t sure how to respond. What could she give Eric when someone else had her heart and her body?

“I ain’t trying to pressure you or—”

“You can text me about other stuff E.” She smirked, giving in.

Not to him or his romantic advances, but maybe to his friendship. His face lit up in triumph.

Eric was corny enough to keep her out of trouble, sweet enough to ask her if he could text her just to hear about her—he was safe. His mouth moved to say something else, but he stopped, staring at something behind her.

“You let D bring all his loud friends to my yard lil’ girl?” Diane’s sharp voice made her neck snap around and her body warm.

She turned, expecting her to have a belt in one hand, warming it up to punish her, but the only thing she had was a smile painted on her face. She was dressed down in jeans and sneakers. The casual outfit took more years from her already youthful appearance. Claudette couldn’t hide her own smile.

“I had no part of this.”

“Mhm, you know you still not getting off the hook, right?” She tapped a foot on the ground.

Claudette bit into her lip, looking back at Eric apologetically. He looked between the two of them with an amused smile of his own.

“At least introduce me to your cute friend before I put you to work.” Diane rested her arm on her hip, raising an eyebrow at Eric’s lanky frame.

Claudette looped an arm through hers while laughing at her bluntness.

“E, this is Diane, Dominic’s aunt. Diane, this is Eric.”

He didn’t even have time to respond before she tugged Diane toward the house, knowing her punishment had something to do with cooking.

Once they made it inside the kitchen, she watched Diane rifle through bags of groceries pulling out odds and ends. She kicked off her sneakers and padded toward the sink to wash her hands.

“Please tell me you know how to peel a potato?” Diane pulled a sack of russet potatoes from one of the grocery bags and sat them on the table.

“Of course, where’s your peeler?” She patted her hands dry while Diane shook her head.

“Peeler? Girl, use one of those knives from that knife block up there.”

“A knife?” Claudette sputtered out.

“Yes, a knife.” Diane walked over to the wooden knife block and pulled an enormous knife from it. “Don’t cut yourself because I’m not taking you to no emergency room and don’t be peeling all the skin and the potato.”

She swallowed the ball of nerves in her throat while Diane set up her workstation. She grumbled at the laughter and music outside while she was stuck hacking potatoes. Rolling up her sleeves, she sat in front of the sack and the bowl of water Diane sat on the table. The sharp knife glistened as she took it into her hand, trying to decide where to cut first.

“You like that boy out there you was talking to?” Diane turned her back to her.

“Eric?”

“Yeah, girl. Who else you think I’m talking about?”

She giggled. Diane’s cantankerous attitude never got old.

“He’s just a friend from school. He helps me with ‘Nic’s music stuff.”

“Okay, now that I know who he is, can you answer my question?” Diane huffed.

“He’s nice, and he’s handsome.” She took one of the large potatoes in her hand and slid the knife across its rough surface, cutting off a jagged piece of skin.

Diane whistled the Jeopardy *think* music while pouring a bottle of cooking oil into the deep fryer she had plugged up.

“Okay, okay, okay.” She cut off more skin from the potato. “I think he’d make a nice friend.”

“A nice friend?” Diane turned around with one eyebrow hiked.

“Yeah, he’s laid-back and fun.” She shrugged, kind of relieved and kind of ashamed that Eric didn’t make her heart thump like Dominic.

He didn’t make her crazy with desire or make her worry so much she lost sleep. He was just Eric—the cute guy from her Econ class that only noticed her because the professor paired them together for a group project.

Diane pulled apart a package wrapped in brown butcher paper and pulled out pieces of filleted fish. She searched through cabinets, pulling out a bowl and a bag of flour.

“Laid-back and fun, huh?”

“Yup.” She dropped the naked potato in the bowl of water.

“So, what you want? Somebody edgy?” Diane cackled. “Is that your type?”

“No.”

It had been two months since the night she tripped heart first into Dominic’s world, and she still didn’t know what her type was. She just knew that he was the only guy that had successfully gained access to her heart.

“My ex-husband was laid back and fun,” Diane said wistfully while she seasoned the fish.

“You were married?” Claudette asked, grabbing another potato.

“Yeah girl. I wasn’t always some old lonely holy roller. I used to have a life.”

They laughed together as Diane popped her hip out.

“What happened to him?”

“We divorced when Jo was about three. He got another family now. They live down in Tampa.” She placed pieces of the fish in a bag of flour that she’d prepared and shook them, coating them with flour. “He was cute too, like your friend out there. Real sweet man.”

“If he was so sweet then why did you get a divorce?”

“Because I was still in love with Jo’s daddy.” Grease sizzled as she dropped the fish into the deep fryer.

The knife in Claudette’s hand slipped, grazing her finger. She slammed it on the table. Diane continued to fry the fish, ignoring the noise and shaking the basket around in the deep fryer.

“So, what happened?”

“Blu was a lot like D. He was full of problems. Mad at the world, always into something, real hotheaded.” She looked off, smiling to herself, like she was reminiscing. “But none of that mattered to me, because baby he kept me on my toes. He loved me hard. Made me feel like me and him could conquer the world.”

Claudette picked the knife up again, cutting back into the potato. Diane stared off with a smile still on her face.

“Blu must’ve been special. You still smile when you talk about him.”

“He *was* special.” She emptied the basket of fish into a pan she had lined with napkins.

“What happened to him?”

“He’s long gone now—long gone.” She put more fish into the deep fryer and moved to the sink. “I’ll always love him, though.”

Claudette finished peeling the potato in her hand with Blu on her mind. She had so many more questions for Diane who’d ended their conversation with the vaguest answer.

After washing her hands, Diane walked to the table with a knife of her own. She took a potato out of the bag and sliced

the skin off in a few swift motions. Claudette looked at her through squinted eyes.

“You’ll get there baby girl.” She winked. “You’ll get there. I promise.”

They burst into laughter together.

By the time they finished the food, the atmosphere outside was calmer. Dominic and Josiah set up foldout tables in the backyard for the food. Claudette’s fingers were sore from peeling potatoes and her feet ached. She smelled like fried fish and her chest glistened from the Vaseline that Diane had smeared on a burn from hot grease that popped on her. She’d called it a well-deserved war wound.

“Everybody serve your damn self!” Diane yelled, flinging a towel out in front of her after she placed the last pan of fries on the table.

They swarmed the tables in droves, grabbing paper plates and piling on as much fish, French fries and hush puppies as they could. Claudette watched Eric and Marquise blend in with the rest of the neighborhood. They clowned around, chatting up two girls that had materialized out of thin air.

She waited until everyone got their food before grabbing a piece of fish and French fries for herself and sneaking off to sit on the front porch of the house. It was quieter there, with less foot traffic. She smiled to herself, sitting in the same spot Dominic sat in the night she called him, crying over her mother. The best part about being at Diane’s was the closeness she felt to Dominic even when she was alone. His energy was everywhere—in the kitchen, on the front porch, in the hallway.

She picked at the fish, unable to eat much of it after helping Diane cook. Instead of forcing it down, she sat the plate to the side and stretched her legs out on the steps. The front door creaked open behind her, causing a gust of frigid air to brush against her back.

“I been looking for you,” Dominic drawled behind her.

Her mouth curved up, anticipating his handsome face. She sucked in a breath, listening to him move down the steps

beside her.

“You heard me, Clo’?” He sat next to her.

She flung her head to the side. He had shed his wife beater and was now in just jeans with droopy eyes.

“Did you eat?” she asked, ignoring his question.

“Nah. I’m good.” He licked his lips. “I’m not hungry.”

She rolled her eyes at his dismissal of her concern, knowing he was full of weed and liquor.

“Why you rolling your eyes? What I do now?”

She picked up her plate and pinched a piece of fish. The fatty crust coated her fingers.

“Open.” She shoved the piece toward his mouth.

He opened, letting her push it inside.

“Good?”

His head nodded as he looked into her eyes while she continued to pinch off pieces and feed them to him. Now and then her fingers would get caught between his lips and he would hold on to them, sucking the tips.

“What you learn this time?” He reached out to touch the greasy burn on her chest.

It stung when he pressed his finger into it, but she didn’t tell him so.

“I know how to peel potatoes and I can chop them up to make French fries.” She looked at his finger he dragged across her chest. “I don’t think I have the fish down yet—hence the burn on my chest.”

He laughed and leaned forward to place a chaste kiss on the purple wound.

“Don’t worry. One day you gone be on your Ayesha Curry shit, cooking up some fire ass food for your husband and kids.”

He wrapped a muscled arm around her shoulders and pulled her in close. She laughed and laid her head on his

shoulder, listening to the picture of her future he painted in his head. It was a future without him, Diane, or Josiah—a future she didn't want to experience.

TONY'S BASEMENT WAS so smoked out, someone could get high just from the secondhand smoke alone. The flat screen tv Dominic had helped him mount a few days prior, played a muted NBA game that no one payed attention to. It was a quiet Sunday night that had barely begun and Diane had been blowing up his phone since he left the house that morning, but he wouldn't answer.

He'd been on a recording binge for the past few weeks. Two days had been the longest he'd stayed cooped in Tony's basement recording track after track. Mo laid across Tony's stained futon scrolling on his phone while Nate, a neighborhood friend, hung around smoking and vibing to the last track he recorded.

Dominic sat next to Tony, nodding his head, lighting up his second blunt of the night while nursing a drink in his other. His first drink had been at ten that morning and he hadn't stopped since then. He hadn't been that messed up in a while, and Tony embraced his drunken state by playing up the slur in his voice on each track they laid down. The last beat they used meshed so well with his voice they hadn't stopped replaying it. He finessed it, riding the beat so hard that it would only work with his voice—no one else's.

“Man, this shit fire!” Nate shouted above the bass. “This that smooth shit.”

“Hell yeah.” Tony nodded. “It's most definitely that smooth shit.”

Dominic puffed the blunt, listening to the two of them go back and forth.

“The beat though.” Nate held a fist to his mouth, shaking his head. “It’s fire T.”

Tony and Dominic shared a knowing glance because they both knew Tony had nothing to do with the beat. It was the beat Claudette made. Everything was the same, but with a few additions. There was a slight change in tempo and Tony added some keys to create a haunting intro. But she was the mastermind behind it.

She was in everything he’d created over the past two weeks. His new obsession had become keeping her as satisfied as he could while he still teetered between two worlds. He was at a crossroads and it was evident in his music. It was more introspective and less shallow while still maintaining the same hardness that characterized Dough. His tone and delivery hadn’t changed, but the lyrical content was different.

“I can’t take credit for it.” Tony increased the volume on the track and sat back, admiring Claudette’s production.

“You did this shit, D?” Nate grasped the blunt that Dominic held out.

“Nah, the other half of me did that.” His brain did sprints, trying to keep up with every word and sentence before they came from his mouth, but it was useless. “Shit, she got her foot on Tony neck. Motherfucka’ got competition.”

Tony laughed at his cross faded admission. “You fucked up D.”

Dominic burst into his own laughter, flicking both of his long middle fingers up toward Tony. Nate looked at them both and shrugged his shoulders, failing to understand what they were talking about.

“Hell yeah. I’m gone.”

His goal was to make sure he didn’t remember the day. He had no particular reason—sometimes he just got that way. He’d wake up in a mood he couldn’t quite decipher and reach for the nearest substance that would numb it. It’s like Diane could sense his waywardness even when he slipped out before seeing her. She’d call nonstop every single time, and he’d

ignore each one while he chased a high that he could never quite reach.

“That nigga talking out the side of his neck,” Mo called out from behind his phone.

“Fuck you. I’m speaking goddamn big facts.”

He was speaking facts while speaking too much.

“You need to be focused on this nigga talking reckless about you.” Mo flashed his phone toward the three of them.

“Cut the music, T,” Nate said.

Tony raised forward, tapping a key on his laptop.

“It’s a lot of fake niggas that don’t be standing on shit...” It was a voice Dominic didn’t recognize. “Cappin’ ass lil’ boys that don’t be about what they rap about.”

The voice was gravelly and confident in their insults. Dominic laughed, the insults bounced around in his head, but didn’t register because of the haze he was in.

“Turn that shit up,” Dominic said, taking the blunt back from Nate and taking a pull.

Mo sat up, turning the volume up and turning the screen around. The phone dangled from his hand carelessly. Marco’s jewelry that Mo hadn’t stolen caught the light from the flash of his camera while he sat in the front seat of a vehicle smoking his own blunt. He was live, rambling about the static between himself and Dominic. Anybody who kept their ears to the streets already knew, but he’d confirmed it.

“Pussy ass deleted all his shit off IG, tryna’ hide and shit. He don’t really want smoke. He a lil’ ass boy that think this play-play.” Dominic heard laughter in the background. “Y’all be dick-ridin’ niggas that ain’t about shit.”

He felt all eyes on him. They were trying to read through his relaxed demeanor. Marco’s insults were lightweight. He was a troll. A fake internet gangster that would fold as soon as someone backed him into a corner.

“Bet I have that nigga bitch on my nuts while he locked up.” Marco threw his head back. “I done got one of his hoes workin’ already, now I just need the other one. The lil’ young one he hiding. Bet I have that lil’ bitch right by the time you get out, pussy. I’ll fuck that bi—”

Mo turned the live off, sparing his ears from the rest of Marco’s rant. The room was quiet. Tony and Mo watched him while Nate paced the room, ready for whatever the night would bring. He wore his loyalty like a badge of honor. Dominic once took care of his grandmother and younger sister financially while he spent two years in state jail so Nate felt as if he were forever indebted to him.

The weed and liquor Dominic had indulged in all day had muddled his thoughts. He hadn’t even realized he’d been talking.

“Nah D. I’ll handle that shit,” Mo said, responding to whatever had come out of his mouth.

Dominic still didn’t know what he was saying, but he was on his feet. He put the blunt out and sat his solo cup on the closest surface that wasn’t a blur.

“Bro you not in your right mind right now. Sleep on that shit.” Tony stood, reaching out to pull him back, but it was too late.

He only saw red and heard the chaos that erupted around him.

“Man y’all can’t let him do no crazy shit right now!” Tony shouted.

“D gone do what he want to do, and I’m gone ride, regardless,” Nate replied.

“He already got one fuckin’ foot out and y’all trying to pull him all the way back in.”

“I’m gone handle it Tony,” Mo said, attempting to quell the chaos.

The rest of his movements were a blur. He made phone calls while they piled into Mo’s impala. He had tunnel vision

and his heart pounded out of anger instead of fear.

“D, just say the word and I’ll slide that nigga for you,” Mo said, hitting the gas and maneuvering out of Tony’s long driveway.

“Fuck all that. You was the main one telling me to handle him so that’s what the fuck I’m gone do. I’m gone handle it. Me!” Dominic pounded a hand across his chest.

“You trippin’ man. You not even in the right mind state to handle this shit, just let me do it.”

They sped through the dark streets of Tony’s neighborhood. It didn’t take much work to find out Marco was posted at PJ’s, a local hole in the wall. Dominic opened the glove compartment, shoving past papers in search of the Glock Mo kept there. His adrenaline raced at the first feel of the cold metal.

“Man chill out! You gone do some reckless shit over a girl when you know you already got a case.”

“Fuck you! You don’t even fuck with Clo’, but you over there offering to handle the shit.”

Nate watched from the backseat as the two of them grew louder.

“I’m offering because your dumbass too faded to even think! This why I told you to leave her alone! She got your mind gone! You ain’t never been no nigga to go off emotion, you always think first. I’m the one that be going off emotion.”

“Nah, she got my shit right and I’ll handle anybody that fix they mouth to talk reckless ‘bout her.” He stuck the piece in the front of his jeans.

His mind ignored anything Mo said that didn’t have to do with Claudette.

“I forgot a nigga ain’t never been in love,” Mo said as he frowned harder.

“Only bitch I ever loved was my mama, nigga,” Dominic replied in a strained voice.

His mouth went dry at the mention of that word being associated with Claudette out loud.

“You a motherfucking lie. If you ain’t love her, you wouldn’t be geeked out right now. You got us running up in a crowded club to hit a nigga, instead of waiting in the cut for his ass like I know you to do.”

He was spinning. He couldn’t keep up with their conversation.

“I ain’t on no pussy ass love shit.”

His denial made him disgusted with his own self, but he figured If he didn’t admit it out loud it wasn’t true.

“You out your body right now so I’m gone let all this shit slide—plus you my nigga and I know ole’ girl got your nuts in her hand so I’m not gone fuck you up. This ain’t the D I know, so I’m gone chalk it up to pussy and love.” Mo sped into PJ’s parking lot and came to a rough stop in a parking spot away from the entrance. “When we get out this bitch all this bullshit is dead. We gone fire that nigga up like he deserve. He a bitch—a pussy for tryna run up on your heart. I ride for you so I’m gone ride for Claudette too, regardless if I fuck with her or not.”

Mo’s words sealed the deal on the nasty conversation.

He and Nate got out of the car first, leaving Dominic to linger behind with Mo’s words swirling around in his faded mind. The chiming of his phone made him pull his hand away from the handle of the car door. He pulled it out, expecting Diane’s name to flash across the screen. He was prepared to block her number for the rest of the night. It wouldn’t have been the first time he’d done it. The constant string of phone calls was like a bad omen.

Instead of her name, a text message from Claudette teased him from the lock screen of his phone. His heart pounded along with his head. The sight of her name reignited his paranoid thoughts of someone getting to her.

He opened the message.

I'm going out of my mind about you. E wants to take me on a late-night Starbucks run to get his stupid tea and I'm over here spazzing because I haven't heard from you in days. I can't even sleep. Why do you do this crap to me? I really need you.

He saw red again.

PART THREE

THERE WAS NO phone call.

There were no pep talks or treasure hunts for bail money—only silence.

The videos from the night it happened taunted her each time she got online. There were news reports, social media reactions, and scathing think pieces written by underground music blogs that dissected every piece of the video along with Dominic’s music. Her blood grew cold each time she watched his soft face ball into a grimace before throwing the first punch.

“Clo’, don’t watch anymore of those videos,” Autumn said, pulling her backpack over one shoulder. “Please. I know you’re upset, but doing that shit is not healthy.”

She let the video play, anyway, watching as Dominic rammed punch after punch into the man’s jaw. The crowd in the club bunched together, trying to flee all at once. She recognized Mo’s stocky frame holding a gun out toward anyone that dared to stop what was happening. Another guy with them stood around hoisting his own weapon as if Dominic wasn’t on a rampage.

“I need to understand what the hell is going on.” She wiped at her puffy eyes as Dominic ate a punch thrown by the other man.

The fight spilled outside, ending in an exchange of gunfire between Dominic and the man he went after. There were very few details about what occurred between the time he threw his first punch and when he shot at the man, almost striking him in

his abdomen. The police apprehended him, Mo, and the other man later that night.

Autumn walked to her bedside, pulling the phone from her hand.

“Look at me Claudy.” Her nostrils flared as she powered the phone down. “You don’t need to understand shit right now. The only thing you need to do is get yourself together.”

“He hasn’t even called me.” She blinked, in a daze.

“Good! Don’t hold your breath waiting on him to.”

She was stupid, confused, heartbroken, and tortured by her cellphone—constantly going back to their messages, reading and rereading them. There had to be something that she missed, a message she overlooked that would explain why he would do what he did and leave her in the dark.

“He always calls eventually. He’ll call.” She tried convincing herself as much as she was trying to convince Autumn. “I just need to hear his voice.”

She dragged a hand across her tangled hair, fighting the urge to puke out the empty contents of her stomach.

“Forget that shit! Do you not see what he did? He almost killed that dude.” Autumn moved her face close to hers and snapped her fingers in front of her swollen eyes. “Now is not the time for you to be naïve. Enough is enough. You better be glad he didn’t get your ass killed while you was running around town with him!”

She panted, her chest heaved up and down. He had to have had a reason. He always had a reason.

“Let him go. You got too much to lose by messing with him.”

“I can’t.” Her head shook.

“Yes, you can!”

“No... because I-I think I love him.” The tears fell. “It’s like I want him so bad that I can’t breathe sometimes. I just need to... I just need to hear his voice. That’s it.”

Autumn's face fell at her admission. She tried to talk, but whatever she tried to say didn't come out. The backpack she held onto fell from her shoulders as she climbed into Claudette's bed.

"Oh Claudy... no." She pulled Claudette into her arms, wiping at the tears that wouldn't stop. "No... you weren't supposed to fall in love with him. Not him. Why the fuck? No."

She sobbed as she listened to Autumn's bewildered rambling.

"How was I supposed to know not to? I don't know anything about being in love," she rasped. "He's all I know."

Autumn hushed her, stopping the rest of the admissions bound to come out of her mouth.

"That was stupid of me to say." Autumn brushed her hair back. "I didn't mean it in that way. I thought it was just a crush, that's all."

"I wish it was just a crush, but I don't think you lose your mind over crushes or crave them so bad that it literally hurts."

"Or worry so much that you can't sleep," Autumn completed her thoughts.

"What do I do now?" She turned her head to face Autumn, searching for answers.

She was desperate. She would do anything to feel normal again.

"You let time heal your heart." Autumn kept her eyes on the stained ceiling of their room. "I don't know why he hasn't called, but I've dealt with enough guys like him to know there are a thousand reasons. They're involved in so much constant shit that you become a liability to them. The Dominic you saw in that video may not be the Dominic you know, but it's the Dominic the streets know and the streets don't care how much you love him or he loves you."

"But why not just tell me this stuff? Why go silent?"

“He’s sending you a message and making sure you hear it loud and clear. Making sure you have no choice but to cut ties with him.” Autumn inhaled a rigid breath.

“Forcing my hand, huh?”

“Most definitely.” Autumn reached between the two of them, gripping her hand. “You’re strong though. You’ll get through this. We’ll get through this.”

“I feel like somebody ripped my heart out with their bare hand and stomped on it.”

She thought back to Autumn’s gory prediction, *he can strip you down bare and make you feel pain like you never felt.*

“Time. Give it time,” Autumn whispered.

The thought of time made her head ache. Thinking about a life without him in it was strange. He had come in her life, rearranged it, and left so quickly that it was almost as if it didn’t happen at all. If it weren’t for the ache in her chest, she would’ve thought it had all been a dream.

There were ten white polka dots scattered across Professor Gilrich's blue blouse. Claudette had counted them twice. Her black curls were moist as she moved around the auditorium in excitement. The slacks she wore gripped each curve of her body. Claudette had never seen a human being as excited about finals week as she was. Amygdala girl sat upright, engrossed in Professor Gilrich's rant that started with her love of the skeletal system and had now turned into a full-on sonnet about her love of final exams.

It was disgusting.

Claudette looked down and dragged her finger across the screen of her phone, browsing the photos Marquise emailed to her that morning. Still under the impression that she was in contact with Dominic, he had sent them, along with a short, somber message.

Fucked up how they did my nigga. Next time you chop it up with him, tell him I'm about finished editing the video.

Her reply was even shorter.

Sure thing.

While Professor Gilrich dissected the format of their final, Claudette studied Dominic's face. The worst part of getting her heart broken were the memories. They replayed in her head—the last time they made love, their last kiss, the last time she saw his smile.

He was shirtless in the picture, crouching in front of his car, displaying his tattoos and scars. The grimace on his face made her smile.

“Guys, please remember you must have a C to advance to A&P two. No exceptions.” Professor Gilrich walked behind the podium at the front of the auditorium.

She rolled her eyes and exited out of the pictures. She had tortured herself enough for the day.

“I think I've held you guys hostage long enough,” she added. “I'm going to let out a few minutes early, but if I call your name, please stay behind.”

Claudette squirmed in her seat, fighting the urge to grab her backpack and leave despite Professor Gilrich's disclaimer. Her bladder was heavy and she couldn't wait to get back into her bed.

"Johnson, Thomas, Smith, Baker..." she rattled off the names, shuffling through a stack of papers that sat on the podium. "Dawson, Goins..."

Hearing her name, Claudette shoved her belongings in her backpack and hurried down the steps, taking two at a time. She made it in front of the podium with only two other people ahead of her. She squirmed, bouncing from side to side, mentally rushing Professor Gilrich. There was no way she'd make it to the bathroom in time if she kept chatting as slow as she had been. She focused on the bright pink backpack of the girl in front of her. She studied the stitching, ignoring the throbbing of her bladder until she made it in front of Professor Gilrich.

"Claudette..." she spoke her name in a breathy voice as if it were the first time she had ever heard such a name. "Thank you for staying behind. There's only a few weeks left in the semester and I'm a tad bit worried."

Her moist curls shook as she shuffled around, searching through her stack of papers. She made an *aha* sound once she found the paper Claudette dreaded.

"Now, I know you're an awesome student." Claudette bounced on one foot. "But you received a D on the midterm. That's not good for your final grade in this course. You understand that if your final grade is not a C or better, you cannot advance to the second part of the course?"

"I understand." She swallowed.

"I don't want you to get discouraged, but you will really have to pull off a miracle here."

"I understand."

"If by some unfortunate circumstance you don't end up passing this semester, you can always retake the course in the summer." Her angular face was set in a pout. "But you need to

understand that it will be much harder. The material will be condensed and you'll only have a month to learn everything.”

Claudette nodded, glancing out of her peripheral at the few unlucky students behind her that would receive the same crappy news.

“If you ever need help, my door is always open.”

Their conversation ended with Professor Gilrich giving her a grim smile. She turned and hurried toward the exit of the auditorium, searching for the nearest bathroom. She ran out into the foyer, ignoring the strange looks she received. Autumn would kill her if she soiled the expensive denim jeans she had borrowed from her closet that morning.

The bathroom she found was hidden in a back corner of the foyer. She pushed the door open, and it closed with a loud thump that echoed throughout the space.

“Oh my God... oh my God,” she whispered the words to herself as she rushed into the first stall, slamming the door shut.

Her backpack fell to the floor, and she shoved the tight jeans down, collapsing on the seat of the toilet and dropping her head in her hands. The other awful part about getting her heart broken were the wicked things it did to her body. She grimaced at the bright dots of blood that lined her panties. With no tampon or pad, she took a wad of tissue and rolled it in a heap, placing it in the crotch of her underwear.

Being in the thick of heartbreak made her never want to experience love again.

She pulled the jeans back up her hips, struggling to button them. After grabbing her backpack from the floor, she washed her hands and left in a blur.

The walk back to her dorm was in the same manner—a blur. Faceless people brushed past and against her. Their smells made her stomach flip-flop. She hadn't eaten since the day before and had no plan to indulge in the tasteless food from the dining hall.

As soon as she made it inside the haven of her room, she stripped, putting on a fresh pair of underwear and a liner to take care of her bleeding. Her limbs sank when she climbed into the bed.

It was the best part of her day. She could drift off into a blissful sleep void of Dominic. It was there where Bryson would comfort her, trying to teach her all the things about boys he never got a chance to while he was living.

“Another bomb ass nap?” Eric asked, smiling at her through the phone.

Claudette grimaced and discreetly wiped the slobber from the corner of her mouth.

He always called at the worst times. If she hadn’t ignored his last two calls the evening before, she could have ignored this one.

“Yeah... I’m getting up.” She kicked the blanket from her body, basking in the cool air that blew from the vent above her bed.

“Did you eat today?”

“Yup.” She paused the FaceTime call, checking the time.

It had become hard to keep up with what day it was. Every day blended into the other. On weekends, she slept the entire day unless Autumn forced her up for a meal in the dining hall. During the week, she slept between classes in the library and turned in for the night after her last class ended in the early afternoon.

“Ice cream don’t count as food.” She clicked the top of her phone screen, returning to the call.

Eric’s white teeth sparkled underneath the crappy fluorescent lighting that gleamed above his head. She couldn’t tell where he was, but it was quiet. The background behind him was only a white wall.

“It could. It keeps me content.” She pushed back her wild mane and rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

“You need real food.” He moved, standing up.

“Hm... okay. Since you’re so perceptive, what else do I need?”

“To get out of that damn room.” She sat up in a daze, looking around.

Autumn’s side was clean, which was an oddity. Her clothes were put away and she tucked her makeup inside the travel case Claudette had gotten her for Christmas. It was Claudette’s

things scattered around the room. Dirty laundry spilled from her closet, books and spiraled notebooks laid on her desk along with a bottle of Midol for the cramps that wouldn't leave although her period had come and gone.

She rolled her eyes and fell back against the pillows on her bed. "I went out yesterday."

"Going to the dining hall don't count as getting out." He carried her with him as he moved around wherever he was.

She watched while he scratched at his hair and grabbed something off camera before walking out into a hallway.

"It most definitely counts as fulfillment for my outdoor quota for the week." Keys jingled. "Where are you going anyway?"

"To come scoop you, so we can go eat." She glanced down at the bleach-stained boy shorts she wore along with Dominic's shirt she had stolen the night she stayed with him at Diane's after his performance.

"Who said I was hungry? I feel perfectly fine." A yawn escaped her mouth while she rubbed at her back.

"Well, if you feel perfectly fine, then you'll have no problem keeping me company while I eat." The phone bounced as he hurried down a flight of stairs. "So be ready when I get there."

He ended the call.

She tossed her head back, letting out a silent scream. Now she'd have to take a shower and put on *actual* clothes. She huffed, rising lazily and hopping down from her bed. She kicked the clothes that laid on the floor, stubbing her toe on something hard.

"Shoot," she squealed, hopping up and down.

Bending down, she scooped the clothes from on top of whatever it was, tossing them to the side. The glow of orange caught her eye. She reached forward and picked up the small bottle of nail polish that hid underneath the heap of dirty laundry. It was the polish Dominic painted her toes with weeks

before. She smiled, rolling it back and forth in her palms, imagining he was there with her. She heard the unique drawl of his voice, as if he were right there in front of her.

Why you so upset Clo'? You supposed to be my G. We ain't shedding no tears over here.

Tears burned her tired eyes. She squeezed the bottle before turning and throwing it into her trash can as they wet her face.

"I'm upset because you warned me and I didn't listen," she whispered. "You didn't prepare me enough for this."

His deep laugh followed her into the shower as she washed the sleep from her body, wondering if she was on his mind. Did he miss her? Did he replay their last moments together every day like she did?

His ghost sat propped on the vanity in the bathroom as she dried the water from her body.

