

B.LOVE PUBLICATIONS PRESENTS

SINCE THE DAY
we met

KAY SHANEE

SINCE THE DAY WE MET

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B. Love Publications

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kay is a forty-something wife and mother, born and raised in the Midwest. During the day, she is a high school teacher and track coach. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with her family and friends. Her favorite pastime is reading and writing romance novels about the DOPENESS of BLACK LOVE.

SYNOPSIS

One night is all it took to drive strangers, Kyree Ross and Braelynn Waters, to ecstasy. However, the reality of living thousands of miles apart and the committed relationships they would return to forces a vow to forget their unprecedented passion.

One year later, when the paths of the unsuspecting pair cross again, the feelings they were afraid to let flow have magnified tenfold. Nothing will stand in the way of their love... or so they think.

Follow Kyree and Braelynn on their journey of love. Since the day their spirits collided, there was an inkling that they were meant to be. But love rarely makes its home on Easy Street.

PREFACE

Disclaimer

I would love for you to read Kyree and Braelynn's love story. However, if you do not believe in the possibilities of love at first sight, this may not be the book for you. If that is the case, I would greatly appreciate if you would take a look at my catalog and see if I have something else that might pique your interest. Thank you, and happy reading.

Kay Shanee

PROLOGUE

Kyree Ross

“I DON’T KNOW WHY ANYONE WOULD WANT TO LIVE IN THIS dreary ass city. It’s literally been raining for four days straight,” I complained to my brothers, Kolby and Kamden.

We were in town from Chicago, IL for an automotive convention. Well, I was here for the convention, and they came to keep me company. Kolby worked as an accountant, and Kamden was still trying to figure out his path. He worked maintenance with our father while he finished up a degree in business. I was geeked to get away from home for a few days with my brothers, but this rain was annoying as hell.

“It’s Seattle, man. What did you think?” Kamden asked.

“Shit, I didn’t know it rained *this* much. I don’t know how these people aren’t depressed.”

“Well, at least today was the last day of the convention and you can kick it with us tonight before our flight tomorrow afternoon,” Kolby added.

We walked into our hotel and noticed a large group of people posing for pictures. When I realized it was a wedding, all I could think was how pissed I would be if it rained cats and dogs on my wedding day.

“How long y’all need?” I asked as we walked into our two-room suite.

“I need a nap,” Kamden said, looking at his phone for the time. “About an hour and a half?”

“Cool,” Kolby and I said before going into our rooms. Kam was the youngest, so he had to use the sofa bed.

“Kyree,” Kam called out just before my door closed.

“Wassup?”

“See if you can find out where the Black clubs are,” he said.

I shook my head before saying, “Awight.”

I wasn’t sure how it became my job, but the whole time we’d been here, they’d been depending on me to find all the good restaurants and sights to see. I guess I looked like a tour guide or some shit.

About two hours later, we exited the elevator into the lobby. I’d found a club called the Hideout that was supposed to have a good DJ that played hip hop and R&B. As we headed toward the hotel’s entrance, I almost tripped over my feet when my eyes landed on the most beautiful being I’d ever laid eyes on.

“Shit!” I unknowingly said aloud, causing Kolby and Kam to look in the same direction.

“Damn!” they said simultaneously.

Unintentionally, my feet moved in her direction, and I didn’t realize it until I was standing in front of her. The expression on her pretty face led me to believe that she was upset.

“You good?”

She looked up in surprise, and when her eyes met mine, she attempted a fake smile.

“Hi. Umm, yeah. I’m good.”

“We haven’t even officially met, and you’re already lying to me?” I shook my head and faked disappointment.

When she smiled this time, it was genuine, and it went straight to my heart.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Braelynn Waters. You?”

“Kyree Ross.” I took her outreached hand and pressed it to my lips. It sent a wave of heat through my body. “Now that the formalities are out the way, tell me who pissed you off so I can go beat his or her ass.”

She laughed this time, showing all thirty-two teeth and the small dimple in her left cheek. Damn, she proudly flaunted a small gap in her front teeth, and that shit was sexy as hell. She was doing something to a nigga, and I really wanted to beat the ass of the person that had her frowning.

“You don’t even know me, and you’re willing to fight for me? That’s... noble of you.”

“Aye, Ky...the Uber’s here, bro.”

I looked in the direction of the main entrance and couldn’t see myself leaving this beauty. My brothers would have to kick it without me again tonight.

“Go ’head. I’ll catch y’all later.”

I could hear them talking shit about me to each other, but I didn’t care. My focus was on Braelynn. I felt an immediate connection between us that wouldn’t allow me to walk away.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” she told me.

“Done what?”

“I have a boyfriend and—”

“Is he here?”

She shook her head. “No, he left.”

“Is that why you’re upset?”

She nodded. “He promised he’d stay for the reception. I don’t know why I’m surprised, though. He does this all the time. I should have been more surprised that he showed up at all.”

What I had first thought was sadness was actually more along the lines of irritation. I wanted to do something, anything, to calm her spirit.

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I have a girlfriend. I’m an honorable man, so you don’t have to worry about me pushing up on you. I just want to talk and see if I can cheer you up. Come to the bar with me and I’ll buy you a drink.”

She looked in the direction of the ballrooms where I assumed the reception was being held.

“Let me text my sister and best friend so they aren’t looking for me.”

She pulled her phone out of the little, gold purse that was hanging from her wrist. While she did that, it gave me some time to admire her without looking like a creep. She had to be about five-six without the heels she was wearing. Her cocoa-brown skin was glowing on this gloomy day, and her loosely curled Afro was highlighted with shades of red. I couldn’t tell if it was the natural color or not. To say she was beautiful would be an understatement.

The orange dress she wore looked good against her skin. It fit her tiny curves perfectly. The V-neck dipped low enough to show her barely-there cleavage, drawing attention to the fact that her breasts weren’t very big. She had a lean build with just enough in all the right places.

“Okay, to the bar we go,” she said as she stuck her phone back inside her purse.

“Lead the way.”

She winked before turning to walk away and added the perfect amount of switch to her tiny but plump ass, which caused me to have to adjust my dick before following her. Boyfriend or not, I knew that switch was just for me. After

finding two seats at the bar, we both ordered a drink and resumed our conversation.

“Are you from here?” I asked.

“Born and raised.”

I shook my head because I couldn't imagine growing up in Seattle.

“Why are you shaking your head?”

“Does it rain like this all the time? I mean, I've heard that it rains a lot here, but this shit is ridiculous.”

She laughed before replying, “It rains more than those who aren't from here are used to. Where are you from?”

“Chicago.”

She pulled her head back and looked at me sideways.

“Ohh, so I guess you prefer it to be winter for nine months out of the year over rain.”

“What? Don't come for my city. Ain't nothin' like summertime in the Chi.”

She rolled her eyes but didn't respond.

“It's been raining for four fucking days. I'm glad I'm leaving tomorrow because this shit is messing with my mood. Therapists must make bank around here,” I joked.

She pushed me on the shoulder as she giggled.

“Stop it! It's not that bad. You kinda get used to it after a while.”

The bartender set our drinks in front of us, and I took a swig of the beer I ordered before responding to her as she sipped her wine.

“If you say so. What do you do for a living?”

“My sister, best friend, and I have an online lingerie boutique. It actually started off as their thing, but the business

grew very quickly. Since I have an associate's degree in business, they asked if I wanted to become a partner."

"That's dope! What's it called? Maybe I'll order something for my girlfriend."

"MyLynn's Bedroom Boutique. If you Google that, it'll come up. How about you?"

"Nothing as fancy as you. I work as a mechanic in an auto shop. I'm here for the automotive convention that ended today."

"Wait! Seriously?"

"Yeah. Why would I lie?"

"I was at the convention, too."

She must have noticed the look of confusion on my face because she began to explain immediately.

"I know that seems weird, considering what I just told you, but fixing cars is kind of my... thing."

"I can't believe I missed your pretty face."

She looked at her drink, and if she had fairer skin, her cheeks would be rosy from blushing.

"Well, I didn't look like this." She laughed. "I was there the past three days and half the day today. I think I would have noticed you as well."

"A female mechanic, huh? Do you know how sexy that is? How did you become interested in fixing cars?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Typical story. My dad wanted a boy but got two girls instead. I'm the oldest. With him being a mechanic and me being a daddy's girl, Braedon Waters taught me everything he knew."

I detected a hint of sadness in her voice, even though she had a tiny smile on her face.

"That's pretty dope."

“I guess everyone has their opinions about that. I used to work at a shop where I was the only woman. The men were some real assholes, and I got tired of dealing with their shit. When Jaelynn and Myla asked me to partner up with them when they started the online boutique, I jumped at the chance. I wouldn’t work in another mechanic shop unless I owned it.”

“Damn! That’s unfortunate. Men can be assholes, though.” I paused. “Your dad still working or is he retired?”

“No... he’s dead.”

“Oh, shit. I’m sorry to hear that. I didn’t—”

“It’s okay. It’s been about three years. He had a heart attack while driving and ran into a pole.”

I didn’t know what to say, and even if I did, I wouldn’t have been able to get the words out. Shaking off the unpleasant memories that came to mind, I placed my hand over hers in a consoling manner. The vibrations that hummed through my body when we touched alarmed me, but I didn’t move my hand. Instead, I gave hers a squeeze and changed the subject.

“I plan to open my own shop soon. Been saving for a few years.”

“Now that’s dope!”

I turned my head to look at her because the excitement in her voice surprised me. I knew it was genuine because I could see it in her eyes. Braelynn didn’t know me from Adam, yet she’d shown more enthusiasm than my own girlfriend. For some reason, that realization made me feel some type of way.

“We’ve actually been thinking about buying or leasing a building for a lingerie store soon,” she continued. “Business is great, and we can’t keep most of our products in stock, but there’s just so much to the brick and mortar side of things. I’m kind of on the fence about it.”

“Yeah, it’s a lot of work, owning your own shit, and having an actual building will bring more overhead,” I agreed. “I

think it's worth it, though."

"Not according to my boyfriend." I almost didn't hear her because she said it so softly.

"He doesn't think business ownership is the way to go?"

"No, he actually owns a small IT firm. He just doesn't think it's the way *I* should go."

Again, I was slightly confused, and I guess she could tell by my expression, so she continued.

"He doesn't take the lingerie business seriously and thinks it's more of a hobby than a business. I'm not gonna even share his thoughts about me being a mechanic and having my own shop. When I told him my idea for an all-female auto shop, he damn near passed out laughing and told me it wouldn't be in business more than a month."

"He actually said that to you?" She hadn't even answered yet, and I was pissed.

"Multiple times," she told me, sounding defeated.

Who the fuck does this dude think he is?

I shook my head in disgust as we both took sips from our drinks. Knowing that he wasn't supportive of her made me think of Leah, my girlfriend. Sounded to me like they would be a great couple.

"How long you been with your guy?"

I swear I saw her roll her eyes before she answered.

"Two years."

I nodded my head. Two years is a long time. She'd probably be in it for the long haul, waiting for him to propose.

"I've been with my girl for about a year," I offered. "She doesn't think 'working on cars' is a good career, either. Keeps pushing me to go to college and get a 'real degree' because trade school ain't good enough, I guess."

“Oh my God! Samuel is the same way. Besides my associate’s degree in business, I’m a licensed mechanic with multiple certifications. He thinks that’s nothing, and it irritates my entire soul.”

“Sounds like they would be a match made in heaven.”

After laughing at my comment, we sat in a comfortable silence for a few minutes before I turned to look at her and found her eyes on me. I never released her hand, and I was rubbing across the top of it with my thumb.

“Do you have a room here?” she asked softly.

I wasn’t sure that I heard her right. My eyebrows raised, questioning whether or not my ears had deceived me. When she held my gaze, I summoned the bartender.

“Last name is Ross. Charge the drinks to room 817.”

We both stood to leave the bar and walked to the elevator. As we waited, I squeezed her hand to get her attention.

“You sure about this?”

“I am.”

She said it with confidence, and I believed her. For some reason, I needed her to know that I didn’t do this kind of shit on the regular, but something about her was causing me to step out of character. We stepped inside the elevator, and I pushed the number eight before backing her against the wall and putting my forehead against hers.

“Do you believe me when I say I ain’t the cheating type of nigga?”

“I believe you,” she whispered. “I’ve never—”

I pressed my lips against hers for a kiss that I couldn’t resist stealing. Electricity shot through my body as soon as we connected, causing me to pull away and rub a finger across her lips.

“I’ve never wanted a woman as much as I want you right now... ever.”

Braelynn Waters

I'D NEVER DONE ANYTHING LIKE THIS. I'D NEVER CHEATED. I'D never had a one-night stand. I'd never had sex with a man that I wasn't in an established relationship with. Tonight, I was doing it all.

Kyree's presence erased the frustration I had with Samuel and any thoughts I had of him from my mind. His spirit connected with mine in a way I wished Samuel's did. His handsome features made a puddle in the seat of my panties. With skin the color of peanut butter, perfectly straight, winter-white teeth, a low Caesar cut with deep waves, tiny, almond-shaped eyes, and just the right amount of facial hair, he didn't look like he should be working under anybody's car. He looked like he should be on somebody's runway. Damn, he was fine!

As soon as we were in his room inside the suite, my back was against the door, and his mouth was on mine again. This time, his tongue found its way inside and did a sexy dance with mine. I could feel his erection against my stomach, and the desire for him to be inside of me increased tremendously.

He hiked my dress up above my waist as I fumbled trying to unfasten his pants. I heard the ripping of my panties and felt the coolness of the door against my ass. His pants fell to the floor as soon as I was successful with the button and zipper. Pulling his lips away from mine, he lifted my dress up, and I raised my arms, allowing him to pull it over my head.

With his pants at his ankles, he took off his shoes, stepped out of his pants, and pulled his Polo and undershirt over his head. He stood before me in black boxer briefs and black athletic socks. His physique was muscular but not bulky. I could tell that he was a regular at the gym, especially with the eight-pack abs he sported. The light from the lamp in the corner of the room allowed me to see the tattoos that covered his upper chest and both arms. That shit was sexy as hell.

His eyes traveled the length of my body as we faced off. I wasn't wearing a bra and my panties were in shreds. The four-inch heels and earrings were all that I had left on my body. He stared at me with an expression I couldn't read. *Maybe he changed his mind, or he's giving me a chance to change mine.* The longer he stared, the more self-conscious I became. My hands moved to cover my breasts and my mound, but he reached up to stop them.

"No! You're beautiful. I don't ever want to forget you. I need a visual of you engraved in my brain. I want to memorize everything about you, so when this is over, all I need to do is close my eyes and see the magnificence that is you."

His words made my nipples hard and my pussy leak. This man made me feel things I didn't know were possible, and I'd only known him an hour, maybe two. I was unsure of how much time had passed since he'd approached me in the lobby.

His hand caressed my cheek as he spoke. "It feels like I've known you all my life."

Not giving me a chance to respond, his hand went to the back of my neck, and he pulled my face to his. Our lips crashed into one another's, and we kissed like lovers who were reunited after years apart. We made our way to the bed, and when I began to kick off my shoes, he pulled away.

"Leave 'em on!" he demanded.

We fell on the bed, him on top of me, and his soft lips landed on my neck. He planted a trail of kisses as his mouth traveled to my breasts. When he took one of my nipples in his mouth, a moan escaped my lips. After his tongue tasted each of them, he continued to move down my body until he was face-to-face with my bare pussy.

Although I was expecting his mouth, his finger would do as well. He rubbed my slick folds before sliding one finger, then another, into my haven. His thumb pressed against my clit with the perfect amount of pressure.

"My desire to taste you has me ready to risk my life."

“Mmm,” I moaned.

“Can I trust you with my life?”

“I’ve been tested. We use condoms. I wouldn’t risk your life,” I managed to say.

I guess that was all he needed to hear, and without further interrogation, he dove in.

“Shittt!” I screamed.

He French kissed, licked, and sucked every crevice his mouth could find, leaving nothing untouched. The feeling of pleasure was overwhelming as the tingling traveled through my body. My climax was near, and I knew it was going to be a wet, slippery mess.

“Fuck, Ky! I’m cummmmm—”

I couldn’t quite get my warning out, but it didn’t matter. This nigga was feasting on me as if I was his last meal and he was on death row.

“Oh my—shit!”

The dam released, and I lost control of all my senses. The heels of my shoes dug into his back, surely leaving marks, as I reached my peak and continued chasing the feeling his mouth provided.

As I came down from my high, I felt his absence momentarily. When he came back, he was naked. My eyes got wide when they landed on his dick. I quickly tried to mentally prepare for my pussy to be stretched deep and wide as he turned off the lamp.

Once he sheathed himself, he lifted each of my legs, removed my shoes, and put my legs on his shoulders. Our eyes connected, and his hands went to his dick.

“Once I slide inside, there’s no turning back. Tonight is all we have. No regrets.”

I hated the reminder that tonight would be the only time I’d ever feel like this, the only time I’d feel like all that

mattered was the amount of pleasure he could give me and the levels of ecstasy I could reach. I appreciated his concern about the possibility of regrets, but they were absolutely the least of my concerns.

“No regrets,” I repeated.

His dick met the entrance of my domain as he plunged inside. The snug fit almost took me out, and Kyree showed his appreciation with a grunt from deep within.

“Fuck!” he groaned.

My mind briefly went to Samuel and how he could never fill me to the brim like this. *My pussy would not be the same after this experience. Would he be able to feel the difference?* Even with those thoughts, I lifted my ass from the bed so he could go deeper.

“Braelynn—baby, what are you doing to me?”

I could ask him the same thing. My body was being taken to heights never reached before, and once I left this room, I was sure they would never be reached again. Kyree knew my body as if he'd been studying it for years. He kissed, licked, and teased me with his tongue as if someone had given him a map of my erogenous zones. It felt like my pussy was made for his dick. The way she molded around him, the way she responded to his strokes, the way she came on demand with his command.

“Give me that juice, Brae. Soak my shit up.”

And just like that, my essence drowned his condom-covered dick and dripped down my ass crack onto the bed. I felt his dick vibrate, and it shook my entire soul. *How could I ever move on from this? I know we just met. I know that tonight is all we have. Why does it feel like this man is my forever?*

PROLOGUE CONTINUED

One Year Later

Kyree

“There’s so much more you could do with that money, baby. That’s all I’m saying.”

“That’s all you’ve ever said, Leah. It’s no secret that you don’t want me to open my own shop.”

I didn’t know why I was arguing with this woman about money that I saved. Especially about using it for something that had always been my dream. I had gotten to Leah’s apartment about fifteen minutes ago and was excited to tell her that I’d gotten approved for a loan through the SBA. The plan was to take her to dinner to celebrate, but she had pretty much fucked that up with her lack of enthusiasm.

“I just don’t get it. You have so much potential. You could be doing so much more with your life. Why don’t you use the money to enroll in college? Or, my mom has some connections with Ford Models here in Chicago. Let me pay for a photoshoot, and I’ll have her make the connection. You are much too handsome to be fixing cars all day.”

I guess she thought ending it with a compliment would make what she said less fucked up. She’d been trying to get me to conform to her and her family’s expectations since she made our relationship official. Yes, I said “she” because I was still trying to figure out how I let that shit happen.

“Look, Leah. I’m tired of going back and forth with you about what I choose to do with my life. I was a mechanic when we met, remember? You didn’t have a problem with it when I saved your ass thousands of dollars after you were told your transmission was fucked up. You don’t mind sending all your damn rich relatives my way when they want their car fixed for the low. This is non-negotiable. If you don’t want a mechanic as your man, move the fuck on!”