You like that corny nigga, Sunflower?

"Shut up," she responded as if he were there. "Go away, 'Nic."

Go away? You made sure I can't ever go away, remember? We locked in for life.

She tried catching her breath while she shoved on a pair of leggings and pulled a t-shirt over her head.

A loud knock on the door made him disappear back into her thoughts where he would continue to torture her. She grabbed her phone, shoving her feet in a pair of sneakers she'd left by the door.

“Come on, at least share with me.” Eric pushed the basket of lemon pepper wings from King’s Wings toward Claudette, trying to coax her into eating.

She shook her head and pushed the basket back.

“No thanks. I’m good.” She held up the Styrofoam cup of water that she’d been sipping on.

He shrugged and picked up a drumstick from the pile of wings, biting a large chunk of the tender meat. Grease coated the sides of his mouth as he chewed with gusto.

“So, what’s been up with you? You been in a funk lately since Dough went to jail. I know you and him were tight, but I mean he got a lawyer and everything, right?” He rambled, licking the grease from his fingers. “You upset about him or what?”

She raised an eyebrow at him while sticking the straw back in her mouth.

“Nope. Just been under the weather.” She avoided the topic of Dominic, chewing at the end of the straw.

“You been under the weather for about two weeks—that’s a while.”

She smiled to herself, picturing Dominic giving her a hard look, warning her about telling their business to Eric.

“I’m good E.” She reached out, pulling the wing from his hand that he had just grabbed.

She sat the cup down, taking a bite out of it. The texture was rubbery, and the taste was bland, but she continued to chew. He smiled at her attempt to lighten the mood.

“Good?”

She nodded, forcing the chicken down.

“See... all you needed was a little food in your stomach.” He picked up the cup of water and held it out for her to take a sip.

She put the half-eaten wing back into the basket and sipped the water to settle her gurgling stomach.

“How much longer you think you going to be sick?” He smirked, giving her a strange look and pulling the straw from her mouth.

“What’s the look for? You don’t believe that I’ve been sick?” She frowned.

“You know I was sick once before too.” He sat the cup down and leaned back in his chair.

“Eric, I’m sure we’ve all been sick before.”

“Nah... I’m talking about the strange sickness you’ve had for the past two weeks. You know, the kind where you can’t eat? All you want to do is sleep because it’s the only time it don’t hurt.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She looked away from him.

He drummed his fingers on the table and watched her watching the other patrons in the restaurant.

“You can ignore me all you want, but I’m not blind.”

“I’m not ignoring you.”

She wasn’t. She just hadn’t expected him to call her out.

“Alright, I won’t push.”

They sat in silence. Eric picked over the rest of the wings in the basket and she continued to look at everyone else but him. She should have been in her bed, in blissful sleep, chatting with Bryson about her strange spring semester.

“I’m sorry,” she said the words without thinking. “I just have a lot going on right now.”

She turned back to him, and he held his hands up, shrugging.

“I’m not trying to cause you anymore stress, Claudette.”

“You’re not.” She smiled at his gentle nature. “I promise.”

He stretched his long legs underneath the table, brushing against hers.

“We only got a few weeks left in the semester and I don’t want you to be down and out like this for the little time we have left to hang out.”

“According to my grade in A&P, I’ll be here for the summer.” She pursed her lips.

“What you mean? You failing?”

“Pretty much. I would need a miracle to pull a passing grade on the final to finish with a C.”

Eric shook his head, sighing. “Have you at least been studying?”

She gave him a blank stare.

“Okay. Stupid question.” They both chuckled. “Look, I made a B in that class. I could help you out if you want?”

He delivered the question as if he were preparing for her to decline his offer but deep down she knew she needed the help and the distraction.

“Only if you don’t mind putting up with me for the next few weeks.” She leaned forward, resting her head in her hands.

“Trust—I have no problem with that.”

THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION people in the free world had about jail was that it was this leery place that was always full of exciting fights, drugs and corrupt COs.

In reality, it was a fucking boring place full of criminals trying to pass time. People had limitless time to ponder about the bad parts of their life, the best parts, and the uncertainty of the future. If someone wasn't mentally strong it would break them. The corruption and fights were still there, but they easily became the new normal for people like Dominic who had been there one too many times.

"That eye of yours still fucked up I see," Polo said, turning from the small rectangular window on the door of their cell.

Dominic's cellmate Polo was an older frequent flyer. He had been to jail and prison many times. This stay was just another notch on his belt.

"It's good." Dominic laid back on the hard mat that covered his bunk.

He felt the swell of his eye each time he blinked, but he refused medical attention when he was booked.

Polo shrugged and looked back out of the window. He was short with an even caramel tone and had cheeks smattered with freckles. If they hadn't been in jail, Dominic would have thought he was just somebody's jolly grandpa.

"What about the nigga you fought? How he look?"

Dominic sucked on his swollen bottom lip. He didn't know how Marco looked. He didn't even realize he tried to shoot

him until the cops caught up to him, Mo, and Nate not too far from PJ's.

“Don't know.”

“Boy, you must've been some kind of fucked up,” Polo chuckled. “What you was on?”

Dominic laughed, although the situation was fucked up. All of it was fucked up—his life was fucked up.

“Shit, Hennessy and some gas.”

He decided not to share that he'd also popped a Xanax at some point that day, but he couldn't remember when. The longer he stayed in that cell, the more bits and pieces of that day came back to him. Some memories made sense, while others didn't.

“Yeah man—that Hen-dog will make you want to duke it out with a nigga just for looking at you wrong.” Polo shook his head. “Happened to me a few times back when I was a youngin'.”

Dominic stared at the ceiling of their cell, trying to remember that day for the hundredth time. Each time he tried; the sequence of events never made sense. He saw himself ignoring Diane's phone calls. He remembered recording that day, but the words he rapped weren't clear. He remembered Claudette had texted him she needed him. She was supposed to be his last stop that night because he needed her too.

“Your old lady put some money on your books yet?” Polo asked.

“Nah.”

“Oh—must be mad at your ass.”

She was, but not for the reasons Polo thought. He knew her so well that when he went to sleep at night, he felt the hopelessness she felt without him. Sometimes in his dreams he heard her cries—those were the bad nights. The best nights were the ones where her laugh would kiss the canals of his ears and he felt her fingertips caressing his skin.

He would starve before he ever had her put money on his books. She was too good to him and for him. No matter how much he wanted her, he wouldn't allow himself to fuck up her life along with his. It wasn't fair to her, so he needed to let her go. The only problem was, she refused to let him.

"My old lady mad at me too. Ain't answered none of my calls since I been here." Polo moved from the window and went to sit on his bunk. "I don't blame her. I'd be sick of my shit too if I was her."

"How long y'all been together?"

"Forty years."

Dominic whistled. "Goddamn. That's a long time."

"Don't seem like such a long time when you meet the right one."

"I guess so." He crossed his legs at the ankles.

"What about you? How long you been with your girl?"

"She not my girl."

"My fault. What she is then?"

He heard Polo getting comfortable on his bunk, ready to hear his answer.

Another misconception people had about jail was the *dangerous cellmate* stereotype. Most cellies that Dominic had were niggas that liked to shoot the breeze to make the time go by faster. There were the *Sports Center* cellies that liked to ponder about LeBron's plans for the upcoming season. Then there were the gossips—niggas that knew everything going on outside. They knew who was fucking who, which clubs were lit, and who had beef. The worse ones were the mental cases that rambled on for hours. He had learned long ago that most people loved to hear themselves talk, so he sat back and listened most times.

"I don't got no girl man." He exhaled, stretching his legs out.

Polo was asking too many questions, ruining his plan.

“I forgot you one of them young niggas.” He laughed.
“I’m just an old man. You ain’t got to worry about me knocking at your girl door for nothing young blood.”

Dominic turned on his side to face the wall, hoping that the doors would pop soon. He needed to get out.

“So, what you gone do different this time around?” Polo’s deep voice bounced off of the walls of their cell.

“What you mean?”

“I can see this ain’t your first rodeo. Either you keep fucking up or you use this time to smarten up. The choice is yours.”

He closed his eyes, preparing to tune Polo out.

“Me? I plan to smarten up. I’m old. I done missed out on so much shit. Kids’ birthdays, wedding anniversaries, life period. I mean, people ain’t lying when they say life is one big journey. Crazy I waited until I’m old to decide the journey I’m on ain’t working out.”

Dominic kept quiet.

“How you doing in there?” Josiah’s voice sounded muffled through the beat-up phone Dominic held to his ear.

“Shit... maintaining. That’s all I can do.” He scanned the dayroom of the pod. “What about you?”

“Same shit. Maintaining.”

“You been going to school, right?” He rested his back against the wall beside the phone, waiting on Josiah’s answer.

“Yeah... I been going.” He sounded distracted.

“If you ain’t going, you need to be one hundred with me. You know I don’t fuck with that lying shit.” Dominic huffed, knocking the knuckles of his free hand against the wall.

“Man, ain’t nobody lying to you.”

There was always a silent battle that brewed in their household. A tug of war between Diane and Dominic on the responsibility of Josiah. She didn’t understand the bond they had or Dominic’s willingness to step in and take care of Josiah like he was his own when they were only a few years apart.

“What I always tell you about this bullshit?” He heard the sound of a car door slamming. “I’m waiting nigga.”

Josiah kissed his teeth.

“To tell the truth and stand by my word no matter if it’s what the other person want to hear or not,” he mumbled the words under his breath.

“So, where the fuck you been at?”

“Nowhere for real. Just hanging out.”

The pod grew rowdy as two burly inmates argued. Dominic watched, clenching a fist at his side.

“*Just hanging out?*” he mocked. “You got a month until you graduate and you running the streets?”

“I’m not running no streets, D.”

“Then what you call it?”

“Man, you coming at me on some bullshit when you ain’t even got your own shit straight.” Josiah’s voice grew shaky.

“I’m not saying my shit straight.” His chest grew tight. “But I’m for damn sure gone make sure yours is. You got a full ride to college to do what you love and you about to fuck it up trying to follow in my footsteps.”

“Man, that shit don’t matter.”

Josiah sounded dejected, and it was how Dominic felt. The days were growing longer, hostility brewed amongst the inmates, and Quentin visited him less while he worked on the intricacies of his case.

“I don’t know what you on, but you better get your shit in order and be ready to walk across that stage.”

Josiah kissed his teeth. “Right. I’m gone be walking, accomplishing one of the biggest moments of my life in front of thousands of people and the one person who got me there won’t even be able to see it.”

A lump sat in Dominic’s throat as the recording beeped, notifying them they only had a few minutes left of their fifteen-minute call.

“Don’t discredit your mama, Jo. She do her best. She had a hand in getting you where you at too.”

“But she ain’t teach me how to be a man.” Dominic swallowed, still looking at the two inmates that had now moved to their feet. “I love her for everything she do, but you took care of me. Shit, you still do low-key.”

Dominic didn’t know how to teach anybody how to be a man when he barely knew how to be one. He only knew how to take care of and nurture those that were the closest and most loyal to him, so that’s what he did.

“Jo...” He raised his voice, trying to compete with the noise from the inmates. “Don’t let my fucked up decisions stop you from doing right. You say I taught you how to be a man... well I know damn well I taught you that everything I do is so you can have a better life. I made my sacrifices so you

can go to college, play ball, and do shit I knew I'd never get to do. I'm tryna get you away from this life man."

Josiah breathed into the phone as it beeped again.

"You hear me, Jo? Do this for me man. If I don't have shit when I get out of here this time, I'm good because I know I gave you what I never had."

His stomach clenched as he thought of Josiah drifting in the streets while he was locked up.

"I hear you, D... I hear you," Josiah replied.

Before he could respond, the automated message interrupted, informing them they were out of time. As soon as the final beep sounded, one of the quarreling inmates threw a punch.

THE SUMMER SUN made the skin on Claudette's back prickle with sweat as she walked through the rows of sunflowers admiring their yellow hue. She held her tiny arms out so she could brush her hands against the giant beauties.

"Slow down, Sunflower!" Bryson called from behind her.

His hands were full because he carried a basket, scissors, ribbon, their drinks, and a digital camera.

She stopped at the sound of his voice, waiting for him to catch up. She wanted to run through the fields and soak up the bright energy from her favorite flower, but Bryson was slowing her down. She thought he had forgotten about her favorite place that summer, but he didn't. She didn't even have to mark her calendar or throw any hints. He remembered.

"Okay," Bryson said, huffing out a breath and crouching down with all of their belongings in his hands. "You ready to pick out one to take home?"

She nodded with a smile on her brown face, keeping her mouth closed, too embarrassed to expose her two missing teeth in the front. He sat the basket down and tossed all the extra stuff inside.

"This time, you need to find the sunflower that needs the most love and care." He reached out and fluffed the large puffball on top of her head. "It may not be as pretty as all the others, but that doesn't matter."

She nodded in excitement, ready to get on with the task. Bryson grinned, gazing up at her from his position on the ground. Although his face glowed with happiness, his eyes told another story. He tugged at the red sundress she wore and

then stood on his feet. She took off, her white Keds kicking up the dirt from the ground as she went on the hunt for the perfect imperfect flower.

Later, they sat on a quilt he spread in the bed of his pickup truck eating strawberries. She bit into the ripe fruit at odd angles, trying to work around her missing teeth. Her sock clad feet rested on Bryson's lap while she fingered the sunflower she picked out.

It was still vibrant but wilted. The petals drooped and faced downward. Her fingers danced around the wilted petals, brushing against them. She pulled them up and watched as they fell back down.

"It's a good flower," Bryson said, biting into his own strawberry. "Doesn't matter what it looks like on the outside. Don't let that scare you off. It's still deserving of your love and care."

Her soft eyebrows rose at his words. She inspected the flower again, while taking in what Bryson said. She held it in front of her eyes, gazing at the sad flower.

"It's beautiful." Bryson smiled at her still trying to find the beauty in it for herself. "But we'll nurse it back to health with a little TLC. You know what that is?"

She shook her head, and he chuckled.

"Tender loving care." He took the flower from her and examined it himself. "It's the extra you do to make someone or something better. You can give it water and sunlight, but you have to speak love and positivity into it."

He held the flower out and tickled the tip of her nose with the petals. Her raspy giggle took the sadness out of his eyes for just a moment.

There was something about heartbreak that made a person want to inflict additional pain upon themselves, or that could have just been a crazy theory Claudette came up with.

Her favorite self-destructive thing to do was to listen to Dominic's voice on repeat. There was no specific time of day she did it—it was all the time. She started by falling asleep to the deep timbre of his voice at night and graduated to keeping a wireless earbud in one ear throughout the day. His voice comforted her while she walked the campus and sat in her classes.

It was a genius idea.

“What the hell have you been listening to for a week straight?” Autumn asked, pulling the small earbud from her ear with a grimace.

Claudette sat up from her bed so fast that her head spun.

“Give it back!”

Autumn moved quickly with the earbud and shoved it in her own ear. Her face went from teasing to horrified as she snatched it from her ear and threw it on her desk.

“You... have... lost... your... mind,” she said, taking a dramatic pause between each word.

Claudette sighed and fumbled around in her comforter, searching for the other earbud that she left tangled in the sheets earlier that week.

“Claudette, I love you, but this has to stop.” Autumn stood in the middle of her mess with her arms crossed.

The waterworks had already begun as she pulled every layer of bedding from her body. She tossed her pillows, her sheets, and comforter to the floor while Autumn buzzed in her ear. She wiped at her face, trying to breathe through her erratic behavior.

“Where is the other one?” she asked.

Autumn walked closer to the bed with her hand outstretched to grab her arm.

“Don’t!” Claudette blocked her hand before it could make contact. “Just help me look for the other one.”

“Claudette, stop it!”

“No!” She fell back on her legs.

“Look at yourself.” Autumn reached forward and touched her arm with caution. “You need to get out of this room.”

Claudette didn’t understand what she was talking about. She didn’t need to go anywhere; she was in the best place she could be.

“I’m fine. I just want you to give it back. I’ll listen to something else, but I’m not leaving out of here.”

She wiped at the tears that fell. Their room had become a safe space. Her bed was the only comforting place she could find.

“Look at yourself,” Autumn said, squeezing her arm. “Look at this room. I have to make you get up and shower. This shit ain’t healthy.”

Her eyes roved down to her legs and chest. She still donned yesterday’s leggings and hoodie that she had thrown on for her early morning English class. There was a pile of clothing on the floor that grew bigger each week. Shoes were scattered in a trail that led from the door to her bed. Her backpack sat unopened underneath her desk.

Her deal with Eric had long been forgotten. She crafted elaborate excuses as to why she wasn’t available to study. Sometimes there was some truth in them, like an upset stomach that made it hard to keep down the ice cream she gorged on or eyes that wouldn’t stay open. There were times she ignored him altogether because she was so angry about everything and nothing at all.

Somehow Autumn’s words made the day-old clothes on her body feel like a heap of dirt attached to her skin. She snatched her arm from her hold and climbed from the bed.

“I want my earbud on my bed when I get out of the shower.” Her voice was rigid as she walked to the bathroom.

She ignored the lightheadedness that plagued her as she slammed the door to the bathroom and stripped. Autumn burst in behind her and scooped up the clothes she left on the floor.

“What are you? My warden? I don’t need a chaperone to wash my butt,” she said, rolling her eyes.

She stepped into the shower, turning the knob to the hottest setting and waiting for Autumn’s snarky response. There was just silence instead. She peaked through the streaks the steam left on the shower door, wondering why she hadn’t responded. Autumn fingered through the clothes she’d shed, holding up the sports bra Claudette snuck from her drawer the morning before.

“I thought you said your period was over?” Autumn asked.

She sucked in a breath as she brushed the towel across her stomach. She pulled it up, carefully avoiding her breasts.

“It is.”

Autumn shook her head with a strange expression, unaware that Claudette was watching her. She opened her mouth and then shut it again.

Claudette guessed she was finally fed up with her borrowing her clothes without permission. She’d gone from bras to jeans, sweatshirts, and leggings. It was typical of her to borrow Autumn’s plush sports bras while PMSing. The soft fabric cushioned her tender breast without causing more discomfort, but this month, the tenderness wouldn’t subside no matter what she wore.

“Okay.” Autumn choked out the word and left out of the bathroom.

“Everything okay down there?” Eric asked from his side of the futon.

Claudette stopped shuffling underneath the blanket draped on her lap and looked over at him.

“Mhm,” she hummed back, moving to lie on her side.

No matter what position she sat in, she couldn't get comfortable. The rails from the futon dug into the skin of her back. Her sock covered feet would get hot, so she'd take them off. Then they would get cold, so she'd put them back on. The peppermint tea Eric made for her nauseous stomach had too much peppermint, making her nausea worse as the night wore on.

Autumn let out an obnoxious cackle at the standup comedy that played on Eric's mounted flat screen. She laid on the floor beneath her, unbothered by her constant moving. Claudette had missed half of the jokes that were told.

Eric shared a four-bedroom off-campus apartment with three of his other frat brothers. It was a typical bachelor pad with liquor bottles stowed away on top of the kitchen cabinets as decor and a bare-bones living room set comprised of a stained loveseat and a broken coffee table. It reeked of weed and the masculine mixture of several colognes.

There were only two weeks left in the semester, and the impromptu get together was Eric's idea. The only reason she'd agreed to come was because he had invited both her and Autumn. She was sure he knew that it was the only way she'd agree. He was going back home to Savannah for the first half of summer and would be back the second half to take two courses. It was bittersweet. She doubted she'd be drowning in sorrow once he left, but she would miss his presence and willingness to help her nurse her obvious broken heart.

“You want some more tea?” He leaned forward, getting ready to reach for her cup.

“No, I'm good. Just relax.” Claudette tightened the blanket around her body while smiling at him.

Autumn huffed and turned the volume up on the television to drown out their chatter. Claudette and Eric chuckled to themselves while snuggling back to their respective sides of the futon.

The raunchy jokes hardly registered to Claudette as she stared at the comedian pacing back and forth across the stage. She tried to hide the yawn that escaped her lips, hoping Eric and Autumn wouldn't notice her lack of attention. Her phone burned a hole in the pocket of the fitted joggers she wore. She stroked the soft fibers of the blanket, trying to keep her fingers busy and ignore temptation.

Marquise had finished editing the footage from her and Dominic's last day together. The email came to her inbox early that morning. Each time it tempted her; she'd talk herself out of watching it. Autumn called this stage of her fictional breakup with Dominic, *the purge*. She was to delete all of their messages, get rid of everything that reminded her of him and block him on social media, but she had only done the latter.

It hadn't even been a real block.

Just as quick as she had blocked him, he was unblocked, but she would never tell Autumn that. He had given her access to every account he owned anyway—too preoccupied with real life to care about what happened on social media. If she wanted to delete every trace of him from the internet, she could have done so with ease. After the unsuccessful attempt at purging him from her life, she decided she would work at it slowly. She was ready for it, she could do it, she just needed the willpower.

She blinked, trying to get herself to focus on the television as Autumn lit up with laughter again.

Focus.

She needed to focus.

Her foot kicked from underneath the blanket, running away from the heat again. This time, a heavy hand beat her to the thick sock she was getting ready to pull off.

She looked out of the corner of her eye at Eric. His long arm had reached across the imaginary barrier they created on the futon and pulled her foot toward him. His eyes were still on the television, but his hand slid the sock off. He laughed at a joke while he pulled her other foot from underneath the blanket, taking that sock off too.

She held her breath, waiting for him to move his hands, but he never did. Instead, they gently caressed her toes. His hands were soft and felt different from Dominic's calloused ones. He tickled them and ran his fingers across the soles before leaning forward and kneading them. While her body floated off into a peaceful slumber, Eric and Autumn's cackles hardly disturbed her. His hands worked in circles, making her shoulders sag. As soon as she entered the first stage of sleep, a loud knock jolted her head upright.

"That's probably the food," Autumn said without turning around.

Eric's fingers stopped kneading her heels and eased her legs from his lap. He got up to answer the door, and she sighed, curling into a ball, hoping he wouldn't be gone long because she was on the cusp of an epic nap. She could feel it—all she needed were his hands back on her feet. As she closed her eyes again, she heard Autumn get up from the floor beneath her and Eric faintly talking to the delivery driver at the front door.

"Come on Claudy, get up." Autumn pulled the blanket from her limp body.

She grumbled, forcing both eyes back open. Autumn stood above her, glaring with both hands on her hips. Her curly ringlets were brushed into a puff like Claudette's, except her natural curls were looser with a brown tint. With the mounting stress of the last few days of the semester, she had forgone all wigs until further notice.

She shook her head and sat back on the floor.

"I hope he at least got a liter of Sprite," she mumbled, picking at her cuticles.

Claudette forced her body from the futon and slid onto the floor next to her.

“You need to drink that for your never-ending stomach virus, instead of that nasty peppermint tea,” she said, her last words coming out in a whisper as Eric walked back in with the pizza, a liter of Sprite, and three solo cups.

He handed Autumn the cardboard box before he dropped to the floor beside Claudette. Autumn wasted no time, flipping the top of the box open and reaching for a slice. The smell of the sausage made Claudette’s stomach gurgle in protest.

“So, what you gone do when you get back home?” Autumn asked, looking at Eric.

He shrugged. “My dad owns a plumbing company. I might see if he wants some help for a few weeks. I could use the money.”

He took a large bite out of the slice of pizza.

“Plumbing?” Autumn wrinkled her nose. “So you gone be messing with shit all day?”

Eric coughed, almost choking on the greasy slice of pizza.

“Plumbers do other stuff too,” Claudette said while she moved to rest her back on the edge of the futon.

“Yeah, stuff that involves unclogging people’s shit.” Autumn pulled a large slice from the box and shoved it towards her.

Claudette swallowed the bile that threatened to come up. She was sure after she mended her heart and moved on from Dominic, she would be the size of a toothpick.

“Man, that’s not all he does. There are bathtubs that need unclogging, water leaks, pipes that need replacing.” Eric leaned into Claudette’s side while she picked the sausages from the pizza. “Your friend trying to play me.”

“Ain’t nobody playing you. I think it’s commendable you’re getting some legit money. Most dudes would lie around playing 2K for a month until it was time for them to come back to campus.” She squinted her eyes at Claudette, who was

taking the tiniest bite out of the pizza she'd turned into a mound of cheese and bread.

"Nah, I most definitely will still play 2K. Don't get it twisted."

Claudette concentrated on chewing and swallowing while trying to keep up with the conversation.

"Since when do you not eat sausage?" Autumn licked the grease from her fingers. "It's your favorite kind. That's why we got it."

"I do. It's just not agreeing with my stomach at the moment." She shrugged.

"Ain't nothing been agreeing with your stomach lately." Autumn rolled her eyes.

Eric cleared his throat. "It's been a bug going around campus. My roommate was sick a couple weeks ago—couldn't keep shit down."

"Yeah, but hers ain't going away." Autumn reached for another slice of pizza and stared at her. "Weird."

"I'm fine," Claudette said, trying to convince them and herself. "Really. This is probably a sign I should take better care of my body. I should eat healthier."

"If you say so." Autumn gave her the same look from the day she had picked up her clothes in the bathroom.

Her eyebrows pinched together like she wanted to probe more, but she knew she couldn't with Eric there.

"So, if your dad is a plumber, how'd you get into computers?" Claudette deliberately changed the subject.

"My ma. Her and my daddy are complete opposites. She's an IT director for a major hospital in Savannah. She's always been big on me exploring and figuring out how things work." He crunched down on the thin crust of the pizza and swallowed. "My dad is real traditional. The plumbing business has been in our family for years. He always expected me to take over once I graduated high school, but my mom wasn't having that."

“Mom sends you off to college to study what she loves and dad wants you to take over the family business?” Claudette dropped her half-eaten slice back into the box. “What do you want?”

“Who you supposed to be? Iyanla Vanzant?” Autumn smirked.

Claudette stuck out her tongue at her and flicked a hand her way, brushing off the smart comment.

“Never thought about it.” Eric looked up, shrugging. “Guess I could ask you the same. You haven’t even declared a major.”

“Right! Get on her ass. Ms. Fix My Life don’t even know what she doing here.” Autumn clapped and pulled the liter of Sprite into her lap.

“Whatever. In my defense, I’ve never been passionate about much of anything.” Her hands moved to clutch her rumbling stomach. “My grandpa is also very hands off with those types of things. He made sure I got to college like my dad wanted, but that’s about it. As long as I’m not failing out of school and wasting his pension, he’s good.”

“Hell yeah. George don’t play about that pension.” She and Autumn cackled together. “It only took a month for him to cut you off last semester.”

The days of her and Autumn roaming around to different restaurants and buying as much junk food as their heart’s desired on George’s dime felt like decades ago. It didn’t take long for him to stop making the pit stop at Western Union during his Saturday morning errands to send them money. She could only imagine what he’d say when she explained to him she had failed a course and would have to retake it during the summer, costing him unnecessary money.

“What about your parents? They don’t send you money?” Eric asked.

Autumn gave him a grim smile and twisted the cap from the Sprite bottle. She poured them each a cup of the lemon-lime flavored drink.

“My dad died when I was younger and my mom isn’t in my life.” Claudette rushed through the explanation, trying not to rehash what happened to either parent.

“Damn. I-I didn’t know. Sorry.” He stumbled over his words.

“No big deal.” She took the cup Autumn sat by her leg and gulped the soda.

The carbonation soothed her empty stomach.

Autumn looked between the two of them over the rim of her own solo cup. The room quieted. Claudette drank the last of her soda and sat the empty cup beside her. Her stomach had finally calmed. She knew the relief was only temporary, because each time one ailment disappeared, another popped up in its place to torment her.

“Autumn you have no room to talk. What the heck are you going to do with a degree in Communications?” Claudette asked, piercing the silence between them.

She and Eric burst into laughter while Autumn threw her empty cup their way.

“If things pan out like I plan, I won’t be needing that Communications degree. So, y’all can laugh it up.” She shoved herself up from the floor.

“What you mean by that? So you getting a degree for nothing? Wasting four whole years?” Eric looked up at her with a baffled expression.

Claudette sat back, holding in her giggle, because she had heard Autumn’s plan a thousand times.

“Eric, with this face and this body I don’t plan on clocking in to nobody’s job. I’m meant to be kept, not worked to death.” She sashayed out of the room, leaving Eric just as confused as he was before.

“Your friend is...” He turned to Claudette, shaking his head.

“Something else?”

“Man!”

They laughed together, falling into each other.

He pulled back, the smile falling from his face. His eyes squinted as he studied her, and her heart pounded as he moved his head closer to her face. She prayed he wouldn't kiss her because she couldn't stomach it. They weren't the lips she wanted on her. She wanted the only lips that had ever explored her mouth and body.

His eyes stared at her lips that poked out in horror.

“Damn Eric, y'all don't know how to aim? Y'all's bathroom is so pissy,” Autumn said, drying her hands on the back of her sweats.

Eric pulled back with a hard blink and turned toward her voice while she looked up at Autumn who was drying her hands on the back of her sweats. Autumn didn't even realize what she was interrupting.

“Whatever... so what're we watching next? Something scary?” he asked.

His face returned to normal and there was no hint of desire in his eyes anymore.

“Hell no. I don't do scary movies. Let's watch another comedy.” Autumn sat back in her spot on the floor, flipping the lid of the pizza box in search of the remote.

Claudette stared, tucking her bottom lip under her front teeth, wondering what a kiss from Eric would have been like and whether Dominic would care that someone else wanted to experience her in ways that only he had.

WATER POUNDED THE shore of the beach as Dominic stood in the sand watching his toes sink into the fine grains. The cawing of seagulls in the distance caught his attention. His tiny feet propelled forward to a flock that pecked around pieces of bread someone was kind enough to leave.

It was quiet, the only sounds were the water splashing forward and the rowdy birds. He wasn't used to silence. There was always noise at home—a television blaring, Eve yelling, music playing from cars that parked outside their motel room, neighbors fighting.

The empty beach looked like the backdrop of a postcard. The only thing missing were the tourists with their umbrellas and beach towels. He and Eve were the only two souls there.

“Nic! Come here!” Eve shouted from the shoreline.