“Why are you all in your feelings? How can you be mad that I want more for you than you want for yourself? I can’t introduce you as a mechanic when we attend social events. You’ve seen the kind of company my family keeps.”

That was the last straw. This shit was over. I took a deep breath and counted to ten. She simply didn’t get it. Mentally, I did a quick inventory of our relationship, and I couldn’t think of one reason that we were still together except me being too busy to find someone else. I cared for Leah’s well-being, but that was all. I didn’t love her.

“I get it now. You took me on as your little pet project man and thought you could turn me into something I’m not. Now you gotta go back to your family and friends and tell them that ‘project-make-a-man’ has failed. Fuck this shit! We’ve been having this same conversation for damn near two years, and I’m over it and your bougie ass. Clearly, I’m not the one for you. I’m out!”

“Kyree, wait! Why are you taking this to the extreme? I’m not saying I want to break up. We can come to a compromise.”

I was already headed for the door and turned around and cocked my head to the side. It was obvious she wasn’t listening.

“What I look like compromising about *my* life decisions? Ain’t no fucking compromise, Leah. This is my life, and I’m not about to compromise with you, or anybody else for that matter, about what I want to do with it.”

I walked out the door, and right away, it felt like a huge weight was lifted from my shoulders. That relationship should have ended a long time ago, but now that it had, there was no turning back.

By the time I had made it to my car, Leah had sent multiple text messages. I didn't even bother reading them before blocking her number. It might have taken me a while to come to my senses, but they'd arrived, and I wasn't changing my mind.

Before heading to my place, I went to the apartment that my two younger brothers, Kolby and Kamden, shared. They'd been telling me to leave Leah alone almost since the moment we started dating. This news was going to make their day.

"Wassup, knuckleheads?" I asked after I entered using my key.

"Nigga, how many times do we have to tell you that key is for emergency use only? I'm gon' change the locks on your ass," Kolby, the older one of the two, said.

"Chill out. I came over here to tell y'all some news."

"What?" Kamden asked as they both waited for my reply.

"I'm done with Leah's ass."

They both looked at me with disbelief, but it was Kamden who spoke first.

"Bro, stop playing."

"Naw, I'm straight up. I just left her place, and it's a wrap on that."

"What happened? I need to hear every detail," Kolby said.

He and Kamden sat on their couch, and I sat in the sofa chair as I shared with them what happened.

"I don't understand what her problem is. She act like you out here slanging dope. I told you she was crazy from day one," Kamden said after hearing what happened.

“You did, bro, but she was so damn fine that I wasn’t hearing shit. Before I knew it, we were in a whole ass relationship.”

My attraction to Leah was purely physical, and the pussy was good and consistent. A relationship was never my goal, but somehow, that was what happened.

“I don’t know what took you so long to see that she wasn’t for you. I ain’t never seen a woman so unsupportive of her man’s ambitions,” Kolby added.

His statement made me think about the woman I shared one glorious night with. A woman I’d thought about every day since that night.

“Aw, shit! Here you go. Whenever you get that spaced out, faraway look, I know you thinking about ole girl from Seattle. That’s who you need to be trying to wife,” Kolby said.

After my night with Braelynn, I told my brothers everything. The three of us were extremely close, and there wasn’t much we didn’t share with each other.

“I wish I could, but that was just a one-time thing.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” Kam said. “You know how to find her. You’ve been stalking her damn Instagram every day since she snuck out of the hotel room. Send her a message.”

I shook my head. Braelynn and I agreed that all we had was that night. It was the first time since... I shook off the memory because going down that road was a can of worms I didn’t want to open. Being with Braelynn reminded me that I could love again, and it was by far the best sexual experience I’d ever had. Our stars weren’t aligned, and neither of us wanted to force it.

“We weren’t meant to be. She has a man. I had a woman. It was only one night,” I explained.

“Maybe her situation has changed. Yours just did.”

I didn’t even want to get my hopes up. “Naw, I’m good. So what’s on for tonight?”

“Not a damn thing. Mom and Dad want us to stop by there, though. They got something they want to talk to us about,” Kolby shared.

“This sounds serious. Y’all know what it is?”

They both shook their heads.

“Well, let’s go now.”

I was anxious to find out what was going on and why they hadn’t told me, since I was the oldest. About twenty minutes later, I turned into my parents’ driveway. Kolby and Kam rode together since I’d be going home once I leave here.

Our parents, Isaac and Stella Ross, still lived in the house where we were raised. The neighborhood wasn’t perfect, but it had improved quite a bit since my brothers and I were younger. The house had four bedrooms and two bathrooms, which was way more room than the two of them needed now that we were gone. They could probably get a decent amount for it and buy something smaller, but they were comfortable and didn’t want to move. Not to mention, my mother said she needed room for the grandchildren she was waiting for us to give her.

I let us inside, and we found my parents in the family room, watching television. After greeting them with hugs and cheek kisses, we sat down wherever there was an open seat.

“What are y’all watching?” I asked.

Ma shook her head before saying, “Some mess your father found on the ID channel. Babe, turn that off so we can talk to the boys.”

“Damn it. It was just getting good,” Dad fussed before doing as his wife asked.

“Everything good?” I asked.

“Actually, they’re great, son. We have a surprise,” Ma said.

“You ain’t pregnant, are you?” I joked.

“Ky, don’t play with me. You know damn well I’m too old to do some dumb mess like that.” She shook her head. “The surprise is really for you.”

I looked at each of them before saying, “For me?”

“Yeah, bro. The four of us thought it would be nice to send you on a little vacation,” Kolby shared.

“Of course, it wouldn’t be a vacation without your brothers tagging along,” Ma added.

“We going to Belize, bro!” Kamden said with excitement.

“Belize? Really? When?”

“We fly out next Thursday, and we’ll be there until the following Friday,” Kolby said.

“I hear it’s poppin’ for Memorial Day weekend,” Kamden added.

I couldn’t get too excited, knowing how much this trip must have cost them. We were comfortable growing up, and my parents still worked. My mom had been a bank manager for as long as I could remember, and my father was the head of maintenance for a shopping mall. Both of them, being only fifty-five, still had a few more years before they reached retirement age.

“Wow! That had to be expensive. How did y’all—”

“Don’t you worry about all that.” Dad cut me off. “We’ve watched you work extremely hard for years to reach your goal, and we want you to know that we’re proud of you. You’ve been a great example for your brothers, and before you fully start your journey as a business owner, we want you to celebrate.”

Damn! They had a nigga choked up. My brothers had been my best friends since the day they were born, and all three of us had a tight bond with our parents. We were a very close-knit family, but I still couldn’t believe that they had done this for me. *Belize! Wow!*

“Say something, bro! You excited?” Kamden stood and approached me, then Kolby did the same while our parents looked on.

“Hell—heck yeah, I’m excited. I appreciate y’all a lot, man. I’m just speechless.”

The three of us embraced, and I went over to my parents to thank them properly as well.

“I can’t thank you guys enough.” I hugged each of them. “I have some news for you guys, too.”

“I hope you didn’t get that damn girl pregnant. Let me sit down for this,” Ma said as she took her seat.

“Ma, you really think I’m out here reckless like that?”

“Just tell us the news, son,” Dad said, sitting next to my mother.

“I hope you guys aren’t too disappointed, but... Leah and I broke up.”

“Oh, thank God!” Ma shouted.

“About damn time,” Dad mumbled.

Kolby and Kamden were cracking up at our parents’ reactions.

“Whooaa! I ain’t know it was like that.” I faked surprise, knowing damn well my family wasn’t fond of Leah.

My brothers and I hung out with our parents for longer than I planned. Ma made dinner, and there was no way I was turning down a home-cooked meal. Several hours passed before I finally made it to my apartment. When I let myself inside, I thought I had walked into the wrong apartment. I looked at the number on the door to be sure.

“How the hell did you get in here, Leah?” I asked, standing in the door, not allowing it to close.

She stood from the couch and walked in my direction. When she was close enough to touch me, she said, “I sweet-

talked Jerry into letting me in. I told him I lost my key. Anyway, I thought you would want to talk once you cooled off.”

“Nothing has changed.”

“Ky, I’m not about to let two years go to waste. I’m not letting you go.”

“You have no choice, Leah. Hell, you don’t want to be with me. You want me to become a whole other nigga. I’m not changing who I am, so I ended this shit... *today!*”

“I can’t believe you can let me go so easily.”

“You made it easy. Now, if there’s something of yours you want to take right now, get it and leave. If not, I’m throwing that shit out.”

I doubt if she had anything more than a toothbrush here, maybe a T-shirt or two. Although we’d been dating for two years, I didn’t allow her to get too comfortable in my space, and I never got comfortable at hers, which was why we never exchanged keys to each other’s apartments.

“I can’t believe you right now, Kyree!”

Suddenly, she swung at me, and I put my hand up just in time to catch her wrist and gently move her to the hallway.

“Are you crazy?”

“Oww, you’re hurting me.” She fake cried as I released her. “I’m calling the police.”

“As long as you do it on the other side of this door, I don’t care what you do.”

“I hate you, Ky! I fucking hate you!”

I slammed the door in her face, while she continued screaming on the other side.

“I’m too good for you any-fucking-way. If the dick wasn’t so good, I would’ve never wasted two years on your broke

ass! Don't even make enough money to be with a bitch like me!"

Her voice got quieter as I got further away from the door. I prayed she went about her business and pretended I didn't exist. I walked around my apartment to make sure nothing was out of place or missing. I didn't know how long she had been invading my space. When I went back to the living room, I didn't hear any yelling, so I assumed she left.

After taking a quick shower, I stepped out and wrapped a towel around my lower half. Suddenly, I heard banging on my apartment door.

"Open up! It's the police!"

"No the fuck she didn't!" I said aloud.

Before going to the door, I grabbed my phone and called my brother, Kolby.