She sat with her back to him. He saw her cradling something. The gusts of wind blew her straightened hair in every direction, making the strands whip across her face.

Dominic looked at the birds and groaned. He was just about to scare them off. His tiny body stomped through the sand, struggling to keep his feet from sinking.

“I'm coming, damn.” He grumbled more to himself than Eve.

He stumbled through the sand, trying to hurry to her before she accused him of being disobedient. The closer he got, the more he realized that she cradled someone rather than something.

His steps slowed as he neared her body. Two brown feet dangled off of her lap. He sucked in a breath, wondering what was happening.

“Come see!” she commanded.

He stumbled forward, stopping just beside her and the small body she held. It was a girl with unblemished brown skin and kinky hair brushed into two thick braids. Dressed in a yellow sundress, she looked like she belonged in some department store’s summer catalog. She was the prettiest baby doll he had ever seen.

“Why do you have that baby doll?” he asked in a low whisper, crouching beside Eve.

His fingers reached out to touch her small toes. The baby soft skin felt like silk. He jumped back as one toe he touched moved.

“She not a baby doll.” Eve glared at him. “She real.”

Eve shook her, and they both looked on in awe as the baby girl opened both eyes. She looked at Eve in confusion, blinking back tears. Eve rocked her and her pouty mouth opened as she looked around in a panic before noticing Dominic. His heart leapt at the sight of her round face—it was Claudette.

“She crying because she don’t know you,” Dominic said.

Eve stopped rocking and moved to let Claudette sit up.

“Don’t cry Clo’. She won’t hurt you.” He reached forward, pulling her from Eve’s lap.

Her sobs grew loud once she found her way into his short arms.

“It’s okay. I won’t let nothing happen to you.” Eve watched as he doted on Claudette.

He wiped her tears, being as gentle as possible.

“How did you find me?” he asked, hugging her as tight as he could.

“Don’t be so rough ‘Nic.” Eve swatted at him.

Ignoring Eve's reprimands, he gave her one last squeeze before letting go. She smiled, exposing two missing front teeth. Her fingers pulled at the bottom of her dress while looking between Dominic and Eve.

"You can talk to us Clo'." He grabbed her hands and pulled her forward.

She sucked in a breath with a worried frown.

"She scared." Eve reached out and fingered her long braids.

"No, it's her voice." He squeezed her hands. "Come on Clo'."

Claudette sniffled; her marbled eyes were glossy. Dominic was in awe that she'd found him. She was there with him and Eve. He couldn't believe it.

"Tell me what's wrong." His little body leaned forward, urging her to talk. "Tell me so I can make it better."

Her mouth opened, but no sound came out. She closed it and opened it to try again. Still, nothing came out. He rose in panic, reaching out to grab her face in his hands. He clutched so hard that he twisted her mouth.

"Stop 'Nic! I told you she scared. You gone hurt her." He wouldn't let go.

He squeezed harder. He needed to hear her. She needed to tell him what was wrong. Tears fell from her eyes as she tried to talk, but only a choke came from her voice box. Her brown fingers clutched her stomach as if she were in pain, but he wouldn't stop squeezing.

"Talk to me! Talk to me!" he yelled.

"Stop 'Nic!"

"No! Talk to me!" His yells turned into sobs.

Eve reached out and pried his fingers from Claudette's wet face. She pulled him back, and they watched as Claudette fell into the sand, still clutching at her stomach. Dominic pushed

to get out of Eve's hold. Claudette needed him, and she was holding him back.

Sand flew into his eyes as he wrestled out of her arms and crawled toward Claudette. Her image faded faster than he moved. Her legs dissolved first, then her stomach that she held. Her face was the only thing left. She shook her head back and forth, opened and closed her mouth, but no words came.

“Talk, Clo’. I know you can talk! Talk!”

“Baby, please talk!” Dominic yelled out in a panic, sitting up from his bunk.

Sweat made the rough fabric of his jail issued pants stick to his legs. His chest was bare but felt like it was covered in a thousand blankets.

“You killin’ me, D. This the fourth time this week you done woke me up yelling and shit,” Polo said from his bunk beneath him.

Dominic tried to catch his breath while his eyes adjusted to the dark cell. The only light was the tiny slither that showed under the crack of their door.

“Shit, man. I ain’t mean to wake you up,” he replied, trying to control the tremble in his voice.

Usually, it was Eve who wouldn’t let him sleep, but now it was her and Claudette. It was the same every time. Each time he got closer and closer to making her speak, she would disappear right before his eyes. He’d contemplated on training himself to stay up throughout the night to let Polo get rest. It would mean he’d be tortured with his own thoughts for almost twenty-four hours a day, but he’d rather that than the nightmares that accompanied sleep.

“I’m old, man. I ain’t wet behind the ears like you. I need a little shuteye to function.” He heard Polo shuffling beneath him. “They about to wake us up for count anyhow. Guess I may as well stay up.”

Dominic wiped at his eyes and eased back onto the hard mat that was supposed to cushion his back. He closed his eyes,

hoping that Eve and Claudette would let him get some sleep.

“That old lady of yours must’ve really done a number on you. Got you up there sweating like a whore in church.”

“Guess so.” Dominic reopened his eyes, realizing as long as Polo was up he was going to make sure he stayed up too.

He rested an arm behind his head, staring into the darkness. He stopped correcting Polo every time he referred to Claudette as his girl, girlfriend, or old lady. Dominic figured he was old and harmless. Him knowing about Claudette wouldn’t bring her any harm. None of those titles meant anything to him anyhow. She was his heart, and that trumped any meaningless title.

“Dreams like that ain’t never no good. You sure you been calling her?”

“Yup,” Dominic lied.

He heard Polo sitting up.

“You want to know something?”

“What?” He wanted to say no, but didn’t, seeing as how he’d kept the man up for almost a week.

“My great grandma from Louisiana used to talk about dreams like that. Usually mean you got some unfinished business with that person and you’re on their mind something heavy.” He got up from his bunk and shuffled to their rectangular window where he had hoisted up a piece of fabric to keep the light out. “If you was in touch with her like you say you is you wouldn’t be having no crazy dreams like that.”

Dominic’s eyes widened in the dark.

“Sounds like you trying to let go but she ain’t.” He pulled the fabric from the window, letting more light in their cell. “Now, the question is, do you want to get rid of her or have her torture you every night?”

He thought hard about a life without her. He thought so hard that his head hurt. Whatever fucked up thing she was doing to his head had made it impossible for him to imagine his world without her.

“How I get rid of her?” He toyed with Polo, trying to see what suggestion the old man had.

“Got to break soul ties with her. There’s a lot of ways you can do it.”

“Like?”

“Rituals and shit like that, but it ain’t gone happen overnight. And I’ll warn you now, she’ll feel when you cut them ties. It ain’t a nice process that’s cut and dry.”

Dominic ran his fingers across his abdomen, contemplating on entertaining Polo’s strange solution. Claudette would be free from him and his drama, but she’d hate it. It couldn’t have been worse than the pain she already felt though.

He could still feel his own pain of seeing her dissolve in front of his eyes in his dream. Would he want that pain in real life too?

“Let me know and I’ll tell you what to do.” Polo rested his weight against the door.

Dominic sighed.

“Can I ask you something?” Polo asked.

“Yeah man?”

“What she do to you?”

“She ain’t do shit to me.” He huffed and sat up, ready to get out of their cell so he could think without Polo’s mindless chatter.

“Then why you want her out your life? She must’ve done some foul stuff.” He laughed to himself. “She fuck your friend? Stole from you? Ratted on you?”

“Hell nah.” He frowned, offended on Claudette’s behalf.

“Then what did this girl do that got you begging for her ass every night like a scared lil’ boy but running from her when you awake?”

Dominic felt the walls of their cell closing in as he gulped, wishing for fresh air. The stale air of their cell worsened his claustrophobia.

“Love me.”

There. He had said it. He admitted it out loud.

Polo burst into rambunctious laughter. He laughed so hard that his pot belly bounced up. Dominic wanted to climb from his bunk and stomp a hole in his throat to shut him up.

“I’m sorry, D. I’m not laughing at you, boy.” He held a hand up attempting to catch his breath. “But I ain’t expect that to come out your mouth.”

Dominic kissed his teeth, knowing he should’ve kept his mouth shut.

“These niggas fear you in here.” Polo wheezed out. “They fear you and your biggest fear is love from some lil’ girl. She must be hell to have you running like you is.”

His mouth lifted into a smile at Polo’s imaginative description of Claudette.

“Now, tell me why you so afraid of this girl loving you. Old Polo may be able to give you something to chew on up there.”

“I don’t know how to love no girl.” He scratched at the kinky curls that sprouted from his head. “She scare me because she look at me like I’m her fucking world—like I’m the fucking greatest when I ain’t shit but a lost nigga.”

Polo looked up at him, his freckled face paled. “Sounds like you don’t think you deserve to be loved.”

“Guess so.” He shrugged and avoided Polo’s piercing stare.

“Okay, tell me this first. What you mean when you say you don’t know how to love no girl?” He paced their cell.

Dominic’s shoulders sagged and he continued staring at the ceiling. He couldn’t look at Polo while talking about something so sensitive.

“I just don’t. I ain’t never been in love with no girl. Not now, never. How I’m supposed to live up to this supreme image of me she got in her head when I ain’t shit compared to the niggas she could have?” He shook his head.

Polo laughed out loud again, making him frown.

“You funny D.”

“Man, what the fuck is funny about that?” His voice grew loud and he sat up.

“You up there talking about you ain’t never been in love with no girl when your ass in love right now. Talking about you ain’t nothing compared to who she could have. Boy, you sound ridiculous.”

“What you mean?” He laid back down, preparing himself to cut their conversation short at any moment.

“You been up there shouting for that girl for a week now. You know in your head that you love her, just admit the shit out loud or let her go for those other, *better* niggas, to have.”

His stomach dropped as he thought about Eric’s hands on Claudette. He had never been a jealous nigga, but just the thought of Eric having free rein around her while he was locked up made his head swirl with violent thoughts. At least on the outside, he had control over their interactions. He knew Claudette was too preoccupied with him to give Eric the attention he craved, but now that he was gone, Eric’s corny ass was probably salivating at her being so available.

“You think she give a damn about you not being shit? She love you for you. That mean she down for you and all the fucked up baggage you come with,” Polo added. “Bet you the first nigga that be talking all that shit about loyalty and you up there ready to throw her to the next dude that’s been waiting on you to fuck up more than you already have. That sound like loyalty to you? I guarantee she more loyal than your ass.”

Claudette’s smile flashed before his eyes. Images of her naked body thrusting below someone other than him made his breathing stop. Her raspy voice telling him she’d always belong to him made his heart beat fast.

He wanted to believe Polo's words, but he knew the drill. He had watched too many of his homeboy's girlfriends make the same claims only to turn around and be up under the next nigga before they even served the first month of their sentences. They eventually grow tired of waiting. The absence of emotional and physical connection becomes too much to bear, so they seek solace in other men. No official breakup occurs, just an end to phone calls and visits. Eventually Claudette would grow tired of waiting too. She'd forget his voice and stop craving his touch.

CLAUDETTE JOLTED FROM her sleep, doing her best to hold the bile that threatened to come up at any moment. She untangled her sweaty body from the sheets and blankets in her bed before sliding onto the floor. Her feet padded against the carpeted floor of her dorm room as she hurried to the bathroom. She stepped on clothes and tripped over sneakers. The clicking of Autumn's bedside lamp made her feet move faster and the muscles in her stomach contracted more violently the closer she got to the toilet.

As soon as she reached it, she collapsed to the ground, almost missing her target. While gagging, she watched as her baked potato soup from dinner spilled into the toilet. She shouldn't have let Autumn talk her into eating the hearty meal. Not long after she'd forced it down, it sat in her stomach in a heap of broth and potato chunks, threatening to come up at any moment.

Her body shook so hard, it made her stomach sore and sweat prickle on her forehead. Autumn's cold fingers held her hair back as she choked out the last few potatoes. Her tired arm reached forward to push the toilet handle down, but Autumn's hand beat her to it.

"Thanks, I didn't mean to wake you up," she sputtered, gripping the bowl of the toilet.

Autumn said nothing. She let go of her hair and walked toward the sink, sighing and turning the water on.

"How long are we going to ignore the obvious?" she asked in a rigid voice.

“What do you mean?” Claudette dropped her forehead onto the back of her hand.

Her body was empty and weak. She heard the clinking sounds of Autumn moving around their vanity, probably grabbing her toothbrush.

“Did you at least have the common sense to use a condom when you fucked him?” She tapped the toothbrush against the sink. “Or you gave him that power too?”

Claudette choked, and her stomach lurched, trying to force up nothing. Tears blurred her vision.

“I mean, what the fuck has he done to you? You’ve lost sense of yourself.” She shoved a toothbrush coated in blue toothpaste toward her, ignoring her sobs.

She deserved it. She deserved the heartbreak and any consequences that came with what she did with Dominic. The truth was, she had blocked the possibility of carrying his child, warping her mind to make herself believe she was sick with a broken heart and an imaginary stomach virus that wouldn’t end. Deep down, she knew what they had done. At any moment she could’ve stopped him and made him use protection after the first time, but she didn’t.

“Why you ain’t say anything?” Autumn pressed, leaning against the sink.

“About what Autumn?” She shrugged, staring at the toothbrush. “What do you want me to say?”

“Something Claudette! Anything! This nigga got you so gone that you walking around hiding the fact that you pregnant. You *just* stopped obsessing over his ass and now this! What else aren’t you telling me?”

She stumbled to her feet, ignoring Autumn’s screaming. She brushed passed her and stuck the toothbrush in her mouth, brushing as hard as she could. The foul taste of the soup wouldn’t leave, no matter how hard she scrubbed. She hurried and washed her mouth out, putting her toothbrush back in the holder it was in.

“So now you’re ignoring me! You can ignore me all you want to, but I’m not the one that knocked you up and left you to fend for yourself.”

Her body warmed at Autumn’s harsh words. She squeezed the edge of the sink, itching to reach out and grab her, but she backed away instead. She left out of the bathroom, moving on autopilot. Her eyes were frantic as she hyperventilated, grabbing the tote Autumn had brought her back from Cabo. She shoved it open, tearing the tissue out of it and replacing it with whatever she could grab.

Autumn rushed out of the bathroom behind her.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

Claudette moved faster. She shoved a hoodie over her head and stuffed her feet in the nearest pair of sneakers. She pulled her cellphone and its charger from the wall with so much force, the cord almost snapped in half. Autumn called her name as she breezed through the door of their room and into the night.

The humid heat nearly suffocated her once she stepped outside. She ignored the uncomfortableness of the hoodie sticking to her body and pressed forward. She knew she looked ridiculous with a designer bag full of clothes that spilled out of the top and massive hair.

Luckily, campus was empty, because it was sometime in the early morning hours. Students were out partying, celebrating the last few days of the semester while she roamed campus in a daze. Her feet ignored the nagging in her head telling her to go back and instead led her to the nearest bus stop.

Diane's porch light flickered on and off as Claudette knocked on the door in a frenzy. She glanced back into the driveway, making sure her mind wasn't playing tricks on her and Diane's tiny Honda was indeed parked there.

She huffed and turned to leave, prepared to catch an Uber back to campus so she wouldn't have to deal with the strange souls that rode the bus at night. Once had been enough for her.

The front door swung open before her feet reached the last step.

"Girl, where is the fire? What's wrong?" Diane shouted.

Her voice made the tears she held flow. She wiped at them, trying to compose herself before she faced her.

"Is it okay if I stay here tonight?" she choked out while walking back up the steps.

Diane's face dropped once she noticed her wet face. She hurried to push the screen door open so she could get to her.

"Oh baby girl, what's the matter?" Diane gathered her into her arms and pulled them both inside the house.

The purse fell from Claudette's arms and onto the floor, spilling its contents. She cried so hard she felt the swelling of her eyes. Her back ached so bad from the journey over that she could barely stand straight. Diane held her up, bringing her through the house, down the sole hallway, and into a familiar space.

Her swollen eyes surveyed the room. It looked like Diane hadn't touched it since he'd left. His Oakland Raiders comforter was wrinkled like he laid on top of it and got up to leave suddenly. His sneakers were clean and lined up underneath the window. There was a space where a pair was missing—the only sign that he'd left. If it hadn't been for that space, she would have expected him to pop up at any moment to scold her for crying so much.

"Lay down. I'll bring your stuff in here." Diane nuzzled her forward before leaving out.

She ambled to the bed and her stomach fluttered with butterflies as Eve watched her from her designated spot on his wall. It was the first time in the month since he left that her body felt light.

She kicked her shoes off and tore the hoodie from her body before climbing under the blanket that still smelled like him. With one last shaky breath, her body settled. Her head sank into his pillow and her worries eased some.

Diane came back and sat her bag on his nightstand.

“Come get me if you need anything.” Her fingers brushed her coarse curls, and she turned to leave without grilling her, which Claudette was thankful for.

Once Diane left, her hand found its way to her flat stomach where she stroked it, thinking of the wild possibility that she and Dominic created a life together while in the reckless throes of love. She wondered if love made all people do stupid things like she had done. She wondered if he had any inkling their actions may have bound them for life.

Her other hand reached out toward the nightstand and fumbled through the bag of junk she packed until it landed on her phone. She was tired of torturing herself and wanted to hear his voice. Purging was useless at this point.

She went into her inbox, searching for the video that Marquise sent her. It was still there, unread. She clicked it, opening the attachment. Her heart hammered as it loaded.

Her face lit as Dominic appeared in the camera’s frame because it was the first time she’d seen him in motion outside of her dreams in a month.

The video was vibrant and crisp. The images were so high quality that it felt as if she transported back to that day. Marquise followed him as he walked Diane’s tiny street, exchanging elaborate handshakes with people he knew from his neighborhood. He turned toward Marquise and grinned, something he seldom did. It was strange seeing his white teeth stand out in the lighting from the sun. His caramel skin was smooth without a blemish or pore in sight. The lines from his

tattoos were so crisp she could make out some of her favorite ones that she would trace while they laid together.

“On some real nigga shit, I’m a whole fraud.” The group of men that surrounded him laughed at his revelation. “I ain’t no rapper.”

He avoided the camera’s gaze and pulled something from his pocket. It was a pre-rolled blunt that he toyed with in his hands.

“I just like to tell stories that people wanna’ hear.” His eyes never stayed focused on one thing, they constantly moved around. “I really ain’t come from shit, so I just rap about what I lived and what I’m still living. People want to hear shit they can relate to, so I like to give them that.”

He placed the blunt behind his ear and faced the camera.

“My best friend once told me that life ain’t fair, and we just got to learn to play with the cards we’re dealt.” He smiled. “So, that’s what I’m doing. Playing with the fucked up hand I was given. It’s all good though, because I’m the type of nigga that can turn nothing into something.”

Claudette laughed out loud to herself at the candid reference from the first night they hung out together in the very bed she laid in.

The camera panned away from his face and the bass dropped to the song that made everyone go crazy the night she and Autumn got drunk at Z-Bar. It was the song that made her realize that people wanted to hear what he had to say, no matter how gritty it was.

Somehow Marquise produced an entire music video during the course of a day. The opening sequence was of her and Jo on the quad. The images blended so well together. If she hadn’t known any better, she would have thought they paid thousands of dollars for the video production when it only cost her a ten-page Sociology essay. The rest of the shots of Dominic were shots she hadn’t been around for, probably taken while she was cooped in the kitchen with Diane.

Images of Dominic’s neighborhood friends rapping to his song and Diane’s small house serving as the primary set made for an authentic backdrop. The best shots were the ones with Dominic alone, vibing to his own music. He rapped alone with no hype men around, except for the toddler she remembered clutching onto him. Her stomach jumped as he cradled the baby closer, smiling into the camera. She replayed the video again and again, in disbelief that she’d been a part of such a journey that produced something so amazing in only three short months.

Her eyes grew heavy as she mindlessly logged into his Instagram account. It was the first time she’d done so since he’d given her permission during one of his many disappearing bouts.

“Are you sure ‘Nic? I can just send you the pictures and captions and you can do it,” she’d said, watching him text on one phone and entertain her on the other while sitting in his car.

“Nah. Just do it for me. It ain’t that serious.” He pushed a button to put the phone to sleep and looked up with a sly smile that made her ignore the fact that she hadn’t seen him in days. *“I’ll send you the login shit when we get off the phone.”*

She remembered frowning at the nonchalant way in which he handed things off to her, letting her do what she wanted with his “career”.

“Now can we talk about something else?” He picked up the phone with her on it and started the car.

“Like?” Her eyebrows raised in question as she turned on her side.

“Like how you be blowing up my mentions, tagging me in all them damn videos you think funny.”

She had giggled, burying her face in the pillow on her bed. She only did it for two reasons—to entertain him because she knew he never slept and to make sure he knew that he always occupied her thoughts even when they weren’t together.

“I be thinking some shit going on and it’s your ass sending me memes at three in the morning,” he’d laughed.

“Block me then!” she squealed.

“Hell nah! I be missing your lil’ goofy ass.”

She smiled at the memory.

His profile was full of unread notifications and direct messages. She knew she shouldn’t have, but she scrolled through the notifications. He only had one picture left on his profile after his mass deletion at the advice of his lawyer, but that one picture had hundreds of comments.

It was a simple image from the day they shot the music video. His expression was neutral, and he held up two middle fingers—*typical Dominic*. He’d shed everything but his jeans and sneakers by then.

The comments were an outpouring of love. People expressed how badly they wanted him free and how much they missed his music but one comment stood out among the well-wishes.

Her palms grew sweaty as she read it over and over.

*Free my bae. You know I’m forever holding you down.
When you get out, you know me and you going up for real.*

She clicked the profile as her hands shook. If it hadn’t been for the personal touch to the message, she would have ignored it, but the fact that the girl had laid claim to Dominic made her nauseated.

Scouring the girl’s profile, she looked for any trace of him. She clicked on every picture of her dressed in designer clothing and partying in private nightclub sections, looking for something—anything. She was gorgeous, vibrant, and seemed to have endless amounts of friends and money, but Dominic was nowhere. He wasn’t lurking in the background of her pictures, nor did he comment on anything she posted. So where did she come from? He had mentioned no one else, but then again, he had the unique ability to make Claudette feel like she was the only person who occupied his mind.

She held back more tears as she hurried to log out. She had no business snooping, anyway; her original intent was to upload a teaser for the music video so his fans could have something to look forward to. Now, she just wanted to sleep.

“Alright, I let you sleep long enough. Time to get up.” Diane pulled the comforter from over Claudette and stroked her thick hair.

She groaned and reached out to pull the blanket back over her body. She didn’t know what time it was and had long ago tuned out Diane’s blues that played throughout the house. The sun was out in full force, shining through Dominic’s small window.

“It’s almost lunchtime. Now don’t make me pop those legs.”

She jerked forward at her threat and moved so fast to get up that the room spun. Diane’s face was nothing more than a blurry image.

“Up!” Diane scolded. “Your breakfast is in the microwave.”

She walked out of the room, already dressed for the day in bootcut jeans and a white t-shirt that laid against her toned body.

Sometimes Claudette questioned her age. She didn’t look a day over thirty, let alone forty. Her youthful appearance was enviable.

Claudette swallowed the chalky taste in her mouth and grabbed her tote, taking it in the bathroom. She had almost forgotten about the events from the night before, but Dominic’s face lining the walls of the hallway made her nausea return.

She hurried through her shower, avoiding the mirror in the bathroom because there were too many memories of them in there. She kept her back to it as she pulled on a pair of leggings and a long t-shirt embroidered with her school’s logo. Luckily she had thrown a hat in her bag and could brush her hair into a decent puff and slap the hat on top of it. It was the best she could do.

Diane moved around the kitchen as usual, preparing a meal that looked like it could feed an entire football team.

“Hurry and eat. I need you to chop some vegetables for me.” She looked over her shoulder and then went back to humming while she combed through a bag in the sink.

Ignoring the food that sat in the microwave, Claudette reached to grab a knife from the block on the counter and collected the vegetables Diane sat out.

“Not hungry?” she asked.

Claudette shook her head and peeled the outer layer of an onion. Any appetite she had was long gone. Her thoughts focused on the bundle of nerves that may have been growing in her belly and the mysterious girl that had plans for her and Dominic once he got out of jail.

She chopped and chopped until the entire onion was nothing but a pile of tiny squares. Diane left her alone to her own thoughts, humming along to the blues that still played. Claudette chopped up stalks of celery and a bell pepper into fine chunks and worked diligently, putting her focus into the task. She heard Diane walking around the kitchen behind her, opening and closing cabinets and clanking dishes.

She was in such a daze that she hardly noticed she’d said anything.

“You need to eat something,” Diane said, punching at the hard keys on their old microwave.

Claudette shrugged and went back to chopping another bell pepper. The microwave chimed and Diane pulled the plate of breakfast from inside, walking it over to the table.

“Come on. Let’s take a break.”

Claudette let out a breath and moved to the sink to wash her hands that were wet and full of tiny pieces of vegetables.

The throbbing pain from her back had come back with a vengeance, but she wouldn’t dare utter a word about it to Diane. Diane stared at her as she dried her hands on a towel thrown on the kitchen island that was always cluttered with *stuff*.

She was sluggish, although she had only woken up an hour ago. She forced herself to ignore the constant fatigue, just like she ignored every uncomfortable feeling that passed. She collapsed in the chair where Diane had sat the plate of food.

Diane observed her every move, waiting on her to pick up the fork. She picked it up, piercing a sausage link and toying with it, knowing she wouldn't bring it anywhere near her mouth.

“What, you don't like my food no more?” Diane asked, tapping her foot up and down.

She gulped down a blob of spit that sat at the back of her throat and brought the link to her lips, taking the tiniest bite. It didn't want to go down, but she forced it. She hurried and flicked the rest of it off of the fork to try something that had a better chance of staying down, like the pancakes.

To kill time she cut the pancake into tiny chunks. She picked up the bottle of syrup sitting on the table, drizzling it across the soft flapjacks. She figured the more time she took, the less interested Diane would be, but it did nothing, because Diane stayed put.

“D know you pregnant?” she blurted.

The fork she held dropped onto her plate with a loud clank, and she did everything in her power to avoid Diane's gaze.

“Well? Do he?” She moved a chair next to Claudette and came around to grab her legs. “Look at your ankles girl.”

Claudette sucked in a breath at the sight of Diane dropping her swollen ankles on the chair. Her eyes burned as Diane took the plate of food from in front of her.

“No,” she mumbled. “I don't even know if I am.”

Diane turned to her and rolled her eyes. “My dear, you are most definitely carrying something in that stomach of yours, but I'll entertain you.”

She thrust the plate of breakfast in the trashcan and went into the refrigerator where she took out a fruit tray and brought it to Claudette.

“Eat as much as you can and go lay down.” She sighed and shook her head. “You can’t do much of nothing with that swelling.”

“Hey Kathy, Jo spend the night at your place?” Diane’s loud voice pierced through the bathroom door.

Claudette sat on the toilet, wiggling her toes that were no longer swollen. She peed on her third pregnancy test ten minutes ago and the result wouldn’t change. The last fleck of orange polish Dominic painted hung onto her big toe, begging to come off. She sighed, ignoring the staticky feeling of her butt falling asleep.

“Well, if you see him, call me. I ain’t heard from him since yesterday morning and the church got me cooking this gumbo for the pastor’s anniversary. I don’t have time to be chasing him around,” she grumbled.

It sounded like she had gotten closer to the door.

“I don’t have no money to put in on Sherell’s gift, but I’ll see what I can do.”

Claudette glanced over at the line of tests, wanting to chunk them in the garbage.

“I guess he’s doing as good as he can while locked up, Kathy. I don’t know. You know he get mad when I try to put money on his books or on the phone and truth be told I ain’t got it anyway.”

She reached and pulled at the polish. A tiny speck fell off, but the rest of the jagged piece stayed put.

“Girl no. Don’t be collecting no money on our behalf. You know I’ll figure it out like I always do. My main priority is getting Jo’s hardheaded ass across that stage and out to Athens.”

The small bathroom felt even smaller than what she remembered. With Dominic, it felt enormous the way he carried her around it and hoisted her on the sink when they made love.

“Look Kathy, I need to take care of something. Call me if you hear from Jo.”

Diane’s hand tapped on the door.

“Alright, time’s up.”

Claudette’s chest heaved up and down. If she could have, she would’ve stayed locked in there forever. She grabbed at the roll of tissue and wiped. Her movements were purposely slow so Diane could go away.

As soon as she rolled her leggings up, Diane burst into the bathroom. She paid her no mind and walked straight to the tests. Her eyes roamed across the three of them. There was no shock or anger on her face, it just seemed as if Claudette was something else to check off her to-do list.

She looked up at her. “So now what?”

Her response differed from Autumn’s. She didn’t yell like Claudette expected.

“I-I don’t know.” Claudette wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

“What you mean, *you don’t know?*” Diane’s nostrils flared. “You better know real soon.”

Claudette shook her head and turned away from her.

“Look here, you got options.” Her hand grasped Claudette’s shoulder, turning her back around. “You’re young, in school, with your entire future ahead of you. D may have had a hand in this too, but this is *your* body. But I’m gone tell you this—this is grown woman shit, and you got to woman up and deal with the consequences.”

Claudette’s hands grasped her stomach.

“I love my nephew but ain’t a damn thing he can do for you or no baby while being locked up.” Her finger rose and inched toward Claudette’s distraught face. “So if you keep it, you better be prepared to figure out how to handle it on your own until he get his shit together and let me tell you I been waiting on him to do that for twelve years sister.”

Claudette swallowed the lump in her throat. Dominic was in jail—he wasn’t even talking to her. She had no job and the only money she had saved was money that came from him. She was barely out of her first year of college, and then there

was George. She didn't even know how to broach the topic of pregnancy to him, and then to have to turn around and embarrassingly explain that the child's father was in jail made her throat close.

"Please don't tell Dominic," she whispered.

It was the only thing she could get out.

"You don't have to worry about me saying a damn thing. That's between you and him."

Diane turned and left her in the bathroom with the positive tests. Her hands trembled once she realized she was still clutching her stomach.