"Yo!" he answered.

"I need y'all here, now!" I yelled.

"On the way!" he replied, without asking any questions.

This was Chicago, IL, and I was a Black man. I knew that if I opened that door, I was going to jail. It would only take ten minutes for my brothers to get here, so I had to hold them off until then.

"He's in there, Officer. I know he is," I heard Leah say, followed by more banging on the door.

"Open up!" he repeated.

Since I was wet from the shower and still had the towel wrapped around my waist, I'd use that as an excuse as to why I didn't answer the door sooner. Some commotion began outside the door, and it was too soon to be my brothers. Looking out of my peephole, I saw my neighbor from across the hall talking to the officer. I relaxed just a little when I saw that the officer was Black.

"Officer, what's going on?" Miranda asked.

“I’m looking for the man that lives here. Do you know if he’s home?”

“Don’t lie, Miranda! You know he’s home.”

She looked at Leah and rolled her eyes before addressing the officer.

“I’m not sure, Officer. Just before you came, I saw the two of them arguing. Leah tried to hit him, but she missed, and he put her out.”

I decided that now was a good time to open the door.

“She’s lying, Officer! He slammed me against the door, and when I tried to get away, he slammed my hand against it, too,” Leah shouted, not making any sense at all.

“I thought I heard someone knocking. Leah, why did you call the police? I don’t know what she told you, Officer, but I’m sure it’s not the truth,” I said, in the most nonaggressive voice I could.

“I’m not lying! He attacked me when I tried to leave. He ___”

“Ma’am, please. Calm down.” He gave her a look and she shut up. “Are you Kyree Ross?”

“Yessir,” I replied with one hand holding my towel up and the other holding the door open.

“This young lady says that you assaulted her. However, I have a witness that states something different. Would you like to tell me what happened?”

“Sure. Would you mind if I go throw some clothes on?”

“No problem. Go right ahead.”

I let the door close and breathed a sigh of relief that the officer wasn’t an asshole, because him being Black didn’t rule that out. After slipping on some boxer briefs, a pair of basketball shorts, and a T-shirt, I went back to the door to find my brothers in the hallway.

“Tell me your version of the story,” the officer said.

“Leah and I broke up earlier today. Apparently, she sweet-talked our maintenance guy into letting her in because she doesn’t have a key. When I saw her, I didn’t move beyond the doorway, and I kept it open because I wanted her out. I asked her to leave, we argued, she swung, and I grabbed her wrist to stop her from hitting me and moved her to the hallway.”

The officer looked at Leah and said, “His story matches hers, so it’s obvious who’s not telling the truth.”

Leah looked down at the floor but didn’t respond.

“Don’t go silent now,” the officer said to her. “If another officer had come here, of a different background, there’s a good chance this young man would have been arrested for no reason. Ma’am, do you understand the severity of making false claims against another person? I could arrest you right now to be honest. I’m gonna pretend like this didn’t happen, and you need to go home and leave this man alone.”

Leah nodded but still didn’t make eye contact with the officer. Miranda went back inside her apartment and my brothers finally entered mine, leaving Leah and the officer in front of my door.

“Thank you, sir. Leah, if I have anything at your place, feel free to toss it. I’m good.”

I closed the door and leaned against it, closing my eyes and releasing a breath. When I opened my eyes, Kolby and Kam were staring at me, and all I could do was shake my head and say, “What a fucking day!”

Braelynn



“How long did you think you could hide it from me?” Samuel said, as soon as he walked into our bedroom.

I was packing for a trip that Jaelynn, Myla, and I had been planning for several months. We were leaving in a couple of days, and I had just began to pack.

“What are you talking about, Samuel?”

“You’ve been fixing cars at your mom’s house. When were you gonna tell me?”

I rolled my eyes in irritation. I knew he’d find out eventually, but it was a conversation I wasn’t planning on having with him.

“I wasn’t.”

He looked at me with an angry expression before saying, “You weren’t? How the hell were you not gonna tell me, Braelynn? I’m your man, and I have to hear the shit from someone else. That should never happen.”

“Since you’re ‘my man’, you should also be supportive of the things I enjoy doing. Besides, it’s only been a couple of weeks, and I’ve only fixed some minor things on a few cars. Why is that a problem? It doesn’t affect you in any way.”

“Because, dammit! You know how I feel about you doing that shit. It’s not the type of thing I feel my woman should be doing. Why can’t you respect that?” He was always trying to play the victim.

“Why can’t you respect that I want to do it? This ain’t about you, anyway. Fixing cars is something that I enjoy. It’s my father’s legacy and something that makes me feel close to him. I missed doing it, so I decided to fix a few cars on the side. My mom still has the garage set up the way my dad left it, and she’s letting me use the space. It’s not that serious.”

He released a frustrated breath and rubbed his hand over his waves. Samuel was handsome, but his attitude made him so ugly to me. It was beyond me why this was stressing him out, but I honestly didn’t care.

“Fine! But don’t get carried away, and don’t bring all that dirty shit in here,” he tossed behind him as he walked away.

“You supporting me would be too much like right, huh?”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

There was no sense in repeating myself, because I was gon’ do what I wanted to do whether he supported me or not. He came back into the bedroom with a beer, asking me what I cooked for dinner.

“I sent you a text earlier, telling you to pick up something unless you wanted leftovers. I need to finish packing because the next couple of days, I’ll be too busy.”

“Busy doing what?”

“Do you really want to know?”

He shook his head and took a swig of his beer. “You know, I’m still not completely cool with this trip.”

“Get over it, Samuel. You travel for work and leisure with your boys all the time. Why is it a problem for me to do the same?”

“I would think that you wouldn’t want to go somewhere so exotic without your man.”

“Well, that’s where Jaelynn and Myla chose to go. I got outvoted.”

Jaelynn was my younger sister and best friend. With her being single and three years younger than me, at twenty-six, Samuel thought she was too wild for me to hang out with. I was always like, *‘Bruh, she’s my sister. You will never break that bond.’* Telling him that repeatedly didn’t stop him from trying. Myla and I had been best friends since the seventh grade. She was like a sister, and although we were the same age, Samuel didn’t like me hanging with her, because she was single as well.

“Why doesn’t that surprise me? Those two have no respect for our relationship, and you’re always letting them convince you to do shit to jeopardize what we got going on.”

This nigga was really blowing me. First of all, I’d told him about this trip months ago. It was not my fault that he had selective memory and hearing. Secondly, he’d never offered to take me anywhere exotic, so I gotta get in where I fit in. Thirdly, it was bad enough I couldn’t seem to find my way out of this relationship. I was not about to let him mess up all facets of my life. My relationship with my family and my business were not up for discussion.

“When are you leaving again?” he asked, knowing damn well I’d told him several times.

“Thursday, Samuel. I’m leaving on Thursday morning, and I’ll be back the following Friday.”

“A whole week? Damn! How were the three of you able to afford a trip like this? Not to mention, it’s Memorial Day weekend. I know you’re not making that much selling underwear online.”

“Don’t worry about how I get my money. Just know that none of *your* money was used to pay for this trip.”

“That’s because all of my money is used to pay for this house and everything else.”

Oh, here we go. He insisted on me not paying bills because he didn’t consider our online lingerie boutique a real job but always wanna throw the shit in my face. Little did he know, we pocketed an average of five grand a month each, after taxes and expenses. I didn’t ever bother going back and forth with his ass. Giving him an evil glare, I walked into our walk-in closet in a huff. Retrieving the items I’d been buying little by little for the trip, I went back to the bed and laid them out. While I tried to decide what all I was going to bring, Samuel hovered nearby.

“I’m telling you right now that these two dresses ain’t going.”

He snatched them from the bed and walked out of the bedroom. I followed him closely while yelling at his back. When he got to our garbage can in the kitchen, he stuffed the dresses inside.

“What the fuck, Sam?” He hated when I called him that because he thought it sounded like a White boy’s name. “I’m a grown ass woman, and you can’t tell me what to wear.”

“I can and I will! My woman won’t be all over social media dressed like some cheap ass whore.”

My head jerked back in shock. This nigga had clearly lost his mind. I didn’t bother to say a word. I turned around and marched back to the bedroom. Going to the closet, I grabbed my duffle bag and began throwing things inside that I would need for the night. As much as I needed to finish packing for this trip, I’d have to do it tomorrow while he was at work.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m leaving!”

Our walk-in closet was large enough that our dresser fit inside of it. I was standing in front of the dresser, and Samuel pulled the bag from my hands and tossed it to the side, then turned me around by my shoulder before slamming me to the

floor. The impact of my landing was so hard that it took my breath away momentarily, not to mention the utter shock I was in from his actions. With his hand tightly around my neck, he put his face close to mine before speaking.

“Leaving? Where the fuck you going?” he asked in a slow, measured, angry tone.

“Samu—I—ca—I can’t—”

I struggled with trying to remove his hand from my neck, but he was too strong. All I could think to do was punch him in his ear with all of my strength. The shock of the punch caused him to release me. I rolled to my side, coughing hysterically as I got on my feet in search of anything I could use for a weapon. When my eyes landed on the aluminum bat, I got to it just in time and turned around swinging. The first swing landed on his left shoulder, and I kept swinging, hitting him multiple times on various parts of his body until he retreated.

“You son of a bitch. Don’t you ever in your fucking life put your hands on me again!”

“Baby, I didn’t mean to. I’m so sorry. I swear to God, I don’t know what came over me.”

“You’re right! You are one sorry excuse for a man. I need you to leave. And don’t come back until I’m on the plane.”

“What? Where the fuck am I supposed to go?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t give a shit. If I see your fucking face before I leave for my trip, I’m filing a report. Take what you need and get the fuck out. You got ten minutes.”

“Baby, please. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I swear. Don’t do this. I freaked out when you said you were leaving.”

“Nine minutes.”

He began to scramble around the bedroom, gathering whatever he needed. I kept both hands on the bat in the swinging position just in case he lost his mind again. The nerve of this nigga to put his hands on me. My ass was still in

shock, but I was no damn fool. We'd gotten into heated arguments before because he was so damn controlling and made a habit of talking down to me. But this... this took the cake. By the time he came back in this bitch, all my shit would be gone and so would I.

Once he was gone, I made sure I put the chain on the door, then sent a text to the group chat I had with Jaelynn and Myla and told them to come over right away and to bring large garbage bags and boxes. While I waited for them, I finished packing for the trip. Thankfully, Samuel had just taken the garbage out. My dresses weren't ruined because there was nothing inside.

By the time I finished packing, Jaelynn and Myla had arrived. I let them in and secured the door with the chain again. They both looked at me with confused expressions and followed me when I walked into our bedroom.

"That nigga put his hands on me!" I showed them my neck, then grabbed one of the boxes from Jaelynn.

"The fuck?" she yelled.

"Are you serious?" Myla shouted.

"Yep, and that's the last fucking straw. I've put up with his ass for way longer than I should have, and I'm done. I told him if he comes back before Thursday that I'm filing a report. That gives me two days to pack my shit."

I continued talking a mile a minute, telling them what exactly went down. The whole time I was talking, I was putting essential items in the box that I had taken from Jaelynn. The two of them watched me go back and forth, probably speechless about what had transpired.

"Jae, can I stay with you until I find a place?"

"Of course! We need more boxes and more hands. I hope you didn't plan on staying here tonight."

"I mean, I don't think he'll come back, and I could put the chain on the door so he can't get in."

“Absolutely not!” Myla said. “That chain ain’t gon’ stop a determined and crazy man. Let’s pack as much as we can tonight. We have three cars, and we’ll come back with reinforcements and more boxes tomorrow.”

Myla pulled out her phone and started texting furiously.

“Who you texting?”

“My brother. You know Myles don’t play that shit, and he gon’ get his boys and beat Samuel’s ass. He ain’t never liked his ass anyway.”

I didn’t even bother objecting, because it would do no good. Nobody liked Samuel, and I should’ve taken that as a hint, but sometimes in life, you make decisions that even you don’t understand.



The day before we left for our trip, I met with a young, Black couple that had their own commercial design firm. They did several types of projects, but commercial design was their specialty. I'd met with a few other companies, but when I explained to them my vision, it wasn't connecting. This couple hit it right out of the ballpark, and I couldn't wait for them to get started.

Generally, mechanic shops were dark, dingy, and smelled like car fumes. Often, women didn't feel comfortable when they visited, and they definitely didn't want to bring their children. With what I had in mind for my spot, none of that would be an issue. The waiting area would be clean and comfortable with a couple of TVs and a supervised play area for kids. I also planned to hire a few female mechanics that would hopefully make female customers more comfortable tending to their car needs.

As usual, my mind went to Braelynn. She was the inspiration behind a lot of this, especially the female mechanics. As hard as I tried to keep my thoughts away from her, I thought of her multiple times a day. Pulling out my phone, I went to her Instagram, as I did frequently. She hadn't posted any pictures in the last few days, which was kind of odd since she normally posted a few times a day.

“I hope she’s okay,” I said aloud.

After locking up my building, I hopped in my car and spotted Tony’s Taco Truck on my way home. After grabbing my dinner for the night, I went home, ate, then finished packing. We had an early flight, and I planned to kick it as soon as we got to the resort, so I took my ass to bed.



THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON, WE ARRIVED AT THE MAHOGANY Bay Resort and Beach Club, and it was dope as hell. I’d only seen the lobby and the area that led to the three-bedroom townhome that they had rented. We were about to live it up for the week, and my excitement was through the roof.

“Aye, bro. Since we’re here to celebrate you, why don’t you take the room with the king-sized bed? Since I’m the second oldest, I’ll take the room with the queen, and the youngin’ can have the room with the twin beds,” Kolby announced.

“Man, y’all wack as hell. We need to flip this shit sometimes. Y’all stay doing me bogus ’cause I’m the youngest,” Kamden complained.

“Just push the beds together and shut up!” I joked as I grabbed him and put him in a headlock. He fought me off and then complained about me fucking up his waves as he ran his hand over the top of his head.

We decided that we didn’t want to waste any more time and went to our rooms to change into our swim trunks. While at the pool, we chilled with a few drinks and flirted with some fine ass women, who told us about a club in town that they had visited the night before. After we ate a late lunch, we headed back to the room to rest up for a night out on the town.

“Did Leah try to contact you before you left?” Kam asked.

“Can you believe she emailed me? I guess that was the only way she could reach me since I blocked her phone

number and she doesn't do social media. At first, she asked if we could meet up so she could apologize in person. When I didn't reply, she got disrespectful as hell, so I blocked her there, too."

"She's a trip," Kolby said. "Fine as hell but a trip, nonetheless."

"You never thought it was weird that someone like her isn't on social media?" Kam asked.

I thought about it briefly before shaking my head. "Not really. When we met, she said something about not liking people to have that much access to her. Some people are like that, so I didn't think much of it."

"Did you grow some balls and reach out to ole girl from Seattle?" Kam asked.

"No, and I'm not going to. I wish y'all would stop bringing her up."

I thought about Braelynn enough on my own without them mentioning her.

"Aye, this the last thing I'm gon' say about her and that situation," Kolby began. "I ain't never believed in that love at first sight bullshit, but after seeing you with her for two minutes, then hearing the way you spoke about her... you made me a believer. You only live once, bro. You may not want to admit it, but you fell in love that night. Keep fucking around and you gon' miss out."

I heard him loud and clear, and I knew he was right. I just didn't know what to do about it, so I did nothing.

"What would you do if you saw her again?" Kam asked as he let us into the room.

"I'd make her mine."

Kam let me enter ahead of him, and I stopped in my tracks. My eyes had to be deceiving me. I literally closed my eyes, rubbed them, and opened them again to make sure that I wasn't seeing things.

Bracelynn



Over the past two days, I'd managed to get everything that I wanted out of Samuel's place with the help of my mother, Lynn, my uncle David, Jaelynn, Myla, her brother Myles, and a couple of his homies. My mom and uncle had no idea why I was moving out so suddenly. I made the rest of them promise not to mention it. I just wanted to forget about it and move on.

When I moved in with Samuel, I gave Jaelynn all of my furniture because she moved out of our mom's house around the same time. That being said, all the furniture in his place was his, and I didn't have any big stuff to move. However, I had more clothes, shoes, and accessories than I thought.

Samuel had a habit of buying me material things to smooth things over when he pissed me off. I wasn't even a materialistic woman, but I let him pacify me with nice, expensive shit. I tried to leave half of it, but Myla convinced me to take it, saying, "Even if you sell this shit on eBay or give it to Goodwill, you earned it all for putting up with his lame ass for three years." Jaelynn wholeheartedly agreed, so we packed it up. I did give some shoes and purses that I'd never worn or used to Myles and his homies to give to their numerous girlfriends.

Samuel was smart and heeded my warning about not coming back to his place until after I had left for my trip, but he sent what seemed like a million text messages. The messages went back and forth between being apologetic about putting his hands on me and pissed off because I wasn't replying. His ass didn't know if he wanted to be sad or mad.

At first, I left him on read because I truly didn't want to communicate with him. I also wanted to make sure he stayed away from the house so that he wouldn't catch me packing before I was done or realize that I was gone and come looking for me. To keep him at bay, I engaged with him, making him believe that we could talk when I got back from my trip. He even sent me some money through Cash App and told me to enjoy my trip. I may have made some dumb decisions, but I was smart enough to transfer that money right into my bank account.

The morning of our trip had arrived. I got up early enough to go for a run and was showered and dressed before Jaelynn got out of bed. She finished getting ready just as our Uber pulled up, with Myla already inside, to take us to the airport. On the way there, I blocked Samuel's number and blocked him from all of my social media accounts. I knew once he found out that I moved out, all hell was gonna break loose.

After the past couple of days I had, I was ready to have some fun. We made it to the airport, checked our bags, and cruised through security. As we waited to board the plane, we made small talk.

"How does it feel to be a free woman after three years?" Myla asked.

"Honestly? It hasn't hit me yet." I paused briefly. "But when I get to this resort, y'all may have to call the hoe patrol to reel me in."

"Ayeeee!" Jaelynn stood from her seat and twerked her ass for the one time. Of course, Myla had to join her.

“If y’all don’t sit y’all asses down in this airport,” I whisper-yelled.

They kept twerking for a few more seconds before sitting down, laughing hysterically.

“You ain’t gon’ do no hoe shit anyway, sis. It ain’t in you,” Jaelynn said.

“I don’t know, Jae. Remember last year when she had that one-night stand with ole dude from Chicago?” Myla recalled.

Jaelynn gasped. “Oh yeah, the mechanic from the Chi, Kyree Ross.”

“Why y’all gotta bring him up? I have a hard enough time not thinking about him.”

“Damn! I wish we could have seen him in person. I mean, he looks good as hell on the ’Gram, but clearly, those pics don’t do him justice with the way you’re still stuck on him,” Myla commented.

I rolled my eyes but didn’t have a rebuttal because she was right. Instagram didn’t do him justice, and I *was* still stuck on him.

“You’re available now, sis. Slide in his DMs,” Jaelynn encouraged.

I shook my head vigorously. “He has a girlfriend, and I just got out of a relationship.”

“If that’s what you wanna call it,” Myla sneered with an eye roll.

“Brae, the way you went on and on about him after that night, I don’t know how you’ve stayed away from him all this time. You might not believe it or want to admit it, but you fell in love that night,” Jaelynn preached.

It definitely felt like love. They continued talking while I zoned out and ultimately found myself on Kyree’s Instagram page, something I did a few times a day, every day, since the most memorable night of my life. He was so beautiful. The

most recent picture he posted was in front of a building with the caption that said: *#hardwork #discipline #goalachieved #businessowner*.