“HOW’S IT GOING?” Quentin asked while thumbing through the paperwork that sat in his lap.

The video screen that separated the two of them made his face appear distorted. He was dressed in chinos and a button down, looking more like a recent graduate rather than an accomplished criminal defense lawyer.

“Shit, you tell me. I’m going crazy in here. It’s starting to fuck with my head.” Dominic brushed a hand across the tall strands of his hair.

“I feel you, but we had a deal, and you fucked it up so...” Quentin shrugged his shoulders. “Judge said no bail, so we have no bail.”

“Man, don’t come at me with that.” Dominic kissed his teeth. “You eatin’ off my dumbass, so you should be happy I fucked up.”

“I’m never happy about wasted potential.” Quentin smirked. “By the way—nice music. I’ve been listening to it all week. Gets me pretty pumped in the gym.”

Dominic’s nostrils flared. Quentin had a unique way of checking him like an annoying know-it-all older brother without breaking his character down.

“Anyway, I got some important stuff for us to discuss.” He tucked the phone underneath his chin and stopped flipping through the documents once he found the one he needed.

“Like what?”

“How do you feel about taking a plea?” Quentin looked into the camera for the first time since he arrived.

Dominic swallowed, glancing down at the hideous orange shower shoes he wore. He wasn't the type to balk at taking a plea deal, it wouldn't have been his first.

"What about Mo and Nate?"

"What about them?" Quentin started thumbing through the documents again. "I'm getting paid to represent you, not your co-defendants."

"Look, I know that, a'ight? But I know you been trying to piece together what happened that night so I know you at least know what charges they facing."

"Aggravated assault, obstruction..." Quentin scratched at his eyebrow, giving Dominic a hard look.

"They got public defenders or what?"

"Dominic, I don't know and we can't waste any more time talking about people I'm not being paid to represent." He blew out a breath, watching as Quentin sat up straight in the metal visitor's chair. "Worry about yourself not your boys."

"They wouldn't even be in this shit if it wasn't for me." Dominic's leg bounced as bits and pieces of his argument with Mo replayed in his head. "That's why the fuck I'm worried."

"They're grown men, Dominic."

"Yeah, but I was loaded and on some dumb shit. If they wouldn't have been there, it would have been worse."

"Okay, I'll humor you. What in the world could this guy have done that made you think the best thing for you to do was to run in a club, whoop his ass while your friends stood guard, and then shoot at him?" Quentin held the phone with a bewildered expression on his face.

Dominic looked down, knowing if he admitted the shit that triggered him out loud, Quentin would be on his head.

"That dude been on some beef shit with me. This wasn't random. He went online and started talking reckless, so I pulled up on him."

“You’re a rapper, Dominic. You mean to tell me you’ll *pull up* on everybody that says something stupid about you online?” Quentin’s face grew red.

“He wasn’t just talking about me, a’ight?”

“Okay, I’m trying to wrap my head around this.”

He cleared his throat and avoided Quentin’s glare.

“Well? We don’t have all day.” Quentin pressed, moving his hand in a circular motion to coax out whatever Dominic had to admit.

“I’m not gone say what I did was right. It was fucked up. I know everything that we talk about stay between me and you so I’m gone put it like this, the only regrets I got about that night was the fact that my niggas got caught up with me and the fact that I missed.” Dominic’s leg stopped bouncing. “And for the record, he pulled his shit out first. I was just gone beat his ass and leave.”

Quentin dropped his head into the palm of his hand.

“If it make you feel any better about representing somebody fucked up like me, I did it because he threatened somebody innocent.” He sat back in his chair. “Somebody he know I care for. Somebody that ain’t got shit to do with the beef me and him got. The only thing she guilty of is riding for my stupid ass.”

Quentin’s shoulders rose and fell as he looked back up at him.

“I can read between the lines. If he threatened your girl, then I’m not saying what you did was entirely wrong. You’re not stupid or a fucked up person—you’re a man. There’s a primal instinct that goes off in our heads when the women in our lives are threatened or put in harm’s way,” Quentin replied. “I had no clue he pulled his gun out first. That’s something I needed to know.”

Dominic nodded, balancing the phone in the crook of his neck while he wiped his sweaty palms along the length of his blue pants. It was the first time he could recall a significant

part of that night that didn't involve he and Mo arguing, getting loaded, or rapping.

Quentin dug through his briefcase and pulled out a ballpoint pen. He jotted something on a piece of paper he had out.

“It sounds like I need to pay PJ’s a visit. I know they have cameras there thanks to social media and the fucking news.” He rolled his eyes. “But I need to see the entire video again and see if they have different angles that show him pulling out his gun first. If not, it’ll just be your word against the prosecutors and that’s not good.”

He spoke fast and wrote even faster. Dominic was aware of the video that had circulated for a week after his arrest. Jo told him about it. He wondered if Claudette saw it. It was a side of him he never wanted her to see.

Quentin stopped writing and looked up at him.

“In the meantime, I have a date for a round of golf with the prosecutor.” He winked. “I’m trying to convince her you most definitely are not a menace to society. You’re an upstanding young man who is a dope rapper and you’re just trying to feed your family. These hiccups are just bumps in the road—mistakes that many young men make. You’re remorseful for what you did, and you only shot because you were in fear for your life. *I* already know these things, but she’s a tough cookie to crack.”

A smile found its way on Dominic’s face and he remembered why he fucked with Quentin.

“I’ll check on your boys for you.” He packed up his briefcase. “Stay out of trouble for real this time.”

They both hung their phones up at the same time. Quentin shoved the last of his papers into his briefcase and chucked up two fingers before rushing out to his golf date with the prosecutor that held Dominic’s future in her hands.

The rattling of the keys unlocking the door behind him made his body tense. It was a guard preparing to take him back

to his floor. He'd give anything to be walking out with
Quentin. His first stop sure as hell wouldn't be a golf course.

Polo's loud snores filled the small space of their cell. He grunted and groaned like he was having the best sleep of his life while Dominic laid back on his hard bunk playing one of Eve's stupid games to keep himself awake.

It was another game that revolved around music. She'd name a song, and he'd have to sing or rap it from beginning to end. She wasn't around to give him songs so he had to rely on the random library of music stored in his head.

With Claudette on his mind, he started with 2pac's discography, rapping quietly as many songs as he could pull from his memory. *All Eyez On Me* was her favorite, so he'd gone through the entire track list. His memory served him so well that the lines came out with ease.

Out of all the times he had gone to jail, this stay had been his hardest. He knew it was because of her. He hadn't taken Polo up on his offer to cut her from his life, so she was stuck in his head. It was something he had adjusted to. Even though she made his time there hard by playing in his head daily, he wouldn't have had it any other way—even when she showed up in his nightmares.

His mind wandered, thinking of the way she owned his bed the night they'd slept together. Seeing her nestled beside him, underneath his bedspread, made him intoxicated with want. He hardly slept that night, too busy latching his mouth onto every part of her body and teaching her how she should be taken care of in bed.

"How that feel?" he'd asked, with one nipple perched in his mouth and a finger exploring her.

She only moaned instead of responding. His finger stopped its circular motion, and he removed his mouth from her breast.

"Why'd you stop?" she groaned, sitting up on her elbows.

"Because you not talking to me." His eyes scoured every inch of her body while she whined, probably hoping it would help her get her way, but it never did. *"Stop that whining shit."*

He hated when she whined because it put his mind into overdrive. It would race with thoughts on how he could fix whatever was wrong.

“Why does it matter if I talk to you or not? You know it feels good.” She tossed her head back, exposing the brown skin of her neck.

“Cause I like that shit. I told you, you have the best voice... I like to hear it.” He nipped at her neck, biting and then releasing the skin. *“You supposed to talk to me.”*

“But what am I supposed to say?”

“Whatever you feel. Let me know I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing, tell me it feels good. Shit, tell me it’s mine.” Her eyes drooped at his explanation. *“You understand, baby?”*

She nodded her head, and he raised a brow.

“I mean... yes. Yeah.” She corrected herself and reached forward, dragging his head back.

“A’ight.” His fingers went back to work and his lips latched back onto her nipple, sucking gently.

He let go of it with a gentle pop, but kept his finger in place, adding another one to stretch her out more.

“It’s mine, right?” He smiled and watched her mouth open in awe at the way his fingers curled inside of her.

“Of course it’s yours.” She looked at him with wide eyes. *“Always been—even when you didn’t know it.”*

He stared into the darkness, mulling over the words she spoke to him. His head spun when she told him shit like that while they were intimate. It made him crazy and activated those primal instincts Quentin talked about.

He turned onto his side and went back to his game, hoping that she realized that what he was doing was for the best. It was what they needed.

“CLAUDETTE ARDELL, YOU wait until four days before the semester ends to tell me you got to repeat a class, and I got to pay for it?” George’s voice boomed through the speaker of her phone, getting Autumn’s attention.

They were both on their respective sides of their room, ignoring one another as best as they could in the small space.

“Grandpa, I’ll pay for it.” Claudette blinked back the tears that were preparing to fall.

It was all she did before she found out she was pregnant, but now that she had concrete proof, the tears never ended.

“Pay for it how? Last you told me, you quit that job. So tell me how in the world you plan to pay two grand for a summer class your butt should’ve passed the first go ‘round.”

George’s voice cracked when he got worked up, and it was crackling all throughout her line.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll figure it out.” She wiped her tears with the back of her hand.

“I hope like heck you do. I got to go—you done ran my blood pressure through the roof with this. I sent you there to get a degree, not to play with my money.” He hung up before she could ease in another word.

She tossed her phone to the side and buried herself back beneath her comforter. It was where she’d been since coming back from Diane’s the day before. Finals week had interrupted her normal schedule with each class having its final exam scheduled for a specific day. She figured she’d deliver the

news to George, although she had yet to take her A&P final. There was no need in prolonging the inevitable.

Autumn hadn't uttered a word to her since she'd been back and she followed her lead, returning the same negative energy. Autumn was also taking a summer class, so they were stuck together unless one of them sought a different roommate. Neither of them bothered to do it, so they silently maneuvered around each other in the tiny room.

"Guess you're saving the best news for later on, huh?" Autumn uttered the words, but Claudette heard her.

She flipped the blanket from over her head and sat up, turning toward Autumn who was looking down at her phone.

"You know what Autumn; get everything you have to say off of your chest." The tears that fell, stopped. "Tell me you told me so. Everything you said was right. He wanted to fuck me just like you said and I let him! He's reckless! He's stupid!"

She climbed from the bed and moved around in a frenzy. Her bladder screamed, but she ignored it.

"And I'm just as reckless and stupid because I'm the one who fell for him. I'm the idiot who's walking around pregnant while he's sitting in jail and not even talking to me." She stuck her toes in a pair of flip-flops that stuck out from underneath her desk. "Gloat about how right you were, but I'm not about to sit here and listen to it."

Autumn sat staring at her with her phone dangling from her hand. Her eyes got big as Claudette angrily rambled while walking past her and out of their room.

Autumn's disappointment was the very least of her worries. She had an entire human growing inside of her and had no clue what she would do with herself *or* it. She couldn't even fathom the thought of being pregnant.

It was like one of those monumental life occurrences that she couldn't believe so she kept replaying the same series of events that led to it. Even though she kept replaying them, it still didn't feel real. Her stomach was flat, showing no signs of

growth. The only sign she had that she was pregnant were the positive tests and the nausea that persisted.

In the dining hall, she nibbled on honeydew. She found that it was the only thing she could keep down since having it at Diane's. The bland tasting fruit made the flip flopping of her stomach stop briefly.

The dining hall was bare, except for a few lonely individuals such as herself. She stabbed her fork into the pieces of melon, counting each piece she ate. Her goal was to eat at least ten pieces but she had only managed three.

"This where you ran off to this time?"

She looked up, sighing at the sight of Autumn as she pulled out a chair and sat down, uninvited.

"Yup." Claudette concentrated on chewing.

"I don't want to spend the summer fighting." She reached forward and grabbed a piece of the fruit from Claudette's bowl.

"Well, don't say rude things." Claudette dropped her fork. "And believe me, the last thing on my mind is fighting with anyone."

She crossed her arms and looked away. Autumn chewed on the honeydew, doing the same. The students lingering around the dining hall seemed to be more interesting to the both of them.

"So, you're really pregnant? For real, for real?" Autumn turned back and her eyes roamed to Claudette's hidden stomach. "Like, you took a test?"

"I took three of them."

"Are you gonna tell him?" Autumn asked. "Well, are you even gonna keep it?"

Autumn's questions almost brought the fruit back up that she'd worked so hard to keep down. She pushed the bowl into the center of the round table they sat at.

"I don't know."

“You got to know something.” Autumn threw the piece of fruit she bit into back into the bowl. “Time not about to stop because you’re upset.”

“Yeah. I know that.”

She was so detached that it was almost as if she were watching a movie about herself—like she was on the outside looking in.

“Jesus, Claudette. You got to say more than a few words.” Autumn raised her hands. “This is another life you about to be responsible for. They’re gonna depend on you.”

How could she even get rid of the baby and be okay with it? Her own mother abandoned her, so how could she turn around and abandon a life she helped create? It would be like history repeating itself.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do.” She dropped her head in her hands. “What if I keep it and I suck at being a mom? I can’t even take care of myself.”

“Then don’t keep it.” Autumn’s voice softened.

“But then I’ll be just like my mom.”

“Claudette, these are two different situations.”

She picked her head up and smoothed her coils back.

“Are they really? It’s clear she realized she got pregnant by the wrong man, just like I did. She was young, just like me.” Her voice cracked. “Now she lives a cozy life with the family she always wanted while I’m floating around lost because she didn’t want to keep me. If I abort it, that guilt will eat me alive and if I give it up for adoption, it’ll just be another me—lost.”

Autumn reached forward and grabbed her hands, squeezing them.

“I can’t tell you what to do, but I can tell you this—you will be a bomb ass mom. I know you’ll love that baby unconditionally no matter what happens between you and Dominic.” Claudette nodded. “You and I both know you ain’t shit like your mom. You’re levelheaded, smart, your hustle mentality is unmatched. Look at all the papers you wrote for

people, look at all the shit you've done for Dominic in only three months."

Her chest swelled.

"No matter what you decide, I got you."

“I don’t know about that Claudette.” Roc mopped behind the counter, avoiding her gaze.

The diner was empty except for the two of them. It was a calculated move by Claudette, because she wanted him fully invested in what she had to say.

“What’s the big deal? Have you hired anybody to replace me?” Her feet dangled from the barstool as she tried to reason with him.

It seemed like years since she’d been inside of the dank building.

“Nah...” The dirty mop water made a sloshing sound as he stuck the mop into the bucket.

“So, you’re shorthanded then?”

“I’m good.”

She blew out a breath and took his keys from the counter to go lock the front door. They were robbed on many occasions because of forgetful staff members that hadn’t locked it while they cleaned up for the night.

“What’s with the hesitation? I need the money and you need the help.” She jammed the key in the door and wiggled it.

The lock needed repairing, but no one had ever taken it upon themselves to call a locksmith.

“You chop it up with D about this?”

“No.” She wiggled the key to the right and to the left, hoping it would finally catch.

“Maybe you should do that. I don’t think he’d be straight with me putting you back on the schedule.”

Ignoring the throbbing of her hand, she gave the key one last shake and turn before it clicked into place.

“Dominic doesn’t control my life.” She turned around and stared at him.

“I ain’t saying he do. I’m just saying, I don’t think he’d be too happy about this.” Roc rested his arms on the counter, his

long locs flung forward, covering his entire face.

“Who cares what he is or isn’t happy about?” She walked back to the counter. “He’s in jail.”

“Yeah, but the dude he got at, not.”

“And I don’t understand what any of this has to do with me getting my job back.” She climbed back onto the stool.

It was getting late, and she promised Eric she’d FaceTime him so they could have a virtual study session for her first A&P quiz of the summer. She didn’t want to hear anything else about Dominic and what he did or didn’t want. It was like each time she tried to move forward, he always seemed to put a roadblock in her way.

“Man, I don’t feel right talking about this with you. You need to hit up your boy.” Her stomach dropped at him referring to Dominic as her *boy*.

He was nothing more than a distant memory that she was working toward trying to forget.

“Let me stop you right there—Dominic isn’t my boy or any variation of whatever the hell that means.” She took a slight pause, gathering her thoughts before she lashed out at Roc, who wouldn’t deserve it. “We don’t even speak. He wants nothing to do with me or—”

She stopped herself, almost revealing that she was carrying Dominic’s child. His eyebrows bunched together.

“He wants nothing to do with me.” She rolled her eyes. “Whatever he has going on with that guy is none of my business. I really need this money.”

“He don’t want nothing to do with you?” He flipped a few locs out of his face. “That don’t even sound right.”

She groaned because she was getting nowhere and she didn’t want Eric to fall asleep on her.

“Okay, let me put this plainly... he hasn’t spoken to me since he went to jail. We have absolutely no contact. He doesn’t care what I do. Me and him are no more. We’re no

longer friends.” She made a show of her explanation, waving her hands.

“That shit don’t sound right.” His locs swung as he shook his head.

“Well, that’s what it is.” Claudette shrugged, pulling out her phone to check the time. “Look, I have something I need to do. I don’t know what else I can do to sway your opinion.”

Roc sighed and walked back to grab the wooden handle of the mop.

“I ain’t gone make no promises.” He pulled the mop back out of the bucket. “Let me handle a few things and I’ll get back with you in a couple days.”

“So that means I’ll see you Wednesday, right?” She smiled, hoping to soften him up and make him open to letting her come back.

“I know what you doing.” He shook his head.

She slid from the stool while grabbing her phone and her own keys. Her feet were barely touching the floor by the time it started ringing with Eric’s name flashing on the screen.

“See you Wednesday!” She called over her shoulder while answering the call.

“Claudette, I’m for real. I got to talk to—” She cut him off by slamming the door behind her after easily maneuvering the difficult lock.

TIME OUTSIDE MOVED at warp speed while time in jail moved at a snail's pace—it moved even slower for Dominic because he didn't have the people closest to him.

Although Mo was in a different pod on another floor, he and Dominic had found a way to communicate. They passed kites through the trustees that moved around the different areas of the jail daily. They typically charged a fee in the form of soups, drugs, or money, but for Dominic, they did it for free.

Mo's kites were nothing more than a few sentences, but they gave him something to look forward to. Mo's grandma kept money on his books and loaded his phone account so he could retrieve and regurgitate information from the outside to Dominic, who had become a recluse. It was Mo who'd told him they'd put Nate in solitary confinement for fighting with his cellie over stolen commissary.

Dominic steered clear of the other inmates on his floor with ease. Many of them knew him from the streets, so there was no hazing or initiations. They left him alone to do his time because there was no respect for him to earn—he already had it.

He sat at the metal desk in his and Polo's cell. He guessed it was around eight in the evening because they were already locked down for the night. Polo sat in his bunk quietly reading a book. It was the same book he had been reading for the past week—something about the laws of power. Sometimes out of boredom Dominic would ask him to read a few of the pages out loud, at other times he would jot down lyrics to imaginary beats.

Tonight, he added the last verse to a song he'd been working on the entire day. The verses formed with ease. He had no intentions on keeping any of what he wrote while in jail. It was just another stupid way to pass the time.

"Tomorrow is my wife's birthday," Polo said, turning a page in his book.

Dominic stopped writing and looked over at him.

"For real? She gone come visit you?" he asked.

He turned around on the stool, ready to hear Polo's answer. His relationship with his wife had become a topic of interest to Dominic over the past month. He chalked it up to boredom.

"Nah." Polo creased the top corner of the page he read.

Dominic waited for him to elaborate, because that's what Polo always did, but he only stared ahead.

"You gone send somebody to get her a gift or something?"

"She say she leaving me." Polo closed the book and tossed it beside him.

The news hit Dominic like it were his own parents splitting up. He had no clue what Polo's wife looked like, but he imagined her picture would be next to "strong black woman" if it were in the dictionary. She worked the same secretary job since she was twenty-five, raised five of their kids, and had gone back to school to get her bachelor's degree. Polo said she wanted to open her own staffing agency.

"Damn Po." Dominic shook his head. "I'm sorry man."

"Me too," he sighed.

"Did she say why?"

"No."

"That's fucked up. She could've at least gave you a reason." Dominic leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, giving Polo all of his attention.

"Nah. She ain't have to give me no reason youngin'." That's her right." He shrugged. "I fucked up so much it almost

seem fair.”

“But you said she the one. You just gone let her leave you like that?”

“I’m an old man D,” he chuckled. “She is and will always be the one, but I got to get right. I done took up so many of her best years, because I can’t put the bottle down and stay my ass out of here.”

“So what now?”

“Pray my lawyer can get my ass into a rehab program.” He moved to sit up on his bed. “I told you I plan to smarten up this go ‘round. I see you doing the same thing too.”

“I guess, man. I’m just tryna get out of here.” He sat back up.

“If you ain’t making no changes, then gettin’ out ain’t gone matter. You just gone end up right back in here.”

He didn’t respond.

“Some of them boys told me you rap. Why you never talk about it?”

“It ain’t that important.”

“Shit, it is if you got other niggas bragging on what you do and not hating.”

Dominic laughed.

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s something I like. Before I got locked up again, I was tryna be more serious about it, but I need money and it don’t bring in near enough for it to be my main focus right now.” He ran a hand down his face at the thought of all the money he was throwing at Quentin to get him out of the shit he was in.

It seemed like each time he put a solid foot forward to be more serious about music, something happened. It was always something that resulted from his wrongdoings, but it all came with the lifestyle he lived. Money came and went often. Sometimes he hustled for days at a time to make sure everyone

was straight. Before the *incident*, it was something he had done again.

He'd started selling large amounts of weed to make up for the money he'd lost. That type of work kept him in the streets and seemed less risky than robbing and slinging stolen guns. People always wanted him to be available, because he was the plug. A missed phone call or text meant a missed opportunity to make money.

His unavailability was something Claudette wasn't used to. She saw it as flighty while he viewed it as vital. He tried to be available to her as often as he could, but just like she hadn't been used to being close to someone with a lifestyle like his, he hadn't been used to accommodating and entertaining a girl like he did with her. It was why he popped up at odd times or went days without hearing her voice.

“Well, you must've been makin' a little something if all these cats running around bragging on your shit.”

Polo's curiosity was genuine.

“I made a little something, not nothing to live off though.”

The truth was, all the money he got in the mail from streaming went straight to Claudette after he'd give Tony his cut. He broke it down and sent it on a weekly basis, attempting to make it stretch for her. It was because of him she couldn't go to work anymore, so he wanted to compensate her for his fuck-up and keep some of the money safe. If he gave it to Diane he knew she would squander it away on bullshit for the church, cigarettes, and bailing her friends out of their own financial hardships. At least with Claudette she could put it toward school or that laptop she needed.

The deal he made with her when they first met was bullshit. He tried to make sure she got every dime he made from music, including the backend he got from Vaughn the night he performed at Playhouse. The only illegal money he had ever given her was what she'd found stashed in the envelope in his closet, and she had given him that money right back to throw at his lawyer fees. He'd started saving that money for her after the first night they came across each other

because he was smitten with the innocent way she hustled. He thought it was cute, just like everything else about her.

“Well, what’s the problem that’s keeping you from making more? You need a manager or something? Somebody to book your shows, get you out there?”

Polo’s questions came a mile a minute. He had scooted forward to the edge of his bed, ready to hear his answer. Dominic assumed he was interested because it was something to talk about other than his failed marriage.

“Nah, I’m good on that,” he responded, thinking of the way Claudette hustled to take care of all of those things for him. “My girl take care of all of that for me.”

The words had slipped from his mouth so casually that he almost didn’t realize he’d said it until he noticed the *gotcha* look on Polo’s face.

“So, she *is* your girl?” Polo asked, lighting up like an overgrown child.

Dominic chewed on his bottom lip. It was too late for him to take it back. He had never called any girl his. They claimed him instead.

He shrugged, not wanting to delve deeper into his attachment to her.

“Is that your plan when you get of here? To make more music?” Polo moved on, noticing him become more guarded.

“To tell you the truth, my only plan when I get out of here is to make sure my family straight. If I can do it by rapping, then that’s what I’m gonna do. If I got to get my hands dirty again, that’s what I’m gonna do.”

He had no time to entertain silly dreams about getting a legitimate job when he got out. It’s why he needed to keep Claudette at a distance. He knew she wasn’t the type of girl down for whatever, no matter how much she loved him.

“D, you can’t think like that,” Polo said. “You thinking small right now.”

“What you mean?”

“You can get out of this shit. You got talent man. If you put all of that energy that you pour into hustling into your music, imagine where you could be a year from now?” Polo raised his hands, attempting to get Dominic as enthralled as he was.

Dominic appreciated his effort, but it was unrealistic. He could only imagine what would happen if he was cooped up in Tony’s basement recording for days on end with no money coming in. It was already killing him that he left Diane to get Josiah through the last few weeks of high school. He’d just paid all of the bills and was preparing to re-up before he’d gotten arrested again.

The thought of her being stressed over money made his head want to explode. There were the bills and then there was Josiah. He had so many expenses in the coming months that he had promised to pay for—his cap and gown, a graduation party that likely wouldn’t be happening, his dorm room essentials, spending money for when he moved on campus and out of Diane’s house.

“You got to think big. Leave that small time hustling for the little boys. The music is the big hustle. If you can finesse the streets, I know you can have that music industry on lock.”

Dominic rubbed the back of his neck, tired of all the preaching everyone did to him. It was his life, and he would live it the way he wanted. Music wasn’t going anywhere. It came so easy to him he’d rather use it as an easy extra source of income rather than his sole one.

“How I’m supposed to pay my bills if I’m hustling music all day?” he asked.

It was a serious question that he wanted an answer to. He knew niggas that slung mixtapes all day. They were always broke, sleeping on air mattresses, with nothing to show for all the hustling they did to get their music heard. That wasn’t him.

“Get you a legit job. It don’t make you less of a man if you get a trade.”

He had heard that a thousand times too. People were quick to tell him to go be a plumber, a mechanic, or an electrician

but the problem was, all the men he knew did none of those things. They all ran the streets just like he did.

“You honestly think you’ll live another year with the path you’re on?” Polo asked.

He decided that if he didn’t, it would be fine. He’d had his time with the people that mattered, made music that resonated with people, and had taken care of enough people that maybe God would spare his ass at the pearly gates.

The sharp sound of folded paper sliding underneath their cell door interrupted his and Polo’s heart to heart and his morbid thoughts. He turned to see the triangular shape of one of Mo’s kites land just a few inches from his foot. He reached forward and grabbed the paper, unfolding it. It came at the right time because his head couldn’t take anymore of Polo’s prying questions.

Mo’s handwriting was small and sloppy. His words were so jumbled together that Dominic had to squint to decipher the message.

Roc say he need to talk to you about Claudette. He say she came up there asking for her old job back. Something about she need money. He say call him ASAP.

Dominic read and reread the letter, making sure what he saw was really there. No matter how much he tried to let go, she still found a way back into his life.

“Everything good man?” Polo asked.

Dominic hadn’t realized that his fingers were gripping the sides of the paper so hard that they crumpled.

“Yeah, I’m good,” he responded, balling up the piece of paper. “You think I can use your pin when the doors pop?”

Polo reached over to grab his book while shrugging.

“You know I don’t care D. I just want you to give our conversation some thought.” He opened the book and laid back down while Dominic tossed the paper on the desk.

He tried to breathe through the wild thoughts that ran across his head. They all centered on Claudette. He just knew

she had moved out of her dorm and was back at home with her grandpa, but once again she had thrown him another curveball. Now, he'd be up counting the hours and minutes until they could come out of their cells.

“No.” Dominic said the word before Roc could finish his sentence.

There was no need in wasting Polo’s money entertaining bullshit. Bags the size of quarters sat beneath his eyes and his stomach growled as he watched the other inmates eat their breakfast.

“You sure about this D? I know Claudette and she not gone be happy about this.”

In any other circumstance he’d let her have her way, but this was nonnegotiable. She was supposed to be gone anyway. He wasn’t even supposed to be entertaining anything to do with her unless it was in his head.

“And you think I don’t know her?” He spoke low into the phone, keeping his eyes out toward the pod.

Nobody looked his way; they were too busy eating their watered down eggs and soggy cereal. The smell of the eggs permeated throughout the open space, making his stomach toil with disgust.

“Chill big dawg. I know that’s your girl, but you got me delivering news on some third-party shit and I don’t like that.” Roc’s voice rose an octave. “Why don’t you tell her yourself?”

“Because I can’t.” He heard the static on the phone line.

“So, she was telling the truth then?” Roc finally replied.

“What you talking about?”

“She say you ain’t want nothing to do with her.”

It felt like his chest had caved. She’d said he wanted nothing to do with her? With her, of all people? It was ironic considering he was obsessed with her ass.

“Oh, and she said that y’all wasn’t friends no more either.”

He knew Roc had thrown that last part in to get back at him for the stale attitude he’d had throughout their entire phone call. It worked, because the blood drained from his body.

“Fuck you,” Dominic said through gritted teeth.

“Baby girl still got you by the balls I see.” Roc’s laugh echoed throughout the line.

Everyone he was close to knew she’d always had, even though he tried to downplay how much influence she had on him. It wasn’t surprising to him that Roc didn’t believe her when she said he’d cut off contact with her. None of them thought he had it in him to let her go.

“Whatever man.” He turned and rested his back against the cold wall.

“So what you want me to tell her?” Roc’s voice grew serious again.

“Tell her no.”

He knew Roc was trying to stay neutral. He hated getting involved in other people’s affairs and liked to mind his business as much as possible.

“I’ll tell her *you* said no,” he replied. “Shit, she already mad at you. Shouldn’t make much of a difference that it’s coming from you.”

He bit into his bottom lip, wondering if Roc had slipped up and hinted at why she couldn’t go back there. Marco was still a free man after their fight at PJ’s, because he was the idiot that ran up on him in a club. The police’s only concern was apprehending him that night after security at the club notified them of the incident. Marco got away scot-free while he sat in jail.

“You tell her why she couldn’t come back to work?” Dominic asked.