Tears began to gather in my eyes when I realized what that picture meant. He actually did it. He was opening his own shop. The pride I felt for him was overwhelming, and I needed a minute to get myself together.

“Going to the bathroom,” rushed out of my mouth.

When I reached the bathroom and found an empty stall, I looked at the picture more closely, and the tears flowed freely. *How was I this emotional for a man that I barely knew?* I remained in the bathroom until I got myself together. By the time I returned, it was time to board the plane.



WHEN THE SHUTTLE DROPPED US OFF AT THE RESORT, I WAS IN complete awe. I had seen the pictures on the website, but they didn't show the true beauty of the place. I suddenly became super excited about the week ahead.

“I can't believe we're here. We've worked hard for this trip and deserve every bit of fun we're about to have.”

Jaelynn and Myla looked at me with big smiles.

“Whew! I'm glad you came back to us. I thought we had lost you for a minute.” Myla joked.

“Whatever! I'm good. Let's go get checked in. I can't wait to see the townhouse.”

Jaelynn went ahead of us to get our keys, and the check-in process was extremely smooth. I almost danced as we were led to our room. Once we were inside, I screamed because it was just so damn beautiful.

“Y'all see this shit? Oh my fucking God! I'm never leaving.”

I dropped my bags and flew through the townhouse, admiring each room. When I got to what was probably the master bedroom, I tripped over something on the floor.

“Shit!”

When I saw that it was a suitcase, confusion replaced my excitement.

“Hey!” I called out to Myla and Jaelynn. “Are you sure we’re in the right townhome?”

“I think so. Why?” Myla asked.

“Because there’s luggage in the master bedroom.”

“What? How?” Jaelynn asked, heading in that direction. “There is. We need to call the front desk to see if there’s an error or something. I’ll do it.”

She went to the living area and picked up the phone that was on the end table. Myla had come over and sat on the couch as we waited for someone to pick up. I stood in the middle of the house, still confused as to how a mistake like this could happen. *It’s Memorial Day weekend. What if there were no more rooms available, and we had to stay here with strangers?* Absolutely not!

“Jae, what’s taking so long?” I asked.

“No one is picking up!”

Behind me, there was a noise near the door, and the three of us looked in that direction. The door opened slowly, and I heard male voices.

“What would you do if you saw her again?” one voice said.

“I’d make her mine,” came from a voice that sent chills through my body. A voice that I wouldn’t forget for the rest of my days.

It couldn’t be.

I watched the door as it opened, and when I saw his face, shock took over. The look on his face had to match mine as he made his way to me. I couldn't move and stood frozen in place.

"Braelynn," he whispered before wrapping me in his arms and burying his face in my neck. He hugged me so tightly that I could feel his heart beating against mine.

"Kyree?" I said, still stunned.

"Baby," he said, pulling his head up and looking into my eyes that were now filled with tears. "I can't believe you're here. I didn't think I'd ever see you again."

"Is this even real?" I cried. "How—"

Not letting me finish my sentence, his lips landed on mine, and they felt as good as I remembered. I melted in his arms, and we got lost in each other. It was like no one else was in the room. We floated into our own world until we heard the clearing of throats. When we separated, we looked around the room at four smiling faces. Then it dawned on me, it dawned on both of us, that we had been set up.

"Y'all did this?" I said to Jaelynn and Myla, who were standing near the couch.

They nodded proudly, grinning from ear to ear.

"Y'all set this whole thing up?" he asked who I knew to be his brothers from his Instagram posts.

They nodded as well, wearing satisfied smiles.

"Wow!" I said.

"This is crazy!" Kyree said, with a huge smile. "A good crazy... Shit, a *great* crazy."

He wrapped his arms around me again, and I buried my head in his chest. There were no words to express the happiness I felt, and I didn't want this feeling to ever end.



Words couldn't express the joy I felt having Braelynn in my arms again. I hadn't realized how much I missed her, and I'd do whatever was necessary to keep her in my life. I wasn't sure what her relationship status was, but that shit didn't even matter. She'd been mine since I first laid eyes on her. If I had to take her from her nigga, so be it.

We had all moved to the living area of the townhome. I sat in the sofa chair with Braelynn on my lap, my brothers sat on the couch, and her sister and best friend were on the love seat.

"I'm assuming we don't need to make any introductions," I said.

"Naw, we old friends now," Kolby confirmed.

"So how did all this come about?" Braelynn asked.

They all started talking at the same time, telling their versions of the story.

"Hold up. We can't hear everybody at once. Who initiated contact?" I asked.

"Me," Jaelynn said. "She told us about you the morning after your little rendezvous. I've never seen my sister so... so... I don't even know what to call it. All I knew is that you

made one hell of an impression. For months, she mentioned you every single day. Mind you, she had a whole ass man but was talking about you like she didn't."

"Shut up! I was not!" Braelynn said with a laugh.

"Girl, don't lie," Myla added.

"Kyree was the same way. Sappy ass was lovesick like a muhfucka," Kamden said, followed by a chuckle.

"I ain't even gon' lie. I was fucked up for a minute," I admitted.

"Anyway, one day, Myla and I were talking and decided that if Brae wasn't gon' make a move, we would do it for her. We reached out to Kamden and Kolby, and we all hooked this shit up," she said proudly.

I appreciated having people around me that wanted to see me win in all areas of my life, and I was glad to see that Braelynn did as well.

"Y'all been planning this trip for a minute. How did y'all know that we'd be single?" Braelynn asked.

"Shit, we didn't, but we don't give a damn about that nigga," Jaelyn said.

"Right! We knew Kyree had your heart, so Samuel would have been a casualty if it came to that," Myla added.

"Bro, we knew that once you laid eyes on Braelynn again, Leah would be a distant memory. It just worked out that you already gave her ass the boot," Kam said.

"With that being said," Kolby began. "We put this shit together because we could see the love y'all had for each other. Now, it's up to y'all to do the rest."

My eyes met Braelynn's just as she said, "I think we can take it from here."

"On that note, can y'all excuse us?" I asked, tapping her thigh so that she would stand. "I'm sure y'all can figure out the room situation, but we got the master."

I wasn't trying to be rude, but I needed some alone time with Braelynn, like right now. Taking her hand, I guided her into what would be *our* room for the week, locking the door behind us. Before another word could be spoken, I took her face in my hands, her arms went around my waist, and our lips met in another passionate kiss. Our connection only ceased when we were forced to take a breath.

"Damn," I said as I looked in her eyes.

"Yeah."

"I've missed you so damn much, which is crazy because I only had the pleasure of being in your presence for a short time. Yet I've craved you for an entire year... and here you are."

"Here I am."

My hands went to the hem of her shirt, and with her assistance, I lifted it up and over her head. Tossing it to the side, I reached for the waistband of her shorts and pushed them down, catching her panties along the way. I felt her hands on the string of my swimming trunks. She fumbled with it a bit before they were loose enough to push down. My dick sprang free, tapping her stomach.

"Let's shower," she said, pulling me toward the bathroom.

"Go ahead. I'll be right there."

I watched her naked ass prance away before going to my suitcase and getting a few condoms. When I walked into the bathroom, she was stepping into the shower. I could see the steam rising, and I shook my head. I don't know what's up with women and hot ass water. Stepping in behind her, I turned the handle to adjust the temperature of the water right away. She wasn't about to have me looking like a prune when we got out.

"Why'd you do that? The temperature was perfect."

"No the hell it wasn't. Now gimme those lips."

I leaned in for her lips, and she put her hand up to my chest, pushing me back.

“Let me wash you up first.”

She lathered up a towel with soap and began at my chest. Our eyes remained connected as she covered me with suds. My dick had been hard since we entered the bedroom, and the more she touched my body, the stiffer it got. When she wrapped her hand around it, she got carried away in her attempt to “clean” it with her strokes, and I had to stop her.

“Baby, don’t play,” I told her.

Giggling, she grabbed my bicep and turned me around to wash my backside. Getting in the squat position, she washed the back of my legs then turned me around to do the same to the front, including my feet. Her mouth was perfectly aligned with my dick, and she looked up at me with lust in her eyes.

Sticking her tongue out, she lightly licked the tip. When she let it travel around the mushroomed top, I knew I had to stop her now, or I was going to fuck the shit out of her mouth. Before she could cover the head with it, I pulled her up.

“My turn,” I told her. She giggled again on her way up because she knew exactly what she was doing to me.

I took the towel from her hand and repeated her actions, bathing her as she did me. By the time I kneeled in front of her pussy, I was over the bathing and this foreplay.

“Open up and give me the lips!”

Gripping her ass, I said a quick thank you to the man upstairs for high ceilings, lifted her up, and guided her legs to my shoulders. Without delay, I dove in.

“Fuck!” she screamed.

Her sweet nectar tasted just as I remembered. The strokes of my tongue across, around, and between her folds sent her body into a frenzy. Her thighs contracted around my head, letting me know that I was hitting all the right spots.

“Ky, baby, please!”

I wasn't sure if she was begging me to stop or go harder. Assuming she meant the latter, I buried my tongue as deep as humanly possible and licked her walls as if they were melted chocolate on a candy bar wrapper.

“Oh my Geeeezusss!”

Not able to warn me, her sex serum squirted all over my face. *Got damn! A squirter? That didn't happen the first time.*

Pulling my face away, I slowly guided each of her legs from my shoulders while still holding her against the wall, allowing her to slide down until her feet hit the floor. Keeping one hand around her waist, I grabbed one of the condoms that I had put in soap tray, ripped it open, and covered my throbbing erection.

“Ahhhh!” we said simultaneously when I lifted her by the ass just enough to sit her back down on my dick.