“Nah, that’s for you to handle. Just like this *no* shit is for you to handle.” Roc’s voice grew hard. “Handle yours.”

He ended the call before Dominic could.

THE HAIRS ON Claudette's arms stood as the frigid air prickled her skin. She figured it had to be a universal law that said all doctor's offices had to be excruciatingly cold. Her sock covered feet dangled from the examination table. She had washed them so many times that the pink was more of a faded Pepto-Bismol color. The twenty dollars she stuck inside of the right one scratched at her ankle, and she sighed and adjusted it for the third time. As soon as she laid back, Dr. Martin rapped on the door before pushing it open.

"Okay dear, sorry to keep you waiting." She closed the door behind her and smiled at Claudette.

Dr. Martin was the general practitioner at the on-campus clinic. She was a regal older woman with grey hair that made her look chic. Her frame was petite, but the white coat she wore fit without overpowering her frame.

"I've got all of your test results here." Her southern drawl made Claudette feel somewhat at ease with being there alone. "Now, you told me your last period was sometime at the end of April, but I suspect that was just implantation bleeding. I'd say you're about seven weeks along."

Her hands grew sweaty as Dr. Martin droned on about her test results being normal despite her less than stellar diet and her stress levels being through the roof. She was STD-free with normal blood sugar levels, but she had lost weight. The only information that stuck out to her was the fact that she had confirmed her pregnancy.

"How's the morning sickness?" Dr. Martin sat down her test results and approached the exam table.

“I don’t know why they call it morning sickness, because I have it all day. The only thing I can keep down is honeydew.” She ran a hand across her flat stomach and tried to focus on everything besides the baby inside of her.

It was impossible to do, though.

Dr. Martin laughed.

“Hopefully, you’re like most women and it goes away around the fourteenth week,” she replied. “In the meantime, stay hydrated and try to eat small snacks throughout the day. You may have to do some exploring to see what you can and can’t keep down.”

She laid back, trying to imagine how she’d look and feel in fourteen weeks, let alone in nine months—she couldn’t. The most jarring part of her entire morning had been the fact that Dr. Martin assumed she would keep the baby, or she just didn’t care enough to address the elephant in the room.

Dr. Martin dug around the cabinets in the exam room until she pulled out a small white device and a white bottle filled with a clear substance. Her eyes followed her every move, unsure of what was happening. The entire appointment had moved in such a way that she wondered if Dr. Martin thought she had been lying when she said this was her first pregnancy.

The paper that covered the exam table crumpled underneath her head as it moved back and forth, trying to keep up with her movements. Dr. Martin turned and squirted her stomach with the clear liquid. It was gel-like and cold. She took the device, fiddling with the sides, and stuck the part that looked like a microphone into the blob of gel. Her hand swirled it around in gentle motions and pushed it into her stomach, sinking it into her brown skin. Claudette was so entranced with watching the microphone move across her stomach that she hadn’t realized Dr. Martin had turned the device on.

The sounds that came from it echoed throughout the room. They started with a loud thump that happened gradually and graduated to multiple thumps that sounded as if they were going a mile a minute. One side of Dr. Martin’s mouth raised.

“There it is,” she whispered. “There’s baby and they have a very strong heartbeat.”

Claudette swallowed, trying to steady her breaths. The baby that at some point seemed like a figment of her imagination was real. It was real, with a heartbeat.

“It’s about the size of a blueberry Claudette.” Dr. Martin looked up at her, smiling.

The palms of her hands were moist with sweat, and her mouth grew dry. She guessed she’d cried enough over the past two months that no tears would come out in that moment. Instead, she felt sweat prickling her body in every crevice. The loud *thump, thump, thump* wouldn’t stop no matter how much she held her breath. That blueberry that thumped inside of her had caused all of her ailments—backaches, nausea, and vomiting. She blamed it on her broken heart, when in reality it was the tiny blueberry nestled inside of her.

“How are you feeling?” Dr. Martin asked, probably realizing that Claudette had been silent the entire time.

Her breathing increased. She wanted so badly for her to take the microphone from her stomach because she didn’t want to hear anymore.

“Fine,” she choked out, trying to appear as normal as an eighteen-year-old could be while hearing her baby’s heartbeat for the first time.

Dr. Martin suddenly took the microphone from her stomach and slipped a wet towelette in her hand to clean up the mess she’d made. Claudette waited, still studying the imaginary blueberries that danced around the ceiling while Dr. Martin cleaned up around her. As soon as she left, Claudette sat up. The boulder that had been on her chest disappeared and a fog that clouded her brain replaced it. She cleaned herself and re-dressed, trying to fight through it, but it made her movements slow.

Dr. Martin came back with a handful of papers and stood back, watching Claudette adjust her baggy Waffle House shirt and shove her faded pink socks into her sneakers.

“I wanted to give you some information before you left.” Her tone was the gentlest it had been throughout the entire appointment.

Claudette looked up at her, unaware that she’d been crying the entire time she dressed. The salty taste of tears coated her lips and dripped down her chin. Dr. Martin snatched a tissue from a Kleenex box that sat by the door and pushed it toward her along with the information.

“I’ve been in your shoes before,” she said, watching Claudette wipe the tears that fell faster than she could wipe and hugging the manila folder. “Sometimes our own selfishness clouds our judgement and we end up in situations we never thought we’d be in. I don’t know what the details of your situation are, but I know whatever decision you make, it’ll be the right one.”

She wanted to ask her what decision she made, but it wouldn’t matter anyway. They were two different women, and Dr. Martin’s decision would have no effect on the decision she would have to make.

On the bus ride to work, she thumbed through the papers in the folder with shaky hands. She made sure she sat as close to the window as she could and crouched over the pamphlets. They detailed the costs of an abortion and reassured her she could still conceive after the procedure—none of that had ever crossed her mind. Her eyes scanned the pages, reading the information but not following a word of it.

Dr. Martin stuck adoption pamphlets at the very bottom of the stack. Her stomach plummeted at the thought of someone else cradling the blueberry that she would carry for nine months. The blueberry that would have her wild hair and Dominic’s almond eyes. She rubbed her eyes at the ridiculous thought and shoved the information in her backpack as they neared her stop.

She stood and slung the bag over her shoulder while signaling the driver to let her off. The thumping heart from her visit kept replaying in her head on a loop as she exited the bus and walked down the street. The thumps grew louder as she

neared the bright yellow building. It was between lunch and dinner, so the parking lot was bare. She zigzagged through the few cars bunched together in front of the building.

The bell above the door dinged to alert the staff she'd entered. Roc was the only person who looked up from his usual post behind the register. His long locs framed his face as he looked toward the door. First, he smiled, but it fell into a mix between a frown and a pout.

"You got your uniform on?" he asked, his eyebrows knitting together.

"Yeah, I said I'd be back on Wednesday." Her arms swung out. "It's Wednesday."

Her mouth became moist at the smell of the sausage that fried on the grill. It wasn't a salivating moist, but a disgusting mixture of extra saliva and the onset of vomit. The tiny blueberry was already acting up, and she hadn't even clocked in yet.

"Let me holler at you real quick," Roc replied, nodding his head toward the back breakroom.

She swallowed the extra spit that coated her mouth and hurried toward the door that led to the back. Roc tossed the notepad in his hand next to the register and followed close behind her. She was prepared for him to tell her he had cut her hours, or she'd have to stay late to help him lock up because Randy had to leave early as usual. Those were the only times he *hollered* at people in the back room.

Without thinking, she walked toward the frayed sofa and collapsed, her backpack sliding from her arm and onto the floor.

He shoved the door closed behind him and frowned at the way she hunched over the arm of the sofa. "You still ain't talk to D?"

"No, I told you he's not talking to me." Her words came out robotically. "I don't mind that you cut my hours. As long as I'm here three times a week I'm cool. It's no big deal."

"Claudette, I ain't cutting your hours."

“Oh. Randy has to leave early again?” She rolled her eyes. “I can help you lock up.”

He raised a hand to stop her rambling. “He said no.”

“Who? Randy? He doesn’t want me helping you lock up tonight?” She rubbed her gargling stomach.

“No.” Roc walked toward her as if he was approaching her with caution. “D.”

His words weren’t sinking in and it seemed like the fog had returned.

“What’re you talking about? I know how to lock up.” She rubbed harder, still fighting the nasty stench of pork that snuck underneath the door.

“Claudette, listen to me. I talked to him and he said no. He don’t want you up here.”

Roc’s voice sounded like it dropped ten octaves. Every word came out in slow motion. Her face balled up, and she sat forward on the couch.

“I’m so sick of him.” She had no time to mince her words. “Who does he think he is? God? Doesn’t he have more important things to worry about besides controlling my life?”

Her ears burned, and she breathed so hard, it felt like she would start hyperventilating. Dr. Martin didn’t tell her about those side effects. Roc held his hands out and walked closer to her, still approaching her like she was an untamed animal.

“Now hold on...” he mumbled. “Y’all should really talk this shit out.”

“Forget him.” Claudette swallowed, trying to keep down the excess saliva.

“No, no, no.” He swung his hands back and forth. “You don’t understand. He not trying to control you.”

“Yes, he is! He does it to everyone around him!” She thought back to Diane’s words. “He’s even doing it to you! He told you to tell me no, and you ran and did it!”

He spoke fast. “It’s not even like that Claudette.”

“Yes, it is! All I’m trying to do is make some extra money, and he’s being an asshole about it.” She moved to stand, but her head spun so hard that she fell back down. “Tell him to leave me alone.”

Roc rushed forward to steady her body as she tried to stand again.

“Sit down, you can’t even stand up straight.” He pushed her back gently. “I told his ass I ain’t want to be involved in this messy shit. He was supposed to handle this.”

She breathed hard and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Black dots floated around and Roc’s face became blurry. The blueberry kept taunting her with the threat of making her throw up the water in her stomach because that’s all she’d consumed since she’d woken up that morning.

“I need to leave.” She pushed at his arm to move him out of the way, but Roc’s large body hardly moved.

“No, you need to sit down.”

She ignored him and reached forward to grab her backpack. He snatched it from her hands and tossed it over his own shoulder.

“I want to leave!”

“Claudette I’m not lettin’ you walk out of here like this. D would kill me.” He fished his phone out of his front pocket. “Tell me who to call. Who can come pick you up? I’m not letting you take no bus or Uber.”

Her ears rang as she ran down the short list of people who she could call—Autumn was in class and had no vehicle anyway, George was in Marietta, and Dominic was in jail.

“Can you get in touch with Diane?” she asked, burying her head in her hands.

“Ms. Diane? D’s aunt?” Roc fiddled with his phone, unlocking it.

“Yeah. I don’t know her number, but can you find it? She’ll come.”

She knew Diane would give her the worse tongue lashing she'd ever experienced, but if it would get her out of that breakroom, she'd gladly take it and more.

“Yeah, I can get it. Just lay down.” He looked around as if he were trying to make sure there was no way for her to escape and eased her backpack back to the floor.

She couldn't have gone anywhere if she wanted to.

It didn't take long for Diane to arrive. Claudette had no clue how Roc had found her number, but he was persistent that she didn't leave in the condition she was in. A cigarette hung lazily between Diane's fingers as she walked over to open the passenger side door for her. Roc cradled her in the crook of his arm as if she were incapable of walking. *It was all ridiculous.* She collapsed inside, still unable to get rid of the black dots that danced around in her eyes. Diane and Roc exchanged pleasantries outside the car as if they were old buddies.

"What's up mister?" Diane asked, taking one last pull of her cigarette and tossing the butt on the ground.

"Nothin' much, just maintaining." Roc opened the back door and tossed Claudette's bag in the backseat, then shut it back with a slam. "You don't mind taking her back to campus, do you? I don't think she had no one else to call."

"Do I mind?" Diane pursed her lips and stood with a hand on one slender hip. "Course I don't. I'm gone take her to the house first and put something good in that stomach of hers and she'll be okay."

She patted Roc on the shoulder and winked at Claudette, who watched them from the front passenger seat of her Honda. They talked for a few more moments—Diane asking about every member of Roc's immediate and extended family. He gave an update on each person while monitoring the staff through the glass windows of the building.

Claudette shoved her head against the headrest, remembering the last time she'd been in that same seat. It was the wildest day she'd ever experienced and seemed to be a grim example of the tumultuous relationship she and Dominic had. It was full of ups and downs—some of the best and worst she'd ever experienced.

Roc tapped on the window, giving her a wave because Diane had finally let him go. She and Claudette both waved back as he walked into the building. Diane got back into the driver's seat with a loud sigh.

“You still ain’t eating?” She looked over at Claudette, pursing her lips. “He told me you looked like you was about to fall out.”

“No.” She crossed her arms and watched the yellow building taunt her as they drove out of the parking lot.

Diane’s foot was lighter than Dominic’s. She took her time when merging on the highway.

“What’s wrong with you? Pregnancy mood swings?”

Claudette was still disoriented. Her limbs were heavy and tingled annoyingly.

“I hate your nephew.” She closed her eyes and Dominic’s butterscotch face appeared behind her closed lids. “I want him to stay out of my life.”

Diane cackled and reached to turn the air conditioner up. The cool air was refreshing against Claudette’s clammy skin.

“You got his baby in you, of course you hate his ass. Won’t be the last time you hate him neither.”

Claudette opened her eyes and watched the cars that whizzed by in the other lanes. She didn’t actually hate him, she just wanted to hurt him like he’d hurt her and the only way she knew how was with her words.

They rode in silence. The only sounds were the thumping of the Honda’s tires against the highway.

“I went to the doctor today,” she said, still looking out of the window.

“Oh yeah? How’d that go?” Diane signaled, sounding disinterested.

She swallowed, somewhat thankful that she wasn’t overly interested. She said her peace back when she made her take the pregnancy tests but had offered no other advice since then.

“It has a heartbeat.” She moved her arms from her chest down to her stomach where she cradled it, imagining that it would grow into a small bump before she knew it.

“Duh, it’s a baby.” Diane rolled her eyes, making Claudette giggle under her breath.

“I know that.” She looked at her oversized shirt. “It just didn’t feel real until I heard its little heart racing.”

“You told D yet?”

“No. He’s not talking to me.” Saying those words were easier.

“That’s why you say you hate him?” Diane sped up as they neared the exit that would take them into her neighborhood.

“Remember that day in your kitchen when you said he thinks his purpose is to take care of and control everyone?” Diane came to a stop at a red light and looked over at her. “I get it now.”

Diane smiled and looked at her hands that covered her stomach.

“He don’t mean no harm. Nobody ever taught him how to love, so that’s the only way he knows how.” The light turned green just as she turned her head back forward.

“You gone need a lot of patience if you gone be in this for the long haul.” Diane pressed the gas, propelling them forward.

“Do you think he’ll ever learn how?” she asked.

Diane laughed. “I think you’ve taught him more than you know these past few months.”

She dissected Diane’s words, wondering if there was any truth hidden in them. If she’d taught him anything about love, he must have forgotten it because her love was unconditional. She’d never leave him to fend for himself. When she told him she’d always be in his head and his heart, she meant it with every fiber of her being. Somehow, he’d taken her words and tossed them out like they were garbage.

“Eve said the same thing when she found out she was pregnant with D.” Diane’s words jolted her from her thoughts.

“Said what?” She frowned.

“It has a heartbeat.” Diane smiled, her tone sounded dreamy and light.

Claudette imagined that’s how Eve’s voice sounded when she was alive. Light—full of hope.

“What did you tell her? I hope something more inspiring than what you told me,” she asked after letting out a laugh.

“Of course.” Diane signaled again, turning down her street. “I said ‘no shit girl, it’s a damn baby.’”

Their laughs filled the small space of the car. Diane pulled into the driveway and Claudette’s shoulders drooped and her nausea dissipated.

“Guess it’s me and you for an early dinner tonight,” Diane said, putting the car into park.

“No Jo?”

“Nope. No Jo,” she responded without expounding on his whereabouts.

It seemed like she hadn’t been the only person affected by Dominic’s absence.

Dinner wasn't as grandiose as it normally was. They ate a beef stew filled with chunks of potatoes and carrots with cornbread on the side. Claudette gorged on the cake-like cornbread, remembering that it was Dominic's favorite. Diane took notice, but only smiled.

They talked about innocuous things like her summer class, Diane's new responsibility as the church secretary, and her life back in Marietta. They didn't talk about their life's stressors. It wasn't on purpose—they just seemed to need the escape.

She found herself buried in Dominic's bed again after dinner. She hated that she still missed him. How would she cope with mothering a human being that was half of him? Calling herself a mother didn't even sound natural. Her hand kept finding its way to her abdomen. It came naturally now. It was something about hearing that heartbeat that made her mind wander.

The pamphlets Dr. Martin gave her were crumpled inside of her backpack in the backseat of Diane's car. Being separated from them made the cloudiness in her head a little clearer. Without their presence she thought about the blueberry and its undefined future. Her eyes grew heavier with each passing thought, and Dominic didn't hold her thoughts hostage for once. They were consumed with something—well, someone else. Someone who knew nothing about how lost its mother was or that its father had no idea of its existence.

As her eyes closed, raised voices made them pop back open. She couldn't understand what was being said, but she recognized Diane's shrill voice and Josiah's low timbre. Diane yelled while Josiah grunted back very few responses of his own. The marimba tone of a phone echoed throughout the house and the yelling grew louder.

Claudette sat up, easing a foot onto the floor. The yelling seemed to get closer to Dominic's door, so she picked her foot up and buried herself back beneath his blanket.

"You can talk to my son, but you can't talk to me?" Diane yelled. "That's the problem around here, he thinks you in charge and not me!"

“He disappearing for days again, coming back in my house smelling like weed and alcohol. You think he listen to a word I say? He tryna be just like your ass!”

Claudette sucked in a breath and her hands itched to cover her ears.

“Oh, that’s how you feel? You’re right, you have bigger shit to worry about. You should be worried about why Claudette telling me she hate you! Worry about your own fucked up shit and let me handle my son!”

She sat up at Diane’s last words and heard the pounding of her footsteps outside Dominic’s door. Her head swung in every direction as she tried to find her sneakers in the dark room before Diane could get to her, but it was too late. Diane shoved the door open and tossed Josiah’s phone on the bed before turning and walking out.

She heard Dominic’s strained voice.

“So just fuck me, huh? Bro I swear I can’t ever do shit right!”

Her shaky hands reached toward the phone. She grasped it, preparing to end the call. Her finger hovered over the red button. He didn’t want her. He wanted nothing to do with her. She didn’t need to hear his voice anymore.

“And I don’t believe a fucking word you say! Clo’ would never tell nobody she hate me!”

She fumbled, almost dropping the phone while bringing it to her ear.

“Nic?” The taste of his name in her mouth almost made her want to take back every negative thing she’d ever said about him even though he’d abandoned her.

“Clo’?” He said her name in a panic. “Baby, you telling people you hate me?”

Her heart thudded at his words. She expected every response but that one. He was supposed to hang up when he heard her voice or curse her out for being in his home because he made it clear he was done with her.

“I-I didn’t mean it. I was upset,” she stuttered.

“You supposed to be gone home. I’m supposed to be out your head.”

The automated phone system from the jail beeped in, reminding them their call was being recorded.

Her face heated at his words.

“Is that what you hoped?” she asked, throwing the blanket back and going to shut his bedroom door. “That I’d fall out of love with you in a month?”

She gulped as she waited on his response.

“Nah,” he responded without hesitation. “I just hoped you’d learn to live without me.”

Her eyes were already growing moist as she fell back against the door.

“Why? So you could be with your girlfriend?”

She hadn’t meant to blurt it out, but the girl’s words sat front and center in her head as he talked about her moving on from him.

“Huh?” She heard him moving around. “What you talking about?”

“You know, your *bae*? She said y’all are going up whenever you get out—whatever the hell that even means.” She rolled her eyes, disgusted with herself for even bringing the anonymous girl up.

Dominic groaned.

“I don’t even know who the fuck you talking about or why you even bringing this shit up.”

“Because you cut me off and she must be the reason. Instead of being a man and telling me, you stopped talking to me like some immature little boy.”

“Do you hear yourself right now?” he asked as his voice rose an octave.

Claudette slid down the door, her butt falling onto the hardwood floor.

“You think I been hiding some secret girlfriend Claudette? For real? You telling my aunt you hate me? Man, what the fuck?”

“Well, help me understand why you did what you did!”

“Because I love you!” She sucked in a breath. “I love you so much that I’d rather suffer without you then put you through anymore shit. I don’t know what fucking girlfriend you talking about, because the only girlfriend, lover, or whatever that I ever had was you! Just you!”

The stupid automated message beeped again, interrupting his confession.

“You don’t even need me. Just let me go, for real.”

She yanked her hair at the finality of his words.

“It’s too late for that,” she said, letting go of the strands.

“What you mean?” he asked. “I promise you I won’t love nobody else. You just have to let me go baby. I’m serious—”

“I’m pregnant.” She cut him off, no longer caring if he knew or not.

They were in too deep for her to keep it from him any longer. Him promising not to love anyone else was a perfect example of how maddening their relationship was.

He was so silent on the other end that the automated machine threatened to end the call early.

“Fuck,” he said. “Fuck.”

Fuck was right.

He wanted her to forget him, but he hadn’t taken into consideration all the times they made love without care. All the times they found themselves so immersed in one another that nothing mattered outside their world and the worry of consequences fell by the wayside.

The automated machine spoke again, telling them they had one minute left.

“What do I do ‘Nic?’” she asked in desperation.

“I-I can’t tell you what to do Clo’. I... just let me, just let me think. It ain’t enough time left on the phone to hash this shit out right now.”

“So, what now?” She breathed in and out.

“I fucked up. We both fucked up, okay? The shit we did was reckless. We can’t bring no baby in—” He stopped himself. “Please, just answer the phone when I ca—”

The call ended.

She thought his words would provide some solace, but they hadn’t. She left the conversation more confused than she’d been going in.

He loved her? He loved her so much that he pushed her away?

PART FOUR

POLO SAT BACK on his bed watching Dominic pace the concrete floor of their cell. He had paced so much since he talked to Claudette, there should have been grooves etched beneath his feet. The bags under his eyes had grown darker because he was surviving off of the watered-down jail coffee that was nothing more than tap water and a few coffee grounds sprinkled here and there.

“Do you want her to keep it?” Polo asked, breaking the calm silence in their cell.

Dominic stopped in front of their door, peering out onto the empty pod floor. The only people that moved around were the trustees and a few COs who supervised them while they cleaned the floors.

“Shit, I don’t know,” he replied.

Really, his heart leapt when she’d told him she was pregnant. He wanted to burst at the seams, but he knew better than to tell her that.

“It don’t matter if I do anyway. She get to make the final decision.”

“Bullshit. There you go with that bullshit,” Polo said. “Don’t stand over there and tell me you don’t know when you do.”

Dominic turned from the window and looked at Polo dressed in baggy cotton shorts and dingy white socks. He didn’t have on a shirt and his pale stomach protruded over the waistband of his shorts.

“Okay, fuck it. Yeah, I want her to keep it.” He pulled his hands above his head as if he was trying to catch his breath, but he was trying to gather his thoughts. “I want that baby with everything in me.”

He figured it was better to confess it to Polo than keep it contained. He just needed to talk through the crazy shit running through his mind.

“Tell her that.”

“Hell nah!” Dominic threw his arms back down.

Polo rolled his eyes and pulled his legs up onto his bed, stretching them forward.

“You don’t understand man,” Dominic added.

“Shit, clearly.”

He had already committed the most ultimate act of selfishness.

“I wasn’t even supposed to touch her.” He shook his head.

“Too late for all that, hell she pregnant now.” Polo scoffed.

“Pregnant and scared because of my dumbass.” His feet started moving again. “I got to get out of here.”

Hearing her voice on the phone was triggering. Every emotion that pertained to her he tried to bury bubbled to the surface. He hadn’t meant to tell her he loved her, but he had been away from her for so long that it burst out of him. He didn’t give a fuck about some imaginary girlfriend that she thought he had, he just needed her to know if shit went south, he loved her. She was the only one that had his heart. Then she dropped the bomb on him. It was a bomb that made his mouth curve into a smile when he replayed her words to himself in his dark cell at night.

“I don’t know why you just don’t tell her you want the baby.” Polo shook his head.

“Because it’s her body.” Dominic cracked his knuckles. “Because I’m locked up. Because she ain’t nothing but a kid

herself. She just started college. I took enough from her. I ain't about to take her future away either."

"Guess you do got a point." Polo laid an arm across his round stomach and sighed. "I still think you ought to say something though, plenty of people have babies while they're young."

"Yeah and plenty of 'em end up fucking they kids up because they was too young to be having babies." He pictured Eve's angular face. "All it do is create a cycle of fucking dysfunction. How I'm supposed to give my baby the world when I got a rap sheet so long McDonalds wouldn't even look my way?"

Polo stayed quiet, letting him rant.

Claudette's confession had set off an alarm within him. She was on his mind before, but now it was constant and she wasn't alone. Their child was there too. He kept a tally of all the things that gnawed at his nerves. How did she find out? Had she been to the doctor? Did her flat belly have a slight bump to it? What did she crave? Did she even realize what she'd done?

She'd given him a future.

“You failed a class Clo’?” Dominic asked, turning his back to the rest of the pod.

He heard her soft breaths over the phone, and he itched to be right underneath her. He wasn’t supposed to be calling her as much as he had been, but the moment he heard her raspy voice the night he called Josiah, the floodgates opened.

“Yeah,” she whispered. “Don’t chew me out like my grandpa did. He still isn’t talking to me.”

It was around five in the morning, and they’d just left their cells for breakfast. Dominic slipped past the lumpy oatmeal and orange juice and went straight to the phone, dialing Claudette’s number that he refused to forget. Josiah increased the money on his phone account and he had an inkling she had something to do with it, but he wouldn’t confront her about it.

“I’m disappointed, real talk. You supposed to be on your shit.” She whined at his words and he closed his eyes. “Don’t do that.”

“Technically, it’s your fault.”

“How?” He tried his best to picture her hiding beneath the sunflower covered blanket on her bed with her thick coils poking out of the top of it.

“I was managing a successful rap artist for half of the semester.” Her teasing words made them both laugh. “I had shows to book, calls to answer, obsessive fans to fight off.”

“You childish.” He bit into his bottom lip.

She sighed. “No, I’m hungry.”

He wondered if it was the baby that caused her sudden craving for food. He wouldn’t ask. They danced around the subject so much it made his head hurt. He waited for her to bring it up, but she never would.

“Go eat.” He turned to look over his shoulder—a habit he’d formed as a youth in juvie.

“No, because in ten minutes that annoying recording will come on and remind me I only have one minute left to bother

you.”

He smiled; those words were the exact reason he’d missed her so much.

“So, what’s your plan?” he asked, using Polo’s words.

“For?” It sounded like she’d snuggled deeper beneath her blanket, but he couldn’t be sure.

Her natural voice made it sound as if she was perpetually sleepy.

“Your class. You can’t fail it a second time. That ain’t gangsta.”

“Eric’s been tutoring me.” His palms grew sweaty. “I passed the first quiz and we’ve been studying nonstop for the next one.”

“Oh.”

Images of them huddled together studying made him queasy.

“Nic?”

“Yeah, I’m here.” He attempted to keep the same tone.

“I don’t like him; you know that, *right?*” She sounded like she was smiling.

“But he like you.”

He felt like such a simp, but Polo told him it was a part of the process of emotional maturity. Expressing himself didn’t make him a bitch. It was a mantra he had to keep repeating.

“So? He couldn’t drag me out of my sleep at five in the morning to talk about nonsense or convince me that making love on a bathroom vanity is normal.”

He laughed. “So, you saying he ain’t got the drip?”

This time she was the one laughing. Her raspy giggle had him struggling to keep from smiling.

“I didn’t say that.”

“Shit, in so many words.” He sighed, teasing her. “It’s okay, he don’t have to know though.”

“You said you don’t care that he’s my friend, remember?”

“I don’t. I care if he disrespects you though.” Or touched her or breathed the same air she did. “And I know he ain’t gone do that.”

Dominic figured that there was something in a man’s DNA that made him aware of another man’s interest. Eric could push and prod at Claudette to test her loyalty, but he knew she was Dominic’s the first day they’d met in Tony’s basement. He wasn’t as innocent as he portrayed.

The recording she hated interrupted with the same old message reminding him that there was just one minute left for her to keep his mind busy. He called her as soon as he woke because her raspy voice was the only thing that kept him sane for the rest of the day.

“And the countdown begins,” she groaned. “Guess I should start getting ready.”

It sounded like she’d climbed out of her bed.

“Clo’?”

“Yes, Mr. drip?”

“Same time tomorrow?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world twin,” she responded just before the call disconnected.

AUTUMN YAWNED, SCRUNCHING up her caramel face as she and Claudette sat in the dining hall eating lunch. It was nothing more than fruit, cold cuts, and potato chips, but Claudette ate it as if it were a five-course meal.

Autumn shoved her bowl of honeydew toward her.

“Thanks,” Claudette said before tipping the bag of chips above her mouth and swallowing the last few crumbs.

Autumn rubbed her eyes and nodded.

“Sleepy?” she asked, swiping her hands together to knock off the crumbs.

“Yeah.” Autumn leaned back in her chair. “Because Dominic loves to call you as soon as the doors pop for breakfast.”

Claudette shrugged and reached for the honeydew.

She had been tight-lipped ever since they’d reconnected. The only thing she’d told Autumn was that he knew she was pregnant. Her response hadn’t been positive or negative—she’d just said *oh*.

“He try to convince you to get rid of the baby?” she asked.

Her hand stopped, and she glanced up at Autumn.

“No.” She frowned. “Why would you ask that?”

“Just curious. You didn’t exactly say what his reaction was.” She shrugged. “That’s all.”

Claudette reached back out for a piece of the melon and popped one in her mouth. She chewed while reaching down to

open her backpack. Her fingers thumbed past the crumpled abortion and adoption pamphlets and grasped her A&P textbook. She had thirty minutes to memorize the superficial muscles on the anterior of the torso.

She opened the book, ignoring Autumn's gaze, and skimmed the pages.

"Well, has he said anything?" Autumn asked.