Bypassing the meeting of our lips, our tongues intertwined. Kissing Braelynn was an experience in and of itself. It was like our mouths were making love, and if that was all she was offering, I'd be satisfied with just that. Moving my mouth away from hers was a challenge, but I wanted to use my tongue to refamiliarize myself with her hot spots. Her moans became increasingly louder, letting me know that I had a good memory. She used the heels of her feet to increase the pressure between us. If I wasn't careful, I'd fuck around and lose this nut sooner than I wanted.

“Shit, baby, it's—”

Her words were cut off when I pushed my hips up and around, digging into her soul. When her walls began to contract around my dick, there was no need for me to war with myself trying to hold on to a nut that I'd been ready to release anyway. Faster and harder, I pumped until the condom was filled with my seeds, and the people at the pool could hear Braelynn singing my praises.

Bracelynn



After our session in the shower, we had another one in front of the sink. Watching him hit it from the back in front of the mirror was... whew... That shit was amazing. We took another shower, separately this time, and got dressed. When I came from the bathroom, after making my hair look presentable again, he was sitting on the end of the bed. I tried to sit next to him, but he pulled me onto his lap. He rested one of his hands between my thighs, and I put my hands around his neck.

“We need to talk,” he said in a serious tone.

“Uh oh. This sounds serious.”

“I mean, it kind of is.” He paused, locking his eyes with mine. “I still can’t believe that we’re here... in Belize... together. I never thought I’d see you again outside of your Instagram posts.”

“You’ve been stalking my Instagram?”

“All day, every day.”

The thought of him being consumed by my posts each day made me smile.

“Why didn’t you ever DM me?” I asked.

“I don’t know... Fear of being rejected I guess.”

“Me too.”

“You too, what?”

“I found your Instagram and was afraid to reach out.”

“Why?” he asked with a look of concern.

“We both had our situations, and... I don't know... I wasn't sure that our feelings matched.”

“What we shared that night was something that I can't even put into words. There were times I had to convince myself that it actually happened. The way I felt with you, I've never felt before or again since then,” he confessed.

“Same.”

“But we're here now.”

“Yeah, we are.” I rested my forehead against his, then suddenly remembered something. “Congratulations.”

“For what?” He moved his head away from mine.

“For achieving your goal and opening your shop. I cried tears of joy for you when I saw your post.”

“You cried for me, baby?”

“I did. I'm so proud and happy for you.”

He reached for my neck as he leaned in for a kiss. I flinched when his hand gently wrapped around it. Pulling back, he looked at me, then at my neck.

“What happened?”

Avoiding his eyes, I tried to stand, but he held me down.

“Why did you flinch?” he asked, anger rising.

“Umm, Samuel and I got into it, and he choked me.”

He shot up off the bed, damn near letting me fall to the floor, but he was holding my waist.

“That nigga put his hands on you?” He paced furiously back and forth near the bed. “What the fuck happened? Was

this—did he—”

He was at a loss for words, and I wanted to calm him down as much as I could.

“Baby.” I stood in front of him to stop him from moving. “I’m good. It was the first and only time he’d ever done anything like that.”

“It should have never happened.” His hands went to my cheeks. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to protect you.”

The fluid building in his eyes shocked me. The fact that he was blaming himself for Samuel’s actions made me admire him even more.

“I can’t let you take the blame. How could you have protected me from something like that? I—”

“By being a man,” he interrupted. “I should have made you mine the moment I felt the vibrations that shot through my body the first time we touched. I knew, right then, that you were made for me. If that wasn’t enough of a clue, the second I entered your haven confirmed for me that you were mine... that you were meant for me. But I ignored it, giving him the opportunity to hurt you.”

“Baby, you—”

“I’m gon’ fuck him up. You know that, right?”

He said that with an authority that made my panties wet. I simply nodded in reply because I had nothing to say in that regard.

“Do we still need to talk? They probably think we died in here.”

He laughed. “As loud as you were, they might think *you* died with the way I was killing that pussy.”

His arms went around my waist, and I pretended to push him away.

“Whatever! What did you want to talk about?”

“After the conversation we just had, I shouldn’t have to tell you that you’re my woman. I don’t know what’s gonna happen when we go back home, but I need you to know that *you* are mine, and *I* am yours. We’ll figure out the logistics later.”

Through my Kool-Aid smile, I said, “Okay.”

“Now, let’s go see what’s up for tonight.”

He led the way out of the master bedroom, and we walked into an empty living room. After further investigation, we found a note that said, *Y’all have fun. Be back later!*

“Well damn! I guess they said to hell with us,” I said with a chuckle, showing Kyree the note.

“I think we said to hell with them first. But that’s cool because I see them niggas literally every day. Now I don’t have to share your attention.”

He wrapped his arm around me and kissed my forehead. My stomach growled, and it was so loud that I was slightly embarrassed.

“I’m starving.”

“I hear.” He rubbed my stomach. “Let’s go find someplace to eat.”

We walked through Mahogany Bay Village, hand in hand. The sun was beginning to set, and it was so beautiful and serene. Being here with Kyree gave me so much peace... something I’d never felt with Samuel. No words were spoken as we took in all there was to see. The vibrations that he spoke of earlier were buzzing through my body.

He stopped in front of a place called Panades Kitchen and looked at me for the okay. I nodded, and we went inside. After being seated, looking over the menu, and ordering our food, we focused on each other.

“So tell me about Braelynn.”

“I don’t even know where to start.”

“The beginning. When’s your birthday?”

“July first, and I’ll be the dirty thirty this year,” I shared proudly, twerking in my seat.

Kyree’s eyes got low, and he bit his bottom lip.

“You better cut that out before we give these people a show.” I straightened up in my seat. “Do you have any other siblings besides Jaelynn?”

“Nope. It’s just the two of us. I’ve known Myla since seventh grade, so it’s been the three of us for several years.”

“That’s cool. Y’all seem real close. My brothers are my best friends. We don’t even fuck with nobody else real heavy.”

“Neither do we. People are too messy these days. Can’t trust nobody.”

“It was pretty obvious that your girls aren’t too fond of your ex.”

“Nobody liked him. My mom warned me about his controlling ways. My uncle David wanted to put him in a chokehold every time he saw him. Myla’s brother, Myles, said he was a bitch the first time they met. I asked myself daily why I was with him.” I shook my head in disgust at myself.

“Did you ever come up with a reason?”

“Honestly?”

“I always want you to be honest with me, and I will be the same with you. Don’t ever feel like you can’t tell me the truth.”

“At first, I liked him. He said and did all the right things. Once we made it official, I noticed some things I didn’t like about him, but I ignored them and got real comfortable.”

I looked down at the table, debating whether or not I wanted to share more. The waiter came with our food, giving me a few minutes to decide, but as soon as he left, Kyree pushed me for more.

“Continue,” he told me.

“Don’t judge me, okay?”

“I promise not to judge you.”

I took a deep breath before I continued. “Samuel is very well off. Well, his family is, and he makes good money with his company. About three months into our relationship, he started paying all my bills. The first time he did it, we got into a huge fight because I knew he was the type of nigga to throw it in my face. Besides, I had no problems paying my own bills. Eventually, I let him do it just to avoid arguments.”

“You stayed with the nigga for his money?” he questioned with an unreadable look on his face.

“No, not really. I just—since he was paying everything, I started to stack my money. The fatter my pockets got, the more I looked beyond his flaws.”

“Damn, Brae, that’s kind of...”

“Shallow. Yeah, I know, but that’s really not who I am. I had been saving my money for a down payment on the shop where my dad was part owner. I don’t know what kind of agreement my dad made with his former partner, but I offered to buy him out. At first, he agreed and gave me a year. Once I had saved enough, I was so excited, only to find out that he sold it to someone else. The worst part was that the person he sold it to tore the building down and made it a parking lot.”

Every time I thought about old Mr. Clayborn’s ass, I got heated. I wanted to beat that old man’s ass right there in that shop when he told me that.

“Shit, baby! That’s fucked up. I’m sorry that happened.”

“I’m over it—well, not really, but that was when I started thinking about opening my own shop and hiring female mechanics only.”

“I think that’s a dope ass idea.”

“Yeah, it is. With Samuel paying all my bills, I’m really close to having enough money to buy another building outright.”

We both focused on eating our food for a few minutes, which was delicious, by the way. After spilling my guts to him, I just knew he would see me differently, but he asked for honesty, so that was what I gave him.

“I get it,” he finally said.

I paused as I was about to put a spoonful of rice in my mouth and met his eyes with mine.

“I get it,” he repeated.

“You do?”

“Yeah. You had a goal you needed to achieve, and he was a means to an end,” he said. “Leah is from a wealthy family. They’re like Black royalty around Chicago. Although I’ve never taken money from her for anything, she thought money could solve everything. Her family is also well connected, and in the early stages of our relationship, she made promises of being able to connect me with people that could help me start my business. When I realized that she was just saying the shit she thought I wanted to hear, I did some research and realized I could do everything I wanted to do, on my own. So... I get it.”

“When Samuel and I first met, I was in a *really* dark place. My father had died almost a year prior, and I was still grieving. I was the definition of a daddy’s girl. My mom still says that her job was simply to get me here because as soon as I was born, I was all about my daddy.”

He smiled and covered my hand with his because he could see that I was getting emotional.

“Anyway, when I met Samuel, he was the perfect distraction. It wasn’t like I didn’t have any feelings for him, because I did. I actually thought that I could grow to love him... until I met you.”

He gave me his sexy smile before asking, “What about me, in that short amount of time, made you realize you didn’t love him?”

“Everything.”

Kyree



After filling our stomachs, we sat in the restaurant and continued to enjoy each other's company. When we left, we slowly made our way back to the townhouse with one of my arms draped across her shoulders and one of hers around my waist.

"It's your turn," she suddenly said, breaking our comfortable silence.

"My turn for what?" I asked, although I knew exactly what she was talking about.

She looked up at me with her lips turned up. "Don't try to play me. I wanna know more about you, since you're my man and all. Tell me about Kyree."