Claudette sighed and slammed the cover to the book closed. He hadn't said a word. He didn't bring up the baby, so she didn't either. It was like an unspoken rule in their early morning conversations.

"No."

"Did he at least say when he might get out?" Autumn huffed and held out her arms.

"No."

"Well, what do y'all even talk about? You pregnant and he's in jail—two big ass elephants that y'all are ignoring," she said. "Do you even know how many weeks you are?"

She was ten weeks and three days.

Her favorite thing to do was to cuddle underneath her blanket in the early morning hours chatting with Dominic about nothing while she rubbed her stomach that felt full but still looked empty.

"Yeah, I do." She reopened the book and kept reading the diagrams that pointed to the muscles in the anterior torso.

"Okayyy." Autumn dragged the word out. "You know that after so many weeks there's nothing you can do, right? You'd have to carry the baby and look into adoption."

Autumn tiptoed around the word, but Claudette knew she was talking about abortion. She also knew she had ten more weeks before she no longer had that option, but she had already decided.

"I know Autumn." Her tone was unemotional and unattached, but that heartbeat she heard stayed with her.

It sometimes lulled her to sleep at night. She didn't want to share it with anyone else except the person who helped her create it, but he'd been silent on the subject.

“You really need to put some pressure on him, because this shit ain't gone go away if y'all ignore it.”

Claudette hadn't been ignoring it. In fact, she made an appointment for the following week with an OB/GYN Dr. Martin referred her to. The galloping heartbeat she heard made her crave more. So, she'd picked up the phone and scheduled the appointment while under its spell.

She'd started taking prenatal vitamins and making herself eat through her nausea. She purposely took the long route to class, making sure she kept track of her steps throughout the day. She'd even taken Marquise's library aide job for the summer to save more money for the baby's arrival.

“I mean, he has to have an opinion, right? Does he even care?” Autumn continued on with her barrage of questions while she ignored her, also wondering if he even thought about the baby she carried.

He said he loved her—that had to count for something.

“If you're going to get rid of it, somebody's got to pay for it. Hell, George don't even know. This shit is blowing me.” She shook her head. “You're way too calm for somebody who's pregnant by a guy like Dominic.”

Autumn played with the cup of water in front of her. She dipped her straw inside, pressing a finger to the top so it could suck up the water that was just melted ice. Claudette blocked out the questions she asked, repeating the muscles in her head.

“You're keeping it, huh?”

Claudette closed the book again, preparing to pack up her things to get away from Autumn's questions about her baby.

“Yes.” She shoved the book back inside her backpack, further crumpling the pamphlets. “You can either support me or let me do my own thing. The choice is yours.”

She hadn't realized when she decided that her baby was hers—but it was.

“I told you I had your back no matter what.” Autumn glanced down at her moving to pick up her backpack.

“Exactly and having my back means letting me decide myself, not goading me into doing what you think would be best for me.” She clutched her backpack to her chest.

“I'm not trying to goad you. It's like Dominic has you in a damn daze all the time.” Her face dropped. “He swoops back in and now you're talking about keeping a damn baby you won't even be able to take care of. It's like you're hoping it'll make him wake up and decide he wants it.”

“Just because he's back in my life doesn't mean he had any influence on my decision. I told you he hasn't said anything else about the baby since I told him,” Claudette replied. “I'm having my baby with or without him. Him having an opinion would be ideal, but it won't make me change my mind.”

She pushed back from the table and stood up. She'd given Autumn more of a response than she deserved. Nobody, not even Dominic, could convince her to get rid of her baby. The moment the sound of its little heart filled Dr. Martin's exam room; she formed an attachment.

She grabbed her empty plate and the bowl that held the honeydew, walking to the dish-drop and then out of the dining hall's doors.

“You think your grandpa would like me?” Dominic asked thoughtfully.

“No.” Claudette tried to muffle her laugh by burying her face into her blanket.

“Damn, you ain’t even try to sugarcoat it.”

“He hates tattoos and rap music,” she replied, sinking deeper underneath the blanket. “But, once he gets to know you, he’ll love you.”

“Maybe,” he responded. “What you eating for breakfast?”

Ever since the morning she’d expressed her desire to eat while on the phone with him, he’d started asking her about her breakfast plans. She didn’t know if it was curiosity or just his way of making sure she ate. With her nausea finally subsiding, she didn’t have to force herself to eat—she craved the oddest things.

“I want fried chicken—spicy wings only, with green beans and a cold Pepsi.” Her mouth salivated, thinking of the meal that would have made the perfect dinner.

“You can’t have that for breakfast Clo’.”

“I know,” she groaned. “I can dream though.”

“Tell Jo to bring it to you after class.”

“No, I’m not going to bother him to go on a fried chicken run.” She rubbed her stomach that rumbled in anger.

“If I tell him to, he will,” he said—the shouting of inmates in the background made her tense. “He driving everywhere else in my car.”

“It’s not a big deal. I have to go to work afterwards anyway.” She rolled over onto her side, cradling her stomach that had started to pudge a little.

She still didn’t look pregnant—just like she’d eaten one too many slices of pizza.

“You got a job?” he asked harshly.

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“At the library on campus. I’m pretty sure Roc has banned me from the restaurant.” She rolled her eyes.

He sighed instead of responding.

That night at Diane’s when she’d reconnected with him, Josiah filled in the missing pieces of Dominic’s wild night that led to his arrest. It was a tale that started with a social media rant that somehow involved her. The person behind the rant was the same person who Dominic feared would somehow harm her. It was the same person he’d assaulted, and she assumed the same person who he’d confessed to her he’d robbed.

“What about Josiah? You’re not worried about him driving around in your car?” she asked.

Ever since she’d met Dominic, she’d learned that he did everything with purpose—well, almost everything. It was obvious the person in question knew what car he drove. It was the reason he’d picked her up in Diane’s car that day they’d met up after Spring Break. It was also the reason she hadn’t been back in his car at all since. She never realized how distinct it was—pitch black, with rims the color of charcoal and tint that couldn’t have been legal. It was boisterous—riding in it felt like she was competing in the Indy 500.

“Jo can handle hisself,” he said as the line buzzed with static.

“And I can’t?” She curled up in a ball.

“Of course you can baby. You can handle yourself, you can handle me, shit, you probably could handle ole’ boy.” He teased, making her smile. “But I think I like you sitting on your ass in a library, doing nothing, and getting paid for it. Easy money is the best money.”

“I guess you’re right—maybe.” She closed her eyes, wondering how he looked in that very moment. “Even though I know you’re using one of your little formulas.”

They both laughed.

“Damn, I got to switch my game up,” he replied.

She squeezed her legs together, ignoring her sudden urge to pee. They had three minutes left. She checked the time periodically after realizing she hated the surprise of the automated message.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, his voice raising to compete against the loud voices on his end.

“How do you know something’s wrong?” She adjusted her position again.

“I hear you moving around, making little noises and shit.”

“I have to pee.” She clenched her thighs.

“Go pee.”

“No, we have three—well two minutes left.” She shook her head as if he were right in front of her.

“Okay. Well, take me with you.” She grimaced at the thought of him being on the line while she peed.

It was crazy that she even cared.

“No, I can just wait it out.”

“Claudette, I seen every part of you. Go pee and put the shit on mute.”

She hated when he got agitated during their calls. It wasn’t often, but she knew his circumstances intensified every feeling he felt. Something so minor, like taking his call in the bathroom shouldn’t have caused an angry outburst, but it did.

He once told her she was the only thing he looked forward to when he woke up. His confession didn’t make her giddy, it made her sad that his mental well-being revolved around her.

Instead of responding, she crawled from underneath the blanket and walked to the bathroom with him wedged in the crook of her neck. She heard his heavy breathing.

“I didn’t mean that Clo’. I’m just—nothing.”

The automated message beeped, starting its countdown.

“I know you didn’t.”

Deep down she knew not to take his harsh responses to heart because he was in a situation that wasn't ideal. She wasn't making excuses for him. He'd gotten himself there by being reckless but she knew enough of him to know that he was failed in every way and his anger and his subsequent actions from his anger resulted from that failure.

She hurried to pull her shorts down.

“Clo’?”

“Yes, Dominic?” She held off, concentrating on her breathing.

“I’m sorry.”

There was no time to respond before the call ended—it always ended at the worst time.

The quiet calm of the library was vexing to Claudette. She heard each rumble and growl of her stomach as the minutes ticked by. The only other sounds were the clicking of students typing on keyboards and the occasional whisper. Her work station was behind a desk at the entrance of one of the large computer labs on the first floor. The only duty she had was to scan student's ID cards as they entered and take their payments if they printed to the industrial printer behind the desk. She spent most of her time working alone. Mrs. Katherine, her boss, had left hours ago. The shift should have been a breeze, but Claudette was used to the hustle and bustle of the Waffle House. She missed the sizzle of the bacon, the kitchen drama, and the drunk customers from her late-night shift.

Her boredom led her from studying for A&P to writing a paper for another classmate who promised her fifty dollars for her work. She memorized the anterior and posterior muscles in the leg, wrote more than half of the paper, and was back to perusing Dominic's social media—something she told herself she'd never do again.

This time she'd tricked herself by setting a limit on how long she would spend on there. She'd made a list of what she wanted to do and then she would get out of there. Her goal was to follow-up on the duties she'd been neglecting.

She'd uploaded his music video to YouTube and placed teasers on his Instagram profile. Her eyes lit at the instant dump of likes and comments on the video teasers. It didn't take long for people to express their excitement for his return.

She cleaned up his Instagram bio, erasing anything she felt was unnecessary. She copied the bios of other legitimate musicians to make Dominic's look as professional as possible. The more legitimate his online presence looked, the more interest his music could garner—at least that's what she figured. The careful curating of his online image was therapeutic in a way. She wanted him to have something else to look forward to besides her.

Emails flooded his long-forgotten booking email. None of them were for bookings because by now everyone knew he was in jail. Many were requests for interviews from indie music platforms or local podcasts. There were some inquiries from some guy claiming to be an A&R for a company that she'd never heard of. She saved them but questioned their validity. She zoned out, scrolling through the messages, deleting the spam, and printing the ones that seemed legitimate, planning to get them to Dominic somehow.

“Psst... psst.”

She jerked up her head, expecting to see one of the freshman athletes that had been bothering her since she started. Instead, Josiah's chiseled face appeared behind the desktop computer.

“What are you doing here?” she whispered, smiling.

“I'm looking for the cutest mommy-to-be.” He pulled two bags from behind his back.

Her eyes widened.

“Who told you?” She glanced behind him, but nobody paid them any attention.

He sat the bags on the counter. The smell of fried chicken wafted through the air, awakening her taste buds.

“Who you think?” he laughed, pushing the bag toward her.

“Diane?”

“Hell nah.” He watched as Claudette fingered the bag, opening it to pull out its contents. “D told me.”

“He did?” She glanced back up with a confused smile.

“Yeah, that's my brother,” Josiah replied. “He tell me everything.”

She pulled out the Styrofoam container of green beans, trying her best not to rip the lid off in front of Josiah. He took it from her hands and pulled it off himself. The smell made Claudette's stomach jump in delight. He reached back into the bag and pulled out a pack of plastic silverware.

“He told you what I wanted?” She grinned, taking the silverware and green beans from Josiah.

“Spicy wings only, green beans, and a cold Pepsi.” He rested his arms on the counter, looking at her. “Don’t snitch and tell him I forgot the Pepsi though. I don’t want no smoke.”

She reached out and pinched Josiah’s angular cheek.

“You know I’d never tell on you.” She took a bite of the green beans and groaned in appreciation.

They were still hot. Her hands reached for the bag and pulled out the rest of her meal. The other bag he brought was still tied shut.

“What’s that?” she asked him, nodding her head toward it.

“That’s D’s mail from the house. Mama been giving it to me, talking about she don’t want the shit.” She frowned and pulled the bag from the counter, sitting it on top of her backpack that rested on the floor. “D told me to give it to you.”

“She’s still mad at him?” Claudette rolled her eyes.

She hadn’t seen Diane since she dropped her off at campus after she’d argued with Dominic and inadvertently snitched on her while in a rage.

“Hell yeah.” Josiah shook his head. “She’ll get over it. She always get like this when D get locked up even though she claim she happy he out the streets. Right now she just stressed about money.”

Claudette chewed, trying to muster up some sympathy, but she had her own problems to worry about. She looked at Josiah, who was lounging against the counter watching her eat. He looked well-groomed as usual, but his eyes were withdrawn. He looked like an espresso colored version of Dominic dressed in slim fitting jeans and a white t-shirt.

“You been okay?” she asked, pinching the skin off of one of the chicken wings.

He shrugged and kept staring at her.

“I’m just chilling.” He smiled.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “It’s okay to miss him.”

He drummed his knuckles on the countertop and studied her face. His eyes scanned her thick coils and then moved downward.

“You want a girl or a boy?” he asked, ignoring her comment.

She picked the piece of chicken back up and bit down, thinking about his question. She’d never thought about whether it would be a boy or a girl. She just knew it was a life inside of her and their bond grew stronger each day.

She swallowed the crispy piece of crust in her mouth. “Doesn’t matter to me. I just want a healthy baby.”

Her words felt safe with Josiah. He was like a curious younger sibling that hung onto every word she said.

“Damn, you sound like D,” he laughed.

She put the piece of chicken down, making sure she wasn’t just hearing things.

“What do you mean?” she whisper-talked. “He talks about the baby?”

Josiah smacked his forehead and laughed harder.

“Duh, that’s all that nigga talk about.” He shook his head. “Why you think he got me bringing you fried chicken at nine at night?”

“But... but... he never says anything to me about it. I just thought—” She stopped herself, thinking back to their conversations.

“The next time you talk to him, ask him.” Josiah leaned forward and swiped one of her wings. “If you want to know something, speak up. You about to bring a life into this world—that’s some serious shit. When you got a child to look after, you can’t just sit back and roll with the punches.”

She nodded, watching him eat her wing. Her mind was stuck on the fact that Dominic wanted their child and hadn’t said a word to her.

“I love D, but he don’t know shit about real relationships,” he said, smacking.

“And you do?” Claudette raised her eyebrow at him.

Josiah licked his fingers and nodded.

“Shit... I know more than his ass.” He smacked. “Y’all about to be connected for life, whether y’all stay together. It’s gone be some long hard years if you too scared to even ask him about the baby he put in you.”

Claudette reached for the cup of green beans and scooped out a spoonful, shoving them in her mouth.

Josiah had a point. It wasn’t fear that kept her from asking. He’d told her he’d give her anything she wanted, and he always did in his own way. She just didn’t want her desires to force him into having a child he didn’t want. She needed him to speak up—to share his desires too.

“But, hey, I’m the one who don’t know shit.” He shrugged, making Claudette laugh.

“You know entirely too much.” She sat back in her cushioned chair and looked at him.

She sometimes forgot that they were so close in age. His mannerisms and ideologies aligned with someone well beyond their years—much like Dominic. Their exteriors seemed hard, but really they were like putty with the women in their lives.

He finished the wing and stuck the bones back onto the cardboard tray her food came on.

“I put more money on his phone account this morning,” he said.

“Jo, you don’t have to do that. I can figure it out and do it myself.” She handed him a napkin from the bag. “You need to hold on to your money.”

He kissed his teeth.

“Chill, you carrying my baby cousin. You got enough shit to worry about. This little money for the phone ain’t nothing.

D done spent way more on bullshit for me. The least I can do is make sure he talk to his girl.”

“Plus, since y’all back talking, he ain’t been on my ass as much,” he added.

She tilted her head, noting his mischievousness.

“You don’t have long until graduation.” She spooned the last few green beans into her mouth. “Don’t screw it up.”

He only had a few days—Dominic had told her so. His tone was sullen when he described how he’d be missing out on the occasion. He said he’d never been to a real graduation. He missed his own while completing another stint in jail for someone else—a friend who he’d committed a robbery with and refused to snitch on. Months after he completed his sentence, he enrolled in an adult education program at one of the local colleges, but never completed it. He told her it was one of his biggest regrets.

“I’m not. I promise.” He took the empty container from her hand and gathered the rest of their trash, putting it all back into the bag. “You coming on Saturday, right?”

“Yes.” She looked as he tied a knot at the top of it. “But you’ve got to promise me something?”

“What’s that Clo’-Clo’?” he asked, reaching in his pocket and pulling out his phone that dinged.

“Please, stay out of trouble. I don’t need both of you gone.” He smiled down at his phone that continued to chirp. “You should’ve heard his voice. It’s killing him he won’t be there.”

Josiah’s smile drooped, and he looked up at her. Losing Dominic was one thing but losing Josiah before he could graduate would be an even worse tragedy. Dominic had prepared him for a successful future—it may not have been as clean cut as Diane wanted, but he’d done it in his own way and on his own terms.

“I got you Clo’. I got you,” he replied. “Hit me up if you need something.”

He held up his phone as he backed away from the counter.

“THANKS FOR THE food,” Claudette whispered. “It was much needed.”

Her raspy voice sounded tired, and she had said little in the two minutes they’d been on the phone. He wondered what had her in her head because it wasn’t like her to not be present for him.

“You know I always got you.” He rested his back against the cinder blocked wall. “Even when I’m not there.”

They listened to each other’s breathing—neither of them saying anything else. He didn’t ask what was wrong, too afraid that it would be something he could do nothing about. He was content with listening to her breathing because at least she was there. She moved around, probably bundled up in her comforter. It was what she told him when he asked her to describe how she liked to have their early morning conversations.

“I couldn’t even get out of the bed.” She still sounded tired, but she spoke clearly.

The randomness of her words made him lift from the wall and turn his back to the other inmates to form some semblance of privacy.

“When you ghosted me.” She clarified. “I couldn’t get out of the bed. I couldn’t even eat. I can hardly remember what I did on those days—they’re a blur.”

“Clo’ . . .”

He didn’t want to hear anymore. His chest was already tightening.

“Just when I thought I was strong enough to get over you, over us, over whatever it was we had, I heard its heartbeat.” She paused. “And it wouldn’t leave my head. It followed me everywhere. Just a constant thump in my head.”

“Clo’ I—” He started talking, but he didn’t even know what to say.

“I finally threw away the adoption and abortion pamphlets the other day. It felt stupid carrying them around with me when I know I’m not giving up my baby.” She sniffled and cleared her throat. “Part of me is scared shitless while the other part of me is so in love with the life growing inside of me.”

“You didn’t tell me you heard the heartbeat.” His head fell against the wall as he tried to keep himself composed.

“You didn’t tell me you wanted our baby,” she replied. “Just like you didn’t tell me why you dropped me until I begged or that you loved me until you thought I hated you. You see the pattern here?”

“I do.” He looked down at the ground.

“Will I always have to guess with you? Should I expect having to decipher your actions to get a better understanding of you? Will I always have to beg you to explain to me why you do the things you do?”

Her words cut into him. They weren’t even harsh—just unexpected.

“No Clo’.” He sounded like a six-year-old version of himself.

“Do you really want our baby?” she asked in exasperation.

“I wanted it the day you told me you were pregnant.” His shoulders lifted.

“Then why not say that? Why torture me with guessing games? I’m used to you doing it with me. But with a life we both created? Come on, Dominic.” She sounded as if she was begging again.

“Hold up,” he said sharply. “I kept it one hundred with you since the day we met. I ain’t drop you for no reason or take your love for granted like you tryna make it seem—none of that shit. I woke up and realized how much you’d lose by being with me, so I made the best decision for the both of us. But it ain’t like none of that matter anymore.”

She tried to speak, but he cut her off. His heart raced, because he needed to lay it all out on the table before the call ended.

“You think I planned to fall in love with you? I ain’t plan to fall in love with nobody, never, but you got me. So, congratulations, you stuck with a nigga who can’t even express hisself without feeling like a bitch. You happy? You ain’t got to play guessing games no more, because I’m telling you right now that I fucking loved you the night you seen me cry.” His voice lowered. “I ain’t admit to wanting our child, because what I want don’t matter. I tried to give you room to make the choice yourself, because I already influenced you enough. My silence wasn’t on no abandonment shit, it was my way of letting you make the choice of whether you wanted us connected for the rest of your life.

“You think you the only one that was fucked up? I ain’t sleep for weeks because you wouldn’t get out my head.” He glanced over his shoulder, trying to give off the impression that he was only shooting the breeze on the phone. “And I still ain’t sleeping because now I’m over here stressed about you out there alone with our baby. I ain’t got nothing but time on my hands to think about the what ifs. What if she decide she don’t want our baby? What if she decide that she do? What if she going to the doctor without me? What if she feeling fucked up because she got pregnant by me of all people?”

He heard her sniffing on the line as he quieted, preparing to get an earful from her.

“I’m eleven weeks.” Her voice was calm and clear. “I don’t look pregnant, just bloated. Kind of like I ate too much. My OB/GYN says I have to go back next week for an ultrasound. It’ll be the first time I get to see our baby. I’m feeling elated that I’m pregnant by you—someone selfless,

someone talented, someone who doesn't realize how much influence he has on others or how beautiful he is."

His mouth curved upward.

"Someone who won't mind painting my toenails when I'm too big to see my own feet." They both laughed. "You understand baby?"

He bit into his lip at the sound of her raspy voice stealing the words from his mouth. Words that only ever appeared when he taught her intimate lessons. The sound of them coming from her sent his body into overdrive.

"I understand Claudette," he responded, his voice laced with humor.

"Are you sure?" she chirped. "Or would you prefer your Instagram bae?"

He kissed his teeth at the mention of the mystery girl that had Claudette wound up the night he'd found out she was pregnant.

"Her name is Tia," he said.

She was the only girl he fucked with that left thirsty messages underneath his pictures on social media when something major happened. Her sole purpose was to create some faux sense of intimacy between the two of them to piss off her perceived competition. He'd broken up plenty of fights between her and other girls because of the fictional tales she'd leave in his Instagram comments. Most of the time he hadn't even had a clue she'd said anything until he received an angry phone call or text.

Mo said the word was that Tia was telling anyone who'd listen that he'd gone to confront Marco over her and that Dominic was hers, although she hadn't put a dime on his books or even tried to contact him.

"I don't like her, you know that, right?" He stole her words this time. "I mean we used to fuck... but she not my G... my G the only one that can get me mad enough to bend her over in a bathroom for talking shit about me being late."

“Nic!” she gasped.

His fingers traced the dirty cracks of the cinder blocks as he contemplated on how much of his and Tia’s history he wanted to confess to her.

“She know about you,” he said.

“What about me does she know?” She no longer sounded as drained as she had when their conversation started.

“That you got my heart.” His fingers stopped. “That you for me and me only. Right?”

“Duh, shawty,” she said, making his smile return. “But if she knows that, then why is she saying those things?”

“Because she think one day I’m gone wake up and love her like I love you, but it don’t work that way,” he replied, nipping her unwarranted jealousy in the bud.

They both settled into a comfortable silence as the automated message interrupted, reminding them they were on borrowed time.

“Nic?” Claudette called out in the last few seconds.

“Yeah Clo’?”

“Can I block her?”

He couldn’t help the laugh that sprang from his mouth.

“Yeah, right after you block Eric’s phone number.” He sighed. “Corny ass nigga.”

Dominic sat by himself at one of the empty tables in his pod. He drummed his fingers while staring at the cookie crumbs one of the other inmates had left behind. He blew out a breath, knocking them to the floor. It was a Saturday—the longest Saturday of his life. It was also the day Josiah graduated.

“What you over here pouting about?” Polo asked, blowing out a breath as he struggled to toss his leg over the bench connected to the table.

Dominic stared in amusement.

“I’m chilling.” His fingers still drummed against the tabletop.

“Are you?” Polo glanced at them and back up at him.

“My brother graduate today.” Dominic’s fingers stopped. “He supposed to come see me afterward.”

He had no clue what time it was, he just knew the day was getting later and the longer he waited the antsier he became. Josiah scheduled the visit for five p.m., which shouldn’t have been a problem, but he knew Josiah was a wildcard just like he was. It was Josiah’s idea, so he gave him the benefit of the doubt. He’d told Diane he didn’t want a party—he only wanted to see Dominic.

“Oh yeah?” Polo’s pale face lit with excitement. “Ain’t that something. You must be proud?”

Dominic smiled as he thought back to the little brown boy that once followed him everywhere. Dominic spent his childhood summers flipping and robbing to make sure he got Josiah out of their environment. He’d flipped so many packs and robbed so many folks to make sure Josiah made it, and now he’d surpassed *making it*.

“Beyond,” Dominic said, his chest swelling. “Shit, I think I’m more nervous than he is.”

“You? Nervous?” Polo asked, slapping him on the back.

He nodded while his leg bounced up and down.

“Don’t get too overwhelmed now. Remember, you got to do it all over again,” Polo said. “This is the beginning.”

Dominic had the look of a surrogate parent—a role he had been too young to take on. Now, he’d become an actual father, and he had to have the emotional capacity to withstand being responsible for another life. This time it was a life he helped create.

The door to the pod swung open, interrupting their conversation. Cruz, one of the COs, entered. He gaited inside, ignoring the inmates that crowded around him vying for attention or being nosey. Dominic watched as his eyes squinted, scanning the crowded pod. His hand rested on the holster wrapped around his waist.

“DeBlanc!” He called out once his eyes locked with Dominic’s.

He swung his arm up, signaling for Dominic to come forward. Polo slapped him on the back one last time as he stood, glancing down at the blue prison rags he had on and sighing.

Cruz waited, chewing on a stick of gum with a neutral expression. He wasn’t like the other COs who used every opportunity to bitch or abuse their authority.

“You got visitors,” he said.

His voice was a southern drawl intertwined with a strong Spanish accent.

Dominic only nodded. He swallowed and did his best to control the goofy smile that wanted to spread on his face because in a few minutes, he’d see Josiah and Diane’s faces. It was the first visit from family that he’d ever gotten ever since his first arrest as a young boy.

Cruz slapped a pair of heavy cuffs on his wrists, and the cool metal soothed his skin that was hot with anticipation. He waited on Dominic to walk out and then followed behind him until they were outside the pod doors. Once outside, Cruz led the way.

Walking anywhere in the jail was time-consuming. Inmates had strict rules to follow, or they risked punishment. Dominic kept his eyes on the back of Cruz's crewcut, and his cuffed hands in front of him. He made no sudden movements and kept just enough distance between them.

They walked down hallways, turned corners, and rode an elevator down three floors before they finally reached the visitation room that was nothing more than an impersonal space full of video monitors. Josiah and Diane wouldn't be in the same room with him. They would be in the same building but on a different floor, in a room that probably looked similar.

Cruz led him to one station that contained a monitor and a chair. He unlocked the cuffs, giving him free rein of his hands again, and backed away. Dominic sat down, his leg was jolting up and down again. He picked up the phone, watching the screen load. His leg moved faster and faster until the camera turned on, making it stop.

He brought a fist to his mouth at the sight of Josiah still dressed in his cap and gown, and a grinning Claudette sitting beside him.

Words couldn't form in his head.

She wore a bright yellow sundress made for her dark skin. She had brushed her wild hair up and tiny ringlets fell from her puff of hair onto her neck and down her face.

"You can't speak nigga?" Josiah asked, with a grin of his own.

Dominic felt the tightness in his cheeks from the intense smile that wouldn't leave his face.

"Man... y'all gone make me..." He started and stopped. "Tell me about the graduation. I wanna' hear everything I missed."

Josiah laughed, shaking his head. He handed the phone to Claudette.

"It was beautiful." Her voice coupled with her round face made his eyes droop. "There were so many people... so many people that cheered for him. I recorded every second."

She rambled on, her face lighting up with excitement. He saw the small gap between her two front teeth and he wished he could teleport through the screen to give her all the kisses he'd neglected to give her when they were together. She rested her hand on her abdomen. His own fingers moved, craving to be underneath hers.

"I can't wait for you to watch it." She moved a coily ringlet from in front of her eye. "He looked so regal accepting his diploma. I cried; can you believe that? God, I'm such a mess."

Josiah cracked up, taking the mortarboard from his head and placing it on Claudette's. He saw Josiah's lips moving but couldn't hear what he said.

"What he say Clo'?" Dominic reached forward, tracing her face on his screen.

"He's teasing me about my pregnancy hormones."

"Let me see." He moved his face closer to the screen, his nose almost touching the monitor.

She raised from her seat and pulled the fabric of the yellow dress against her stomach.

"You can barely see anything. What do you think?" She posed with a silly expression on her face, making him laugh. "Or am I looking like I just had a big lunch?"

He tried to keep his facial expressions in control, but he knew he was failing.

She looked beautiful. Her bump was hardly a bump, but the thought of her carrying his child made him harden with arousal. She looked nothing like the shy waitress he'd met months before. She had glowing skin and a body that filled out from pregnancy.

She grinned, still waiting on his response.

"I think you look... like the best thing that happened to me."

Her face relaxed from the grin she held and she sat back next to Josiah, who watched the two of them in awe.

“Did you bring the picture of her?” he asked with his fingers still on the monitor, hovering over her face.

She drew her eyebrows together. “Who?”

“The baby.”

On the day of her OB/GYN appointment, he didn’t leave his cell. She’d explained to him the morning before that they wouldn’t be able to talk on the day of her appointment. She’d volunteered to cover an early morning shift for a coworker and would have no time to talk with him. So, he laid in his bunk from sunup to sundown. His stomach churned in regret as Polo guided him through prayer.

“Oh.” Her eyebrows relaxed, and she smiled. “I told you we won’t know the gender until I’m closer to—”

“Twenty weeks. I know.” He glanced down at the time remaining on their visit. “But it’s a girl.”

Polo had told him so. He said he’d dreamed of Dominic cradling a baby girl on multiple nights. They were both basking in sunlight. Polo explained to him she would be his greatest gift.

“If you say so,” she agreed. “But no, they wouldn’t let me bring it in.”

He rubbed at his head, blowing out a breath.

“Don’t worry. I’ll mail it to you with some other stuff.” She brushed her hand against the screen, trying her best to soothe his frustrations. “She looked like a little doll. I couldn’t see her features, just a blurry picture of a baby.”

He tried to picture the ultrasound like he’d tried to picture Josiah’s graduation. So many milestones were passing him by while he sat waiting on the courts to decide what would happen to him.

“Who went with you?” he asked, expecting to hear Diane or Autumn’s names.

“I went by myself.” She looked down.

A lump formed in his throat.

“Don’t look like that.” She cheesed; her small gap teased him. “I’m a big girl.”

They stared at one another on the grainy monitor. He didn’t know if the visit had been a good idea or a terrible one, because his heart was shattering piece by piece.

His eyes roamed to the time again.

“Have you heard anything from your... lawyer?” Her words came out awkwardly.

He’d told her twice already not to worry about his case. She had more important things to focus on, and he wasn’t one of them.

“What I tell you Clo’?” He narrowed his eyes at her from his side of the monitor.

She rolled her eyes and adjusted her position in the metal chair she sat in.

“Here, talk to Jo.” She frowned and pulled the phone from her ear, shoving it toward Josiah.

Josiah cradled it in his hands—talking to her. Dominic wished he knew what he was saying. Claudette nodded and folded her arms against her chest.

“Why you do that?” Josiah asked as soon as he put the phone back up to his face.

He was talking in a tone that Dominic would normally use toward him.

“Because I already told her what it is. Me giving her updates every day ain’t gone make the process go no faster. It’s just gonna make her anxious.” He talked to Josiah but kept his eyes on Claudette, who was still staring at him. “You know how the courts is. They move at they own speed and I’m not about to spend my time with y’all talking about it.”

Josiah nodded and looked at Claudette, who was still sitting with her arms crossed.

“How y’all get here?” Dominic asked.

“Mama.”

Claudette took the mortarboard off of her head and placed it on her lap.

“Oh.”

They still hadn't talked since the night she cursed him for the influence he had over Josiah.

“She'll get over it, you know that, right?” Josiah replied, running his hand over the waves in his hair.

“I'm not tripping.” Dominic shrugged.

The only person whose feelings he gave a damn about was sitting in front of him with crossed arms and a pout.

“When you leave?” he asked as his eyes jumped back and forth between both of them.

“End of this month.”

“You know I still got you right? I'm gone make something happen.”

Josiah waived his free hand, shooing away his offer.

“D, I'm grown now. The only thing I need you to do is to get up out of here and take care of your family.” He rubbed a hand over his face. “You did your part, now let me do mine.”

Dominic rubbed a moist hand against the thin blue jail issued pants. Josiah's words sat on his chest. He had a family. His *own* family.

Josiah's eyes roamed the bottom of the screen, looking at the time that was winding down. His mouth moved, and he passed the phone back to Claudette. She reached up to wipe a hand across her face while clutching the phone to her ear.

“Why you so upset? You supposed to be my G,” Dominic said, watching her eyes grow big. “We ain't shedding no tears over here and we not gone spend our last few minutes together like this either.”

“Yeah, I-I understand.” She sniffled. “I'm just having— never mind.”

She stopped talking and smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes.

“You know this not forever, right?” He tried to keep his tone soft.

“Right,” she responded just as softly.

“You ain't gone go find another best friend, are you?”

He heard her breathing into the phone and saw her hand shaking as she tried to dry the tears on her face.

“No,” she replied. “We're locked in for life, remember?”

He laughed because that was something he'd say.

“Always baby—always.”

ERIC SAT IN his childhood bedroom staring at Claudette through the screen of his phone while she shoved potato chips into her mouth.

“Damn, slow down.” He laughed and brought the phone closer to his face.

Claudette sat on one of the worn couches in the library, waiting on her shift to start while eating and cramming for a quiz she had the next day.

“Sorry.” The chips muffled her voice. “I missed breakfast this morning.”

She missed it because she had a major meltdown that morning. She’d spent all fifteen minutes of her call with Dominic crying. He’d gotten the sonogram in the mail and instead of him breaking down, it had been her.

“Clo’... you making me feel like shit baby. Stop it.” He’d pleaded with her as the time ticked down.

“You’re midway through the semester. How’s the grade looking?” Eric smiled while she took a bite of her turkey sub.

“Your girl hasn’t failed a thing,” she said after a swallow. “I’m getting an A. I just know it.”

The material had come easy to her because it was the only thing that she could focus on besides her and Dominic’s little flower that sprouted in her belly. She was fourteen weeks along and was showing. Her round belly poked out from her small frame just a bit, but it was noticeable, so she hid beneath loose fitting t-shirts on campus.

“I see you.” Eric nodded. “When I get back, we’ll have to celebrate.”

“For sure.” She took another bite of her sandwich, knowing it wouldn’t happen. “How’s the plumbing business treating you?”

“I feel like Autumn jinxed me,” he said.

“What do you mean?” She looked down at her textbook after swallowing the last of the sandwich.

“We’ve been getting nothing but calls for clogs—toilet clogs.” She looked into the camera and burst into laughter.

Truthfully, she’d forgotten about that night. It seemed like years ago when they hung out, but it hadn’t been that long. Now, she and Autumn were hardly talking.

“Dang, sorry dawg,” Claudette giggled.

“It’s all good. I’m just counting down the days until I can get back to campus.” He rubbed the trimmed goatee that he’d grown out over the few weeks he’d been gone.

It made him look older. Not in a bad way—he just looked more serious than the goofy frat boy that Claudette knew him as. He seemed to have aged some while being away. His admiration for her was still in his brown eyes. That hadn’t changed at all.

“You’ll be back cutting up before you know it.” She gathered the empty bag her chips were in and the paper from her sandwich, stuffing it in a plastic bag.

“Right. I’ll be able to see you for real and not on FaceTime.”

She smiled politely at his words. He’d been saying things like that over the past couple of weeks. Claudette brushed the comments off, not wanting to hurt his feelings.

“Yeah, maybe we’ll have a couple of classes together.” She tied the bag up and closed her textbook, knowing she didn’t have long before she had to head down to the first floor for her shift.

“I hope so.” He looked off from the camera for a moment and turned back to her. “You seem to be a lot better these days.”

She nodded hoping he’d change the subject; she’d had enough emotional anguish for the day.

“I need you! I just want you to come home! I hate being alone,” she’d sobbed to Dominic—her words were barely comprehensible.

“Yeah, I’m cool.” She shrugged and packed her backpack, hoping he’d get the hint she was ready to end their conversation.

“I miss you.” He blurted the words out, and she stopped.

The zipper to her backpack fell from her fingers. She sighed because she missed him too, but not in the way he wanted her to. She missed his friendship because of Autumn’s absence, but that was it.

“That’s very sweet of you Eric.” It was lame, but she’d never had to let a guy down.

Those were the things Autumn helped her with.

“Look... I know you had a big crush on Dough.” His voice was strained, almost as if he were embarrassed for her. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you—to say something, but I could never find the right time.”

Her heart sped up as she jerked her head back.

“Oh, is that so?”

“You know...” He swallowed, preparing himself to continue. “I grew up around dudes like him and they usually only want one thing. They feed off having girls like you chase behind them, doing everything for them.”

Claudette laughed. “Eric, what kind of girl do you take me as?”

She grabbed her phone from the stack of books she had it propped against.

“Claudette, I think you’re a sweetheart. I just hated to see you crying behind somebody that was probably only trying to fuck,” he rambled. “I mean hopefully he got locked up before it even went that far, but you looked at dude with stars in your eyes. He loved that shit.”

Maybe he thought he was gaining something by bashing Dominic to make himself look like the better man but he was no better.

“That’s funny,” she replied.

“I’m not trying to hurt your feelings. I’m just being honest. I mean, I tolerated him because of you, but the dude is a lost cause.”

“Eric, I can see what you’re trying to do here and I’m not going to entertain it or agree with anything you’re saying,” she said through clenched teeth. “Let me let you go. I appreciate the help.”

“Claudette, just listen to me for a minute. I just hate that that dude had you chasing after him like some lapdog all the time.”

He wouldn’t take heed to her warnings.

“He’s pathetic for that. I’d give you—”

“Let’s get one thing clear... the father of my child is not pathetic or whatever other disgusting word that you’ve associated with him in your delusional mind.” Her fingers shook while she gripped the phone. “I don’t find anything pathetic about a man that would give up his life for me. A man whose shoes you could never walk a mile in. A man who was taking care of an entire household while you were still at home being coddled by your mommy and daddy. Don’t you ever fix your mouth to say those things about him ever again.”

The tears from that morning came back.

“You breaking my heart Clo’. You have to maintain. I know you got it in you. You one of the strongest people I know.” Dominic’s voice had cracked.

“I’ll even do you a favor and pretend you never said what you said. I won’t speak a word of it to him, because if he ever found out what you really thought of me, he’d make you regret every word.” Eric’s smug expression left. “Next time you talk shit about the person I love, I can promise you I won’t be as considerate as I was this time.”

“Claudette I-I didn’t know. I didn’t know you were pregnant. I just assumed that—”

“That I was some little lapdog for a thug that wouldn’t mind bragging about how he fucked another dumb college girl.” Her lips trembled. “Yeah, you *thought*.”

She hung up, unable to tolerate any more of his wild assumptions about herself or Dominic.

Her heart pumped as she tried to calm down.

There were only two people she could call to vent to—one of them seldom looked her way anymore, and the other couldn’t readily accept calls and would have homicidal thoughts after hearing Eric’s words. She took deep breaths, remembering the baby she carried and the emotional rollercoaster she’d been on throughout the day. Her hand went to her stomach where she rubbed, hoping she hadn’t disturbed her.

Her:

She thought back to the look on Dominic’s face when he’d reiterated that she was carrying a girl. He was smiling with a scruffy face, because he needed to shave. His hair was long and wild, but he looked like he was already in love.

“Eric text me and said you went off on him.” Autumn sat up in her bed and looked at Claudette.

Her light brown hair was braided back and covered in a wig cap. The only thing on in the room was the television playing some reality show full of washed up rappers and their spouses.

It was late and Claudette’s butt ached from sitting on the wooden stool behind the desk in the computer lab. She’d only gotten off ten minutes before, taking her time while walking back to their room.

“Oh, he’s already getting his *I hate Claudette* team together?” she asked, kicking off her shoes and going into their bathroom.

“Hold up!” She heard Autumn getting out of her bed. “Now I know you know better.”

Claudette sat on the toilet, relieving herself. “I don’t even feel like talking about it. He deserved whatever it was I even said to him.”

Pregnancy brain *was* real. She could only remember bits and pieces of her angry tirade, but not the full thing. By the look on his face when she hung up, she knew she’d torn into him.

Autumn’s feet pitter-pattered across the carpet of their bedroom floor.

“Hell yeah he deserved it.” She came around the corner and into the bathroom like she wasn’t sitting on the toilet. “You should’ve called me.”

Her eyes widened.

“Called you?” The stream of pee she let out trickled to a halt. “You haven’t even been talking to me.”

“So?” Autumn crossed her arms. “How dare he even fix his funky mouth to say that shit to you?”

“Oh.” Claudette reached for the toilet paper. “He told you what he said to me?”

“Yeah, the Eric version.” Autumn rolled her eyes. “Niggas like him love to play the Mr. Good Guy role, like it’s supposed to make you drop your draws because he does corny shit like give you foot rubs and FaceTime you every day like a damn pest.”

She almost dropped the wad of tissue from her hand at Autumn’s words. She laughed, clutching her stomach.

“You’re laughing, but I’m dead serious and I hope you tell Dominic everything he said.”

Claudette wiped herself, too fatigued to even care that Autumn was still in her personal space.

“You don’t even like Dominic.” She rolled her eyes and flushed the toilet.

Autumn moved back to let her stand, watching her go to the sink and wash her hands. She leaned against the frame of the door as Claudette dried her hands on the oversized shirt she wore. She accidentally pulled the fabric against her, exposing her tiny mound of a stomach.

“I heard y’all on the phone this morning,” Autumn whispered.

Claudette shrugged, opening the glass door of their shower and turning the knob to the hottest setting.

“Yeah... I was having a moment.” She sighed and closed the door back. “Next time I’ll go downstairs.”

“I’m sorry.” She sounded like she was choking on her words as they came out. “I was just trying to look out for you.”

Claudette squatted down to pull open the cabinet beneath their sink. She tried to move through the tears that wanted to fall because she was sick of crying.

“I-I didn’t know how bad you were hurt until I heard you this morning.” Autumn moved further into the bathroom, standing behind her. “My issue with Dominic isn’t a personal one. I just thought you deserved better, that’s all. I was only speaking from my experience, but I realized something...”

Claudette's throat burned as she grabbed a towel from the cabinet—still unable to turn around.

“What's that?” she asked.

“I have to let you live your own life. I can't control your actions or who you fall in love with.” She reached down and pulled the towel from Claudette's hands, sitting it on the bathroom vanity. “I may not like him, but I know you love him and that's enough for me to fall back.”

She stood and turned to face Autumn whose cheeks were wet with tears. Instead of hugging her, Autumn's hands reached out.

“My job is to be there for you and my little niece or nephew—not to control you.” She put both hands around her stomach. “I'm sorry I wasn't there.”

She cradled her stomach as they cried together.

“I still want to pull up on Eric,” Autumn choked out, wiping at her tears.

Claudette fell forward into her arms, laughing. “Don't worry... I don't think he's dumb enough to try anything else.”

They sat on the floor of their bathroom for hours after that, marveling at Claudette's tiny stomach. There were no shouts of joy about her pregnancy, just quiet worries shared between the two of them and a vow from Autumn that she'd step in until Dominic was released.

A spring semester had changed the trajectory of their lives and worries they were supposed to avoid for another three years were materializing right before their eyes.

“DID YOU READ over those DMs I printed out for you?” Claudette asked.

She sounded distracted, and he wondered what had her attention that morning.

“Yeah, I looked at ‘em.” He played with the cord of the phone, twisting it around his pointer finger.

“But did you read them ‘Nic?” He heard her moving around like she was in a hurry.

“I did, but I’m not worried about that right now.”

Claudette had stuck printed pages from his Instagram’s direct messages behind the baby’s sonogram. There were multiple ones, some from the same person. All of them were requesting a chance to meet with him about his music. They kept reiterating how they had no other way to contact him and how interested they were in his talent. He didn’t trust things like that.

“And why is that?” She stopped moving.

He knew he’d grasped her attention. Other people would have brushed off his indifference or berated him and kept on with whatever was distracting them, but she always made time to listen to him. She was the only person who knew about his wants, his fears, and his deepest regrets.

“Cause I don’t trust people like that. Who knows, it could be some fake shit,” he said. “My main focus is you and the baby. All that is just a distraction.”

“Nic, I highly doubt it’s fake. You’re still getting checks in the mail from music streams. People are listening to you.”

It was true. Some of the other inmates in his pod told him that their boys on the outside saw his music video. He knew it was no one but Claudette that had uploaded it online. He hadn't confronted her about it—not even when she brought up that the mail that she'd gotten from Josiah was mostly checks from streaming platforms or when she brought up that there were new messages in his booking email.

He sighed and leaned against the wall. "I'll look at 'em again."

Their relationship was now just a stream of early morning phone calls. He could call her at other times during the day, but he didn't want to deplete the money she and Josiah kept in his account. So, he tortured himself with fifteen minute phone calls that were nothing more than brief check-ins—hardly enough time to satisfy either of them.

It felt like so long since he'd touched her or seen her up close. Sometimes his head pounded from frustration because he tried so hard to remember small things about her, like the way her eyelashes curled around her round eyes or even just the way her small hands looked. Those were things he used to have committed to his memory—now they were slowly starting to vanish.

"I'm just saying, don't write them off. These could be legitimate opportunities," she replied.

"Mhm, Jo told me he saw the baby." He changed the subject and turned toward the open space of the pod.

The air smelled of the mystery meat they were serving for breakfast. He couldn't remember the last time he'd ate breakfast because he'd reserved that time for Claudette.

"He did *not* see the baby," she sputtered out with a laugh. "He saw my stomach, and it's very tiny."

He smiled at the way she downplayed that she was showing because she knew that his stomach knotted at the thought of Josiah seeing her growing belly before he had.

"Still—he saw it." Dominic looked down while running his fingers through the long strands of coarse hair that

sprouted from his head. “You spent the night over there?”

She admitted to him she slept in his bed some nights. Diane was still angry at him, but she’d come back around to Claudette.

“Yeah, I did,” she said, not divulging any more information.

“What you do over there anyway?”

He often wondered about her in his space without him. He knew she’d been over there even when they weren’t speaking. It seemed like she enjoyed being with Diane—something he didn’t understand.

“Just hang out...” Her voice drifted off.

“With my aunt?” he asked, half of his mouth lifted in a smirk.

“Yeah, I help her cook and we talk—stuff like that.” She was still being evasive.

“Bout what?”

“Different things... you, your mom, Josiah, my grandpa...” she rattled on. “She’s not so bad, you know?”

“Never said she was,” he replied. “What she be telling you about me and my mom?”

He’d already told Claudette more than he should have, and he didn’t want Diane to taint her image of Eve any further than it already was—some things were best left buried in the past. Claudette had already forced him to unearth enough skeletons.

“Baby?”

“Yeah Clo’?”

“I see the good in Eve too,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone. “I try not to judge her harshly for what she did to you. She was broken, but she loved you. I know she did and because of that, I can forgive her.”

He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and tried to breathe through the pressure in his chest. One of the bad

things about her knowing him inside and out was the way she read him with ease—even over the phone.

“I gotta go,” she added. “But can you just hear me out?”

“Bout what?” He took a deep breath and inhaled the stale air of the jail.

“Promise me you’ll read the things I sent you and open your mind to new possibilities. There’s power in the stories you tell.” She paused for a moment. “Just because they aren’t as polished or as pretty as others doesn’t mean they don’t deserve a chance. Do you hear me?”

“I-I hear you...”

“I need you to understand that me and Evie are your new world. There are certain things you need to leave behind because she deserves to have a daddy that’s present. We deserve a life with you and if sharing your stories will guarantee that—I’m behind you one thousand percent.”

“Evie?” He almost choked.

“Yes, I want to name her after her grandma, Eve.”

He didn’t know what to say.

“Despite all of her faults, she molded you into the man that you are today. She may have left you prematurely, but she’s in the life that’s growing inside of me. She’s with me and you.”

He believed her. It was no coincidence they’d met, or that she played in his mind everyday afterward. He’d bound himself to Claudette, absorbing every part of her.

The only woman he had the same connection with was Eve.

“My girl ain’t believe me when I told her I was locked up with you.” Rodney grasped Dominic’s hand, sliding his palm against it and letting go with a snap.

They were in the rec yard getting their one hour of allotted free-time. It was a scorching day in July, but they could hardly see the sunlight because of the chain-link fencing that enclosed them in the space.

“Why she ain’t believe that?” Dominic laughed, looking up at Rodney’s brown face marred with scars.

He was tall and looked imposing, but he was the most laid-back inmate in their pod. He was a jokester—often making light of the terrible conditions of the jail.

“She say she can’t go nowhere without hearing somebody bumping your shit.”

He’d heard similar comments over the past week, but he had no clue about anything that happened outside the walls of the jail except for what Mo and Josiah told him. His conversations with Claudette centered on the tiny world they’d cultivated with only their little family.

“For real?” He raised his eyebrows, pulling his head back. “Would’ve thought they forgot about a nigga.”

“Forget about you? Hell nah. They waiting on you to come home.” They walked in sync with each other, trying to shake the sluggishness from their limbs.

“Shit... I can’t wait to get home myself. Seem like I been in this bitch for years.”

“You know that’s how it goes,” Rodney replied. “But you have a big-time lawyer, right?”

“He cool.” Dominic raised his thin shirt and swiped at the sweat that fell on his forehead.

Quentin was working overtime to get him out, but with a baby on the way, time was of the essence. The more time he missed with Claudette and *Evie*, the more his mind played games with him. It taunted him throughout the night, making him think about Claudette sleeping alone. During the day he

thought of her navigating to work and class—tired and by herself.

“He doing what he can. It ain’t like he got the best client. A nigga been down so many times it’ll be a miracle if they give me another chance,” he added.

“Don’t talk like that bro. I been down bad—even worse than I am now, and somehow God made a way.” Rodney stopped, pulling his own shirt above his head. “You been praying right?”

More than he had ever prayed in his life. He prayed for Claudette and baby Evie the most, and then he prayed for himself. He didn’t know if he was doing it right, but he was trying.

“Yeah man. Maybe God will have mercy on my fucked up ass and get me home to see my baby being born.” He shook his head at the prospect of Claudette being in labor without him.

She had about twenty-three more weeks to go, but he could sit for longer than that. There were no guarantees in jail.

“A baby?” Rodney smiled.

“Yeah, I’m gone be somebody’s daddy.” Dominic looked at the concrete pillar above them, trying to picture baby Evie. “That’s some wild shit, right?”

He wanted her to look just like Claudette—with deep brown skin and hair so wild he wouldn’t know what to do with it.

He was still in awe that he’d have a child because the life he lived had no room for love or for innocent babies. Claudette had eased in and clung to him, unaware of the stupidity he was often involved in—now she had a front-row seat to it.

“Nah, not wild at all bro,” Rodney replied. “Some of the wildest been tamed by their seeds. It’s all part of your growth.”

Dominic nodded, looking at the other inmates that played basketball on the only goal with just a bare ring for a hoop.

“You worried, huh?” he asked.

“Yeah... some dudes don’t live by the same code we do.”

“Not at all,” Rodney replied. “But niggas know you solid and he ain’t ‘bout nothing. Any dude that beef through the internet not getting active.”

Dominic watched an inmate jump up and attempt a layup. He swallowed, thinking of the night he and Mo held Marco up. It was the only crime he committed that he ever thought about afterward.

“We all been there before Dough. You a stepper, so you saw an opportunity and took that shit. That’s just the way the game played.” He shrugged. “If he was a real one he would’ve approached you like a man and handled it. No internet involved and no talk about your family.”

Rodney sighed and shook his head.

“None of this shit even matter now though, because you ’bout to leave this life behind for better things and the rest of us that ain’t got shit to lose—we gone handle him.” He held out his hand toward Dominic with a defiant look on his face.

“Don’t even trip.” They grasped hands, sliding them across each other again. “We got you.”

He knew Rodney was good for his word because they were similar men. They took care of family—blood or no blood. Dominic had done the same for many of his brothers. Some he met in jail like Rodney and others from his own neighborhood.

Afterwards, Rodney joined the other inmates playing pickup basketball, leaving Dominic to himself. He leaned forward against the chain-link fence, curling his fingers through the holes. He tried to soak up as much of the outside air as he could, but he couldn’t get enough. Jail had a way of suffocating him. As soon as he entered the doors, he felt stifled. It was a game of mental endurance that he’d learned to play at a young age, and no matter how good he thought he was, he could never beat it.

He wondered what he would tell Evie when she got old enough to ask questions about his life and understand the seedy things he’d done to take care of himself and others. He

hoped none of it would matter and that she'd still look at him in the same way her mother did—like he was the sun.

GEORGE'S PICKUP TRUCK was so old, it screeched anytime he made a turn. Only two buttons on the radio worked, so it'd been playing the same station since Claudette was a little girl. The cloth seats were stained with grime that had settled into the crooks and creases. During the summer months they rode with the windows down because the AC never cooled enough. If anything happened to it, he would've probably held a funeral for it.

"You say I need to make a right up here?" he asked, looking at her.

Her elbow rested on top of the open window and she cradled her head in her hand, savoring the fresh air.

"Yeah, up at the next light." She pointed ahead and turned back to look at the puffy white clouds that coated the sky.

He called out of the blue to apologize for the way he reacted when she told him about her failing grade. She'd cried before he could even get the words out, because Evie made her cry about any and everything. Dominic liked to joke she was the black version of Moaning Myrtle from *Harry Potter*.

"*You watch Harry Potter?*" she'd asked, holding back a laugh.

"*Hell yeah. Don't front like them Slytherin niggas wasn't tough.*"

She had clutched her round stomach and laughed so loud Autumn threw a pillow her way.

"*You laughing, but I'm for real. Slytherin had Hogwarts on lock.*"

She grinned to herself and wondered what he was doing in that very moment.

She invited George to come visit her to celebrate the end of her summer semester. He'd commented on how her round face looked more cherub than usual and how much he'd missed pinching her cheeks. She hid her round stomach underneath a loose fitting top and high-waisted jeans.

They had spent the day together doing the things he liked most, like having breakfast at the Flying Biscuit and trekking into downtown Atlanta to visit the College Football Hall of Fame.

"You give directions like that dang on daddy of yours," he grumbled and shifted gears. "Always waiting until the last minute to tell me when to turn like I'm some kind of mind reader."

She chuckled and reached forward to turn up the volume on the radio. It was stuck on a station that only played gospel music, but she didn't mind it. It reminded her of the Sunday mornings she spent with Diane, helping her cook.

She would tell her about the crazy things Dominic and Josiah did as young boys while they listened to Kim Burrell and Shirley Caesar. They'd laugh and reminisce until the food finished, and afterward she'd help Diane write out the announcements for the morning service.

"Where we going anyway?" He hit the brakes, stopping at another red light. "I want to catch Zaxby's before they close."

"Grandpa, I'm sure Zaxby's closes sometime tonight. We're not going to another state, you know that, right?"

"Could've fooled me." He threw up his hand, and she shook her head. "Now, where do I go?"

"Just keep straight old man." She nodded her head to the song playing and went back to staring at the clouds.

They were halfway to their surprise destination and George grew antsy by the second. He hated surprises *and* following directions, so he was practically having a meltdown.

His truck putt-putted along the street, shaking at every turn and pothole he hit. It was early in the afternoon, so they would be finished with his surprise well before Zaxby's closed.

"When daddy was born, were you scared?" she asked, glancing at him.

His reddish brown complexion was sunburnt, and he wore Wranglers and a button-down.

"Course I was," he said, unsurprised by her question because she always asked him innocuous things about himself or Bryson.

"I ain't know a gosh darn thing about being a daddy." He shook his head. "I was a knucklehead. I liked to hang out with my buddies and get drunk. Didn't even know how to change a pamper."

He strummed his fingers along the steering wheel and switched gears again, making the truck jerk.

"What about grandma?" she asked. "Was she scared?"

"Yeah, but she was always more mature than I was. I swear it was like she'd been here before. She knew everything," he sighed. "Smartest woman I ever met."

"Turn on this road." Claudette sat up and pointed.

It was full of cracks and patched potholes with trees overgrown in some areas and an industrial building sitting off to the right.

"Now make a right, right here."

Her palms grew sweaty, and she sighed, thanking God for George's poor eyesight when they passed the sign at the entrance, but she'd forgotten that that wasn't the only one as they traveled further down the road. He squinted, trying to make out the words.

"What in the... where are we girl?"

The truck rocked over a speed bump.

She swallowed, ignoring his question. They rolled over three more sets of speed bumps until they ended up in the

crowded parking lot of the jail. Her heart almost beat out of her chest.

He pulled into a parking spot, shoving the gear in park. His head swiveled back and forth as he tried to understand why they were in the parking lot of the Fulton County Jail.

“Are you gonna tell me what’s going on?” He turned back toward her with a frown on his face.

She wiped her sweaty palms against his stained cloth seats and unbuckled her seatbelt.

“Grandpa... there’s something I need to tell you.” Her fingernails dug into his seat.

“Okay... I’m listening.”

“I-I’ve been keeping something from you.” Her stomach fluttered and she wasn’t sure if it was her nerves or Evie.

“Claudette Ardell, you’d better tell me why you have me at a darn jail. Are you in some trouble?”

“No,” she said with a whine.

If Dominic had been there, he’d scold her and tell her not to whine. He hated when she did that.

“Well, what is it Claudette?” His voice grew louder and his head swung back and forth from her to the jail’s entrance.

“I’m pregnant.”

She didn’t know that it was possible to see the color drain from someone’s face. He stared at her with a stoic expression, and then he did the unexpected—he burst into laughter. He laughed so hard that he fell forward and slapped a hand on his round knee. He fell into the driver’s side door and laughed until nothing came out but a wheeze.

“Girl... stop messing with me. Now pull up that GPS nonsense on your phone and put in Zaxby’s so we can go eat.” He wiped the tears that had fallen from his eyes.

She reached down and pulled up her shirt, revealing her round stomach where Evie had been nestled throughout the day. It was the first time she’d ever heard George gasp.

“What in the...” He fell back against his seat. “You got to be shitting me! Pregnant?”

“What kind of damn school did I send you to?” he asked, placing a hand on his chest. “And you brought me to a damn jail to tell me this Claudette?”

He was getting louder, and she fought her hardest not to cry because they were scheduled to visit Dominic within the next thirty minutes, and he’d have a fit if she went in crying.

“I brought you here because... because... it’s where her daddy is.” She pointed a shaky finger toward the jail. “He’s in there.”

George stuck a hand on the gear stick and pressed on the brake of the truck.

“Grandpa, no!” she shouted. “We have to go inside.”

She’d planned for that day for the past two weeks. Autumn and Dominic thought it was a terrible idea—both having their own reasons. Autumn thought it was too risky. She claimed it could have sent George to an early grave. Dominic said that it was the most pussy way to meet her grandpa.

“Baby, I’m supposed to go to him as a man and explain what I did. I’m locked up like a fucking animal and you bringing him to see me like this. It’s bad enough that you got to come up here while you carrying my child. That shit is embarrassing,” he’d said.

She covered George’s hand with hers and tried to force the gear back in park. It was stupid, but they couldn’t leave.

“Stop it!” He flung her hand off and put the gear back in park. “I can’t believe this shit. Have you lost your mind while away at that school? Did somebody hit you upside your head or something? There’s got to be a reason for this.”

She reached forward and shoved her phone in her bag, knowing she couldn’t bring it in. There was hardly anything she could bring in—just herself, Evie, and her ID.

“Nobody hit me upside my head grandpa,” she said, fishing through her backpack for her ID.

“I ain’t going in no damn jail, Claudette. I ain’t never been in one before and I ain’t going in one now.” He shook his head back and forth.

She found the ID, grasping it in her hand, and reaching for the door handle. She breathed heavily, unsure of what to say or do to get him inside with her.

“Please, grandpa,” she wheezed out. “We can’t be late going in or they won’t let me see him.”

Her eyes burned from holding back her tears, and he still hadn’t moved. His face balled up in anger.