"I guess that's only fair, huh?" She nodded. "Well, my birthday is on December seventh, and I'll be thirty-one this year. I'm the oldest, Kolby is twenty-eight, and Kamden is twenty-six. My parents have been married for thirty-three years."

"That's nice. When did you break up with your ex?"

I laughed. "Oh, you just wanna get right to the nitty gritty?"

“Yup. From what your brothers hinted, it sounds like there may be a story behind it. What was their beef with her?”

“Naw, it was nothing like that. They thought she was too bougie and uppity acting. My mom said she had a nasty attitude, and she didn’t like her spirit.”

“Mamas be knowing, but how did *you* feel about her?”

“Obviously, I liked something about her, or I would have ended it sooner. We met at a club, and it started off purely physical. Then, one day, I realized that we were in a whole relationship, and I couldn’t even tell you when it happened.”

“Was that something you wanted?”

“With the right person, of course. Leah was more of the right person for that moment and lingered around much longer than she should have. She was used to getting what she wanted and had a way of manipulating things in her favor. I was too busy working and focused on saving my money to date around, so I let things continue because it was convenient. I knew she wasn’t my future. Besides, my mother would have killed me.”

“I can totally relate because my mom probably told me a million times that I better not let Samuel get me pregnant.”

I laughed aloud at that. “No shit! Almost every conversation I had with my mom after she met Leah, she forbade me to get her pregnant.”

“Mothers can be a trip, but ninety-nine percent of the time, they’re right about every damn thing.”

“True... You think your mom will like me?” I asked.

“I have no doubt that she will.”

“Yeah, mine will be trying to get her pastor to come and marry us right away. She’s gonna love you.”

We stood in front of the door to the townhome, quietly taking each other in. She wore a big smile on her face, and I’m

sure mine matched hers. My heart raced at the thought of spending the rest of my life with her.

It's impossible for me to be in love, isn't it? This is only the second time we'd seen each other, and although I could create a roadmap with directions to all of the places on her body that made her moan in ecstasy, it was too soon to be in love, right?

“What are you thinking about?” she asked, bringing me out of my thoughts.

“You... and how lucky I am to have met you... and how my feelings for you only grew deeper during the time that we were apart. Since the day we met, I knew there was something about you. If life's circumstances were different back then, you could already be my wife and carrying one of my seeds by now.”

“After one meeting, you could see having all of that with me?”

“Do you remember me saying that it felt like I'd known you my whole life?” She nodded. “That night, it was like our spirits were reunited. Everything about you was familiar, and you felt like home. I've never experienced anything like that before.”

Before she could reply, the door was pulled open, and Jaelynn stood on the other side, wearing a smirk.

“Are y'all gon' stand out here all night playing kissy-face?” she said before walking away, leaving the door open.

I shook my head and took Braelynn's hand, leading her inside. The four of them were sitting in the living room, dressed as if they were about to kick it. It looked as if they had paired up. Kolby and Myla sat on the couch while Kamden and Jaelynn were on the love seat. I made eye contact with both my brothers as we traded a smirk.

“Y'all looking mighty cozy,” Braelynn said. I guess she peeped the situation, too.

“Girl, hush. You left us to fend for ourselves, so we fending for ourselves,” Myla replied, winking at Kolby.

“Is that right?” she teased. “Let me find out y’all—” Braelynn began before Jaelynn cut her off.

“Nope! We just chillin’, sis. We’ll be here a week, so we’re just getting to know our roommates.”

The girls did all the talking while my brothers remained quiet. I’d have to find out from them later on what was up. The way they were looking at the girls, though, I knew something was up.

“What are y’all about to get into?” I asked.

“Going to that club we heard about earlier,” Kamden answered.

“Word? Baby, you feel like hittin’ the club?”

“Are y’all leaving right now?” Braelynn asked.

“We can wait for y’all to get ready,” Kolby offered.

“But don’t go in that room and get to fuckin’. We ain’t got time for all that,” Jaelynn added.

“Girl! Shut up! Ain’t nobody—”

“Don’t even tune your mouth up to tell that lie, sis. Why do you think we were gone when y’all finally came up for air?”

The whole room went up in laughter, and an embarrassed Braelynn took off to the bedroom. I shrugged my shoulders and followed her.

“Aww, my baby is embarrassed?” I teased, holding her by the waist and planting a kiss on her forehead.

“We weren’t that loud. Jaelynn plays too much.”

“I wasn’t loud at all. *You*, on the other hand, were hittin’ some pretty high notes.”

She gasped and pushed me away. “I was not that loud. Niggas stay exaggerating.”

I pulled her back to me and wrapped my arms around her so that she couldn't move.

“Who is niggas? You saying I didn't have your ass singing soprano in that shower? You want a replay so we can be certain?”

I kissed all over her face and tickled her sides until she admitted the truth.

“Okay, okay, okay,” she admitted through her laugh.

“That's what I thought. I ain't gotta lie on my dick, baby.”

I released her and tapped her ass before we both prepared for a night out.



ABOUT AN HOUR AND A HALF LATER, WE ENDED UP AT A CLUB in town called Jaguars Temple Night Club. It was fairly spacious, and the DJ played music for the diverse crowd that was present. While the girls danced with each other, my brothers and I sat back with our drinks and enjoyed the show they were giving.

“So what's up with Jaelynn and Myla?” I asked.

Kolby and Kamden, who were sitting on either side of me, gave each other a look, and then Kolby answered.

“Myla's cool.”

“Cool as in, you wanna see what's up with her?”

“Maybe. I've been feeling her out today. We got time, so I'm just chillin'.”

“What about you and Jaelynn?” I asked Kamden.

He began shaking his head before I finished the question.

“If Kolby needs me to run interference so he can kick it with Myla, I'm down. Anything besides that, I'm good on her,” he told us.

“Damn, it’s like that?” I said, kinda shocked.

“Jaelynn is a firecracker. She’ll have me in jail about her cute ass. I can see that right now. Look at her.”

I had my eyes on the dance floor while we conversed, but my focus was on Braelynn. When he brought my attention to her sister, I couldn’t help but laugh. She had found some dude and was giving him the dance of his life.

“She’s just having fun, bro. We’re in Belize, and she’s young and single. You want her to act like a prude?” Kolby said.

“I don’t see Braelynn and Myla shaking their asses like—oh shit, never mind.”

I took my eyes off Braelynn for one second to look at Jaelynn, then check the time on my phone. When my eyes were back on her, it was clear that she had lost her mind. All three of them had. My brothers and I hopped out of our seats and made our way to the dance floor with a quickness. They didn’t know we were coming, because their backs were facing us as they dropped every god damn thing like it was hot. We got to them just before they were about to drop into a split.

“Braelynn, what the fuck, baby?” I shouted over the music.

“What?” she replied innocently as I dragged her, as gently as I could, back to our table.

I sat down, and Braelynn stood in front of me, between my legs, with her arms folded across her chest, wearing a mean mug.

“What the hell was that?” I asked again.

“That’s our favorite song, and we made up a routine for it when we were younger. Every time it comes on, we go crazy.”

“You’ve clearly gone crazy. You can’t be dancing like that with those tiny ass shorts on and barely-there shirt. Damn, baby!”

I shook my head at my fucking self. Never in my years of dating was I a jealous type of nigga. I didn't even know what to do with these feelings.

“My bad, baby. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. That's just our shit.”

She leaned in to kiss my lips, and although she still had me fucked up, I kissed her back.

“Look, baby, my bad for tripping like that. I swear to God I'm not even that kind of nigga. At least I haven't been in the past. You had my dick rocking up, so I know these other niggas in here were...” I couldn't even finish, so I shook my head.

“Aww, my poor baby is jealous,” she teased, grabbing my ears and pulling me into a kiss.

“I don't know what I am, but don't dance like that no more when I'm around. Well, unless we're about to fuck or some shit.”

I knew I wasn't making a lick of damn sense, but this woman had my feelings all over the place. She turned around and sat on my lap.

“Don't be grinding your ass on my dick, baby. That's cruel and unusual punishment. I didn't bring any rubbers since I didn't anticipate fucking you in this club.”

She turned around and looked at me with hooded eyes, as if she was contemplating the risk of getting pregnant. I found out earlier today, when we exchanged our most recent STD test results, that she wasn't on birth control.

“Okay, I'll behave.”

I looked over at Kolby and Myla booed up. I guess he was done feeling her out. I looked back on the dance floor, and Kamden and Jaelynn were arguing. That was nothing but the denial of sexual attraction. I was willing to bet they'd give in to that eventually.

Bracelynn



The week was moving way too fast. It was already Wednesday, and we only had today and tomorrow left before we had to go home. The six of us had some fun together as a group, I kicked it with my girls, and Kyree chilled with his brothers. The next two days, though, I didn't want to be with anyone else but Kyree. He and his brothers had gone to the gym, and Jaelynn and Myla went to soak up some sun before it got too hot. That left me alone with my thoughts.

I tried not to let sadness creep in about us being apart. We lived thousands of miles away from each other, and I wasn't sure how this was going to work out. I tried bringing it up a couple of times, but Kyree didn't want to talk about it until it was necessary.

Yesterday, we checked in with our parents. When I called my mom, she was as excited as I was that Kyree and I were reunited. I didn't know how much Jaelynn told her about him, but she seemed to think he was my soul mate. In her eyes, anyone was better than Samuel, though. She said that he'd come over when he realized that I had moved out and blocked him from contacting me. Luckily, my uncle was there, and when he got disrespectful, Uncle David put his ass in check

and sent him on his way. I wasn't ready to deal with the aftermath of this breakup yet.

When Kyree and his brothers called their parents, his mom was absolutely the cutest ever. I could tell that her husband and three boys doted on her and treated her like a queen. However, she didn't waste any time telling me that she was ready for a granddaughter, not a grandson, because she needed a break from boys. I told her I couldn't make any promises just yet