“I can’t believe this shit,” he said. “Bryson probably rolling over in his grave.”

He hit the steering wheel. “In jail? You go and get pregnant while you supposed to be here getting an education, and it’s with some no-good punk that’s in jail!”

She had never seen him so angry—not even when she’d cracked the screen of his brand new flat-screen playing volleyball in the house.

“How you even meet this loser?” He turned to her, wiping at his face. “Have you even thought any of this shit through? Life ain’t gone be kind to a little black girl with a baby in tow and no daddy around.”

She squeezed the hard ends of the ID card. The pain of it jabbing into the soft folds of her hand hardly registered to her. She thought about all of those things, but she’d pushed them into the back of her mind.

“Grandpa... I’m begging you. Please, just come in,” she rasped. “I can’t go in without you.”

Seeing George inside of a jail was like being in the *Twilight Zone*. He couldn't wipe the distraught expression off of his face, and his movements were clumsy and robotic at the same time. They hardly talked to each other except for when they took the elevator up to the floor where the jail held visitation.

"How in the hell did you even meet this dude?" he asked again in bewilderment.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and stared at the floor while she rested a hand on her stomach where Evie did somersaults like she could sense the tension between the two of them.

"It's a long story grandpa," she replied, looking straight ahead at the elevator doors.

It really wasn't a long story—just a complicated one full of ups and downs. She could hardly believe that any of it happened until she would look down and see her protruding stomach.

"This dude must be a piece of work." George shook his head with his mouth turned down in disgust.

Claudette wanted to defend Dominic, but her words stayed tucked inside of her, wanting to burst out—she knew better though.

They stayed quiet until they sat in the cold metal chairs in front of the camera in the visitation room. George kept shifting his body and turning his head to stare at the other people that roamed the room visiting their loved ones.

Her leg jumped up and down as she waited on Dominic's face to pop on the screen. She gripped the phone to her ear as if it would make him come on the screen faster. She felt George's hard eyes on the side of her face.

Just as her palms were growing moist, the camera beeped and Dominic was staring at the two of them. She sucked in a breath at the weary expression he wore. He looked tired yet handsome—even while in desperate need of a haircut and shave.

“Hi...” she said, sitting up to get closer to the screen.

He smiled first and then his eyes shifted over to George, who sat stoically next to her.

“Hi, my favorite girl.” He talked to her but looked at George. “Give him the phone baby.”

GEORGE WAS STIFF, and his expression gave away his thoughts. He frowned a deep frown that drew his mouth downward. Even the low quality of the camera couldn't hide his disappointment.

“You know how this looks young man?” he asked.

He had a deep southern drawl that matched his outer appearance. The phone stuck to his ear stiffly and Claudette scooted closer to him, trying to hear what was being said between the two of them.

“Yes sir. I do.”

Dominic knew better than to say anything different.

“I can't believe this.” He sat forward like he was attempting to get a better look at Dominic. “Can't believe I'm here right now having to do this.”

“I promised her daddy that if anything happened to him I'd do everything in my power to take care of her.” He kept the same hardened expression on his face. “So when he died... I took care of her real good. I ain't no millionaire, but she always been comfortable—ain't never had to want for a thing. In return, she hardly gave me any trouble. She a good girl.”

He choked on his words a little, and Dominic struggled to keep listening.

“I still remember the day she was born.” His voice cracked. “The nurses kept fussing over her, saying she was the prettiest baby that had been born that day—like a lil' ole' chocolate baby doll with a bunch of hair.”

“This girl been my partner in crime since she was a lil’ bitty thing.” He shook his head. “I’m just tryna understand what a fella like you would want with my little girl. She bring me to a damn jail talking about she got a surprise for me and it turns out, it ain’t no surprise. It’s a damn nightmare.”

Dominic swallowed the heavy lump in his throat. Claudette reached forward for the phone but pulled back.

“I sent her to school to get an education, learn some responsibility, and maybe have a little fun. I’m old school, so I’d been hoping she’d meet a nice guy who’d treat her right. Somebody getting an education too.” He pulled the phone away from his mouth for a second and then moved it back. “But... but somewhere along the way she met you and I guess she fell in love or like. I’m still trying to figure that shit out.”

George had said so much that his head spun. He’d highlighted all the reasons he didn’t deserve Claudette or Evie. He’d done it politely, in a better way than what he would do if Evie ever brought home a guy like him.

He and Claudette came from different worlds and would have to learn how to navigate parenthood together. They both had come from broken homes, but she’d at least had a support system in George whereas he *was* his family’s support system.

“So now what? I guess I got to pick up the pieces you left scattered about. Take care of my granddaughter and your child while you sit in here for God knows what? ‘Cause she ain’t got no money to take care of no baby.”

“No,” Dominic replied sternly.

He kept having to remind himself that George wasn’t some nigga from the streets that was stepping on his toes. He was Claudette’s grandfather—his baby’s great-grandfather.

“With all due respect, sir, I can take care of my own.” He sat forward and looked at Claudette. “I ain’t never asked a motherfu— a person for nothing, and I don’t plan on starting now.”

Claudette gripped her stomach.

“Is that right? And how you plan on doing that?”

“It ain’t about the how,” Dominic replied. “It’s the fact that I’m good on my word.”

“Young man, it’s most definitely about the *how*. I’m sitting in a jail talking to you, so I know whatever *how* you talking about ain’t legal.” George raised his finger, pointing at him through the camera.

“The safety of my grandchildren is the most important thing to me. You got that?”

It was the most important thing to Dominic too.

“Yes sir,” he replied, looking down at the floor.

The line went quiet. Neither of them said anything else. They were just breathing and letting the time draw down. He knew Claudette was crying because it was all she did. She cried when she was happy, when she was sad, when she was excited—this time she just seemed confused.

He and Polo had talked about the possible outcomes of the visit since Claudette first told him what she’d planned to do. They tried to come up with a response for every scenario, but it hadn’t mattered because you could never prepare enough for something so fragile.

George was angry, and he had every right to be because he probably had Claudette’s future planned since she was a toddler. She was supposed to marry a lawyer or a doctor and have an easy but fulfilling job like being a teacher. She’d only work because she wanted to, not because she had to. They’d have two kids—a boy and a girl, and she’d drive some soccer mom SUV. Those were probably George’s thoughts, but they were Dominic’s too.

“I know I ain’t the guy you planned for her to fall in love with,” he mumbled, watching her wipe her tears. “Truthfully, I ain’t plan on falling in love with her either.”

“Is that right?” George asked tersely.

“She make it easy to love her, but I’m sure you know that. You been there all her life.” Claudette was looking at him like it was killing her she couldn’t hear his voice. “I ain’t have no nice childhood. I didn’t even finish high school. My mama’s

dead. I don't know who my daddy is—she ain't know either. I've done a lot of shit I ain't proud of. I've made stupid decisions all my life. I'm full of anger. I'm tired. I been taking care of people since I was a lil' boy. Never had no parent to sit me down and show me how to do simple shit—explain to me what's right and what's wrong. I just got an aunt who like to bitch me out about the shit I do, but I can't even trust her to keep the lights on at home.

“But Claudette... she see the good in me when other people look at me and see nothing. She patient with me because she understand that I'm broken. And we both know it ain't her job to fix me, but damn if she don't patch up what she can.” He laid a hand on his heart. “I ain't even believe in love until she came along. It wasn't because I felt like I was too hard for it or nothing like that, it was because I ain't think I deserved for nobody to love me like she loves me. And to be truthful sir—I still don't.”

George's face softened some—not completely, but some. His shoulders sagged a little, and he looked at Dominic intensely.

He didn't know what had made him bare his soul to George. He guessed it was because Claudette had come from him, so he saw her within George.

“Her and that baby saved me. They saved my life.”

~End~

WINTER 2019

The furnace at Diane's never warmed the house enough. It was so awful that the hardwood floors held onto the cold and refused to let go even when the sun came out. Claudette was curled in a ball, dressed in two of Dominic's sweatshirts, leggings, and compression socks that Diane had bought her while out running errands. Her large stomach and the soft pregnancy pillow she slept with took up half of Dominic's small bed. Evie had finally calmed, and she'd just drifted off into a deep slumber when Diane flung the door open.

"Get up lil' girl," she said, walking to the window and pulling the cord of the blinds.

Light shone throughout the room, and Claudette groaned because she never let her sleep in. She laid still, hoping Diane would leave, but she didn't. She walked over to the bed and hovered over her.

"You know, Dominic used to pretend like he was sleep when I'd come wake him up for church." She brushed her wild hair back.

Since being pregnant, it had grown out into an enormous mass of coils that she couldn't tame. Diane sometimes combed it out and styled it into twists she'd wear for weeks at a time. The night before, Claudette had taken them out, leaving it in long crinkles she hadn't bothered to cover before falling asleep.

"You know what I used to do when he wouldn't get up?" she asked with a hint of amusement in her voice. "I used to pop the bottom of his feet."

Claudette felt her going toward her sock covered feet, and she shot up as fast as Evie would let her.

“I’m up!” she giggled.

“Mhm, hurry before Jo eat all the breakfast.” She coughed and walked towards the bedroom door.

“You cooked already?” Claudette tossed the Oakland Raiders blanket from her body and slid from the bed.

Her frame was still small, but her stomach kept growing. It was so large that it sometimes overtook her body and worried George. It hadn’t taken long for him to come around to Evie, but he still fussed about her parents. Dominic wasn’t Dominic, but *that no-good punk that had gotten his granddaughter pregnant* and he was convinced Claudette would work herself into an early labor juggling class, work, Dominic’s budding career and a pregnancy.

“Yup, we have to get on the road soon.” Claudette nodded, wiping the sleep from her eyes and shuffling to her feet. “Don’t worry, I’ll have your butt in there tonight. We can make your favorite.”

Dominic’s favorite things were now her favorite things. There weren’t many, just sweet cornbread, his music, and obsessing over each one of her pregnancy milestones.

She turned his room into a tiny haven for she and Evie. She had filled half of it with things for Evie—a bassinet, a treasure chest filled with her newborn clothing, boxes of diapers in every size, toys and bottles. She filled the other half with filing cabinets full of paperwork and plaques that rested against a wall. An iMac sat on the floor in the corner because she hadn’t had time to buy a desk to put it on. It was where she and Tony had spent sleepless nights piecing together Dominic’s mixtape. It was also where she’d met with Deon Conner, the man that had been messaging Dominic while he was away in jail.

He was an A&R for a distribution company interested in partnering with Dominic to release his music. Dominic didn’t receive an advance for millions of dollars like he would have

from a traditional record label, but he could keep full ownership of his music. The company was a small startup that gave Dominic—well, Claudette and Tony, free rein over his image and music.

She finally called Deon one day after arguing with Dominic for still believing in his music. She wanted to prove him wrong—show him that his music still mattered, so she sent Deon a message first, scheduling a time for them to talk over the phone. He'd answered expecting Dominic but let out a surprised laugh when he heard Claudette's raspy voice questioning his legitimacy.

He explained that they would do the distribution work and Dominic would only be responsible for churning out the music and splitting a part of his earnings with them. It worked because he remained independent with no ties to anyone. With the help of Deon and his company, Dominic's visibility skyrocketed. People that had already been fans of his work gobbled the new music they released. His new fans became obsessed with his sound and advocated for his release.

Claudette and Tony combed through hours of Dominic's recordings—only being able to work with what he created before he'd gone away. They even ventured back to the scratchy low-quality songs from when he was a teenager. Many of them weren't even songs, just Dominic playing around and talking into the microphone about the reckless life he lived. At her request, Tony chopped the recordings up and placed them as interludes throughout the mixtape. She'd woven her creative direction throughout the project.

She didn't even know that he'd recorded verses over the beat she made that night in Tony's basement until she happened across it while playing back some music Tony had left for her on a thumb drive. She sat on the floor of his room, propped against a wall, letting it play. His voice was slurred—it was scratchy and more gravelly than normal. She obsessed over it, replaying it over and over because he sounded so out of it. It personified his tortured soul and made her chest sink. She hated it, but it became one of the most streamed songs from his mixtape.

Claudette walked to the bathroom, sliding her feet across the cold floors with familiarity because Diane's home had become like a third home. She split her time between there, George's, and Autumn's off-campus apartment—she'd moved off of campus that fall at George's suggestion and reduced her course load to three online classes but kept her job at the campus library.

"You can't be living in no dorm with a baby on the way," he'd grumbled one day while they chatted in the kitchen of his bungalow.

She'd shrugged because she had hardly been in her dorm during the last few weeks of her summer on campus. She'd spent them at Diane's, engrossed in whatever she had going on.

Her body sagged with exhaustion as she entered the bathroom. She rushed through her shower, trying to ignore the rush of butterflies in her stomach that mingled with Evie's kicks. She brushed her teeth in the same manner, hoping time would speed up. Afterwards she pulled on a sweater dress that hugged her bump and sneakers by some designer whose name she couldn't pronounce. The outfit had been a gift from Autumn that she'd brought back from her winter ski trip in the Swiss Alps with Kel and his boyfriend.

"Finally!" Josiah yelled as she walked into the kitchen.

He leapt from his seat and crouched to her stomach.

"Hi Evie baby... I missed you." He hugged her stomach and Claudette rolled her eyes.

"I don't even get a hello?" she asked, placing a hand on his head and nudging him away.

"Stop tripping, you know I missed you too." He stood up and wrapped his arms around her, squeezing. "But I missed my baby more."

They laughed together at the way he'd always claimed Evie as his knowing it made Dominic red with anger. He FaceTimed her multiple times a week to talk to her stomach. When he'd come home to visit, they would sit for hours and

watch in awe as Evie rumbled around when they placed headphones on her stomach with Dominic's music playing.

Josiah unwrapped himself from her and they sat at the table. Diane stood behind the kitchen island, pretending to ignore the both of them while she read her copy of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Her half empty coffee mug sat beside her, stained with red lipstick.

Claudette's food sat on the table untouched. It still held some warmth, even though she was late to breakfast. There was bacon, sausage, pancakes and even fruit that she wasted no time grabbing. They ate in silence, each of them in their own worlds, occupied by their own thoughts, anticipating the day.

Afterward, they piled into Dominic's car. Diane sat in the back, bickering about Josiah's driving while Claudette sat in the front seat, cradling her stomach. It seemed like they always drove that way. Diane would eventually be eager for a cigarette and Josiah would lecture her about it, telling her she needed to give up smoking. Claudette would nod off while Josiah zoomed through the streets, telling them about his struggles as a student athlete in "the sticks".

Not too long after they left, Claudette's head fell to the side as Josiah hit a speed bump, waking her up. He rolled over the next two in the same way.

"They there to slow you down, damn," Diane said. "You see 'em and speed the hell up."

Josiah laughed, hitting the gas, surging them into the full parking lot and rolling to a stop in one of the empty spaces at the very front of the jail.

The last time Claudette had been there, she was with a distraught George who'd cried once they made it back inside of his truck. This time the occasion was less somber because it was Dominic's 243rd day in jail and his last.

The judge and the prosecutor agreed to reduce his charges, because his lawyer could prove self-defense for his use of the gun in the attack on Marco. He pled to a lesser charge and

received time served but would be placed on house arrest to finish up the rest of the time the judge had given him for the physical assault and his previous offenses he'd been out on bail for. He'd gotten out in enough time to experience her last month of pregnancy and to see the birth of their child, even though he'd have to get permission to do so. Mo and Nate got decent public defenders with the help of Dominic's lawyer. The time they received was shorter than Dominic's and they were released a month prior.

The three of them sat in the warm car, chatting about nothing while watching the front entrance. Claudette had learned a great deal about patience. She was antsy, but still able to keep herself composed, knowing that he'd be walking out any moment. It was like she'd waited a lifetime for him.

He'd been away, unable to experience any of the success he'd gained. He'd never met Deon in person, done an interview that wasn't from behind the walls of the jail, or heard his music being used in viral videos. As soon as he left that building he'd be entering a new life that he'd never imagined he would ever be able to live in.

Just as her eyes grew heavy again, she spotted his lanky frame swaggering from the entrance dressed in the same clothes he wore the night he was arrested—jeans, a plain white t-shirt that hugged his frame, and white sneakers. He walked as if the cold weather didn't faze him. His belongings were in a sealed brown paper bag this time. It hung at his side as he looked around.

“Aw shit...” Josiah said, clapping his hands. “My nigga free.”

Claudette shoved the door open and power walked toward him; her strides weren't as long as she wanted them to be because Evie slowed everything that she did.

He spotted her and the bag fell from his hands. His arms were wide as she hurried to him. He smelled different but felt familiar, and her body still responded to him like it always had. She was buzzing with energy; her mouth craved him.

“Look at you,” he said with his mouth on the shell of her ear. “I been waiting eight months to touch you.”

In the car she couldn't stop touching him and he couldn't stop staring at her stomach. They sat in the backseat, bunched together. Her touches were innocent—she'd brush her fingers through his hair that had grown out, pull at the small goatee he'd grown, and pull at his fingers.

He was pensive and guarded, but still let her touch him. They rode with the windows down at his request. It was freezing, but his arm dangled out the back window. His other hand sat on top of her stomach where he caressed Evie.

He hardly talked. She hovered around him while a staff member at the private company that would monitor his ankle bracelet, attached it to him. She wrapped her arms around his neck while they listened to them explain the conditions of his home confinement. He nodded, hardly acknowledging the guidelines, as if he'd known them by heart already.

They paid, signed paperwork, and left. Back in the car, his arm hung back out of the window and she curled underneath him. Her mouth itched to chatter about any and everything that he'd missed, but she followed Diane and Josiah's lead, leaving him to his own thoughts.

Diane's house hadn't changed since he'd left. It still smelled like years of cooking and Marlboro Lights. He roamed down the hallway with his paper bag of belongings and the heavy feeling of the ankle monitor attached to him. The door to his room was ajar, so he nudged it forward. It swung open and exposed what used to be his room.

Coconut and ivory had settled into the air. Claudette had slept in his bed and threw the comforter around. She stacked Evie's stuff on one side of the room and the other side held things that he couldn't quite make out—files, a computer, frames that rested against a wall. His feet wouldn't move past the threshold because the stark changes had thrown him off. They made his stomach clench because they felt so right.

“You can go in.” Claudette's raspy voice snuck up behind him.

He blinked hard, feeling her pull the bag from his hand. She pushed him, forcing his feet to move.

“Don't worry. I know how anal you can be about messes. I'll clean up,” she whispered, sitting the bag on the floor by the bed.

She actually didn't know that he wasn't anal at all. It just seemed that way because he was hardly ever in the space long enough to create a mess.

He ambled in, going straight for Evie's things. A pile of tiny pink onesies were on his nightstand. He thumbed through them, picking one up and bringing it to his nose. It was so small; it felt like a swatch of fabric in his hand.

“Mo and his grandmother dropped those off yesterday.” He inhaled the newborn scent already embedded in the fibers. “He said he picked them out.”

He folded it and placed it back onto the pile, moving on to the bassinet that sat next to the bed. His fingers touched the frilly white lace that clung from it.

“Roc bought that.” She went over to the bed and he turned to stare at her.

It was all he could do since she'd ran into his arms. The change in her appearance fucked with his head. She was so tiny with a huge round stomach that he wanted to cradle and kiss. Her hair was out like he loved, but there was much more of it. She was glowing so much he could almost see her aura.

His space wasn't his anymore. It was her and Evie's, but he didn't care. It was the thing about her he loved most—how she'd always been comfortable in his space and molded it to fit herself in it.

She shook the comforter, pulling out two of his hoodies tangled within it.

“Deon wants you to call him when you get settled.” She threw the hoodies on the floor in a pile and tossed the comforter and sheets on top of them. “Me and Diane are gonna go wash clothes and get groceries in a few. What do you want to eat? I know you're probably starving. Don't forget to call Mo, he's probably having withdrawals.”

She rolled her eyes when mentioning Mo and stopped to catch her breath.

“Oh! My grandpa bought Evie's crib, but I need you and Jo to put it together.” She waddled toward the pile and scooped it in her arms. “It has a thousand pieces and apparently you need a power drill to do it. I opened the box and closed it right back.”

She talked a mile a minute like she'd been waiting to get him alone to unleash the most mundane to-do list he never thought he needed to hear. He didn't give a shit about any of what she'd said, because his only concern was being underneath her and Evie.

He smiled at the way her socked feet glided across the floor to his closet. She pulled the door open and reached around his safe to pull out a hamper that was already full of clothes. Her clothes were mixed in with his and she'd turned his safe into a shoe rack. She moved so fast that he was almost dizzy trying to keep up. Ignoring his stares, she moved around his stoic body and continued working like he was encroaching on her weekend routine.

He was an outsider in his own space.

He stared as she sorted the laundry and piled the clothes back inside the hamper. Before he knew it, she left. His eyes roamed the room again, stopping on the files in the corner. He walked over, shuffling through the papers, seeing his name on each one.

He hadn't had any say in his career since being away. Claudette had taken over, and he had only done what he was told to appease her.

"They been waiting, you know that, right?" Josiah asked, walking in the room.

"Who?" He turned to look at him, his voice sounding strange to himself because he hadn't said much of anything since they'd picked him up.

"Your fans." Josiah smiled, moving toward the framed pictures that rested against the wall.

He picked one up and turned it around. Dominic's eyes studied it. He hardly understood what he was reading. He recognized his name and the name of one of his songs from the mixtape Tony and Claudette put together. There were dates and distinctions pertaining to the song, but he still didn't get it.

"What's that?" He squatted down to touch the glass on the frame.

"It's your success boy." Josiah pointed to the platinum record emblem at the top. "They just dropped this one off the other day. It's the second one. Clo' ain't lace you up?"

She hadn't, and he knew she'd done it to protect his sanity while being away.

"I been going to jail since I was a lil" boy Clo' and I ain't never had nothing to look forward to when I got out... just getting fucked up with my boys. Now I got you and Evie waiting on me and I think I'm losing it for real." His voice had quivered as he confessed to her.

He shook his head and glanced over at the picture of Eve for the first time since he'd walked in the room. Claudette had

placed her in a nicer, more expensive frame. Her smiling face seemed to be brighter.

“Nah, she didn’t.” He turned back to Jo.

“Well, you better get your head straight, ’cause this shit ain’t for play no more.” Josiah moved the certification against the wall where it rested before. “Once niggas find out you home, it’s over with.”

He hadn’t understood Josiah’s words until he was stretched out on Diane’s porch later that night. He’d bummed a Marlboro Light from her because his body had been craving the nicotine since he walked in the house and breathed the tobacco nestled everywhere except for his room. Smoke eased from his nostrils as he turned his phone on for the first time in almost a year.

It took a minute, but once it loaded, the notifications were never ending. Social media was like a new world. He took a pull of the cigarette while scrolling through the thousands of comments left by people from all over the world—people who once had no idea he existed.

“That’s a terrible habit.”

His mouth lifted into a smile, and he reached down, snuffing the cigarette on the concrete steps.

“Why you out here in the cold?” he asked, listening to her shuffle behind him.

“Cause you’re out here.”

He sat his phone to the side and stood, walking toward her.

It was late, and she was dressed for bed in his clothes. They had dinner that Diane cooked. She told him that Claudette was off the hook because she’d been working on an assignment for class. He watched them both in the kitchen like the outsider he now was. Claudette sat at the island that was clean for once, and Diane maneuvered around the kitchen. They talked like old friends, teasing one another and gossiping about members of Diane’s church.

Dinner was more than enough. Diane cooked fried chicken, pinto beans, and his favorite—cornbread. He'd hardly eaten any of it while listening to Josiah complain to Claudette about a professor that was giving him a hard time. Her tone was gentle but stern as she talked to him about maintaining decent relationships with his professors. She had leaned close into Dominic's side as his hand caressed her leg underneath the table.

"It's late," he replied, pulling the hood of his pullover on top of her hair.

"I know. It's why I came to get you." She circled her arms around him and stood on her toes. "I can't sleep another night without you."

Once they made it inside his bedroom, there was no room for him to sleep. She and Evie took up the bed, curled against the biggest pillow he'd ever seen. He sat on the edge, watching her chest rise and fall, thinking back to the day they'd first kissed.

He moved closer, hovering above her, obsessing over her lips. This time he didn't have to contemplate over kissing her, because she was his, so he kissed her without hesitation until she squirmed underneath him.

"What's the matter baby?" Her words came out in a sigh.

His arm cradled her stomach, and he kissed her once more.

"Thank you," he said, smiling as she mumbled an incoherent reply.

That night he didn't sleep. He thumbed through the documents that Claudette had collected, trying to make sense of what she'd done while he was away. There were checks and invoices that he calculated, trying to keep up with the amount of money they had earned. She'd printed articles written about him. He recognized some quotes they used because he had done some interviews over the phone while being locked up but thought nothing of them.

His hands shook as he picked up his phone. He'd made Josiah mute the notifications so he could breathe. This time he

pulled up the mixtape that was once nothing more than an idea
Josiah threw out while they tossed the football in Diane's front
yard.

Now, there was no turning back.

One Month Later

She had the tiniest fingers he'd ever seen. Dominic kissed them, counting each one. Then he moved to her toes that were just as tiny and counted those too.

Eve Georgia DeBlanc smelled like heaven and smiled whenever she heard his voice. It was a soft smile, like she'd been waiting all forty weeks to show him how much she loved him. She was born right at midnight—on his twenty-second birthday.

He was shirtless with her cradled on top of him. It was late, with just the two of them awake on the floor in her nursery. The rest of the house had finally quieted. Everyone was asleep in their own room—no longer confined to Diane's tiny shotgun house. She was happy to have it to herself while also maintaining a room in he and Claudette's Sandy Springs home.

The house wasn't massive because Claudette had picked it. She'd decorated each room—making the sterile new construction cozy. The guest house was his. They equipped it with a studio where he spent most of his days locked inside with Tony and whoever else dropped by because he was still under home confinement. Sometimes Mo and Nate would pop up—even Roc would come on his off days. It was where he'd talk on the phone with Polo for hours about nothing in particular, mostly about life and how funny it was.

Evie cooed, still awake, waiting on him to kiss her fingers and toes again, so he started back, pecking each one. She had a head full of curls and a button nose he kissed every morning. The only thing she'd gotten from him was his honey toned complexion.

“You look like mommy,” he whispered, kissing her last pinky toe. “I wasn't even supposed to have her and now God gave me both of y'all. Ain't that something Evie?”

She smiled and murmured back like she understood what he'd been saying. She was alert even though she was only a few days old, and she'd hardly left his side since they brought

her home from the hospital because Claudette was exhausted and still in pain from giving birth. When she wasn't asleep, he'd bring Evie to her and watch in awe as they cuddled while she breastfed her.

"You gone spoil her, you know that, right?" George leaned against the doorframe with a mug in his hand.

He hadn't been home since Claudette called him saying her water broke.

"That's what Clo' say." Dominic lifted from his position on the floor, being careful not to startle Evie.

"It's true." He walked further into the room and sat the mug down on Evie's dresser. "Lord, Bryson had Claudy spoiled behind him. She'd cry and cry until he picked her up or she heard his voice."

He'd been hearing more about Bryson since being home and being engulfed in Claudette's world. It made him feel closer to her because they both understood the deep absence that never seemed to go away after losing a parent.

George held his arms out for Evie, and Dominic passed her to him.

"Hi Papa's baby." He cradled her in his arms and bounced her.

Dominic watched as they roamed around the room together. George communicated with Evie just like he did. They talked to her like she could understand them and the world around her.

He sighed. "Never thought I'd be around to see my baby have a baby."

Dominic let him talk—he always did. He understood that George hadn't warmed to him. He just tolerated him because he knew Claudette loved him. They often bickered over him. He'd heard them on the phone once when he and Claudette went to meet with his probation officer. George had called for a second time as they were pulling out of the parking lot.

“Grandpa, Nic had to report today. I can’t talk on the phone while we’re in there,” she’d said.

Claudette never shied away from his legal troubles, no matter who she talked to.

“Jesus girl, you don’t get tired of babysitting that boy?” George’s voice carried throughout the car and Dominic’s foot slammed on the brakes.

It was a battle he fought with himself when George was around because he’d never had to mince his words for anyone.

“You ready for tomorrow?” He looked down at Dominic who was still stretched on the floor.

Dominic shrugged and leaned back, resting his hands on the shaggy rug beneath him. He’d actually thought about the day non-stop since Claudette had proposed the idea—it was always there, lingering in the back of his mind.

“I been thinking about it.” He glanced over at the picture of Eve that once hung in his bedroom at Diane’s.

It was now bigger and clearer and framed for Evie.

“Nervous?” George bounced Evie and went to sit in the wooden rocking chair Claudette often used to rock her to sleep.

“Kind of.”

He didn’t know what to make of the flutters in his stomach when he thought about the day because it was monumental for he and Evie.

“Bout what?” George asked, rocking Evie back and forth.

Evie was quiet, like she was waiting to hear why her daddy was so nervous about something that would make them closer. It would be a new rite of passage. He’d be able to repent for his past sins and give himself to Christ. He’d go first and then they’d Christen Evie afterward with Autumn and Mo standing in as her godparents.

“Just dumb shit.” He shook his head and moved to stand up. “I’ll get over it.”

“Think you gone have a problem living right?” George’s tone was nonchalant, but his words were skeptical.

Dominic stopped himself and sat back down, mulling over George’s concerns. He watched George’s rocks come to a halt and Evie’s little eyes close.

“Nah, I ain’t got them type of problems,” he replied, pulling himself back up. “Other niggas might take issue with me trying to though.”

He saw the confusion on George’s face, but he wouldn’t indulge further. He decided that he would never explain himself to anyone except Claudette and Evie because they were the only two that deserved it.

“You got her?” he asked, walking toward the entrance of the room, without turning to wait for George’s answer.

“Yup,” George replied. “Do you got her and her mama?”

Dominic’s arm rested on the frame of the door and he drummed his fingers, smirking at George’s question.

“Always.” He shook his head, tapping the frame and walking away. “Always.”

About the Author

Rae Lyse is a Texas-based romance author who enjoys reading and traveling. With a background in social work and a love of romance, she seeks to blend the two by crafting love stories about some of the most complex characters.

□

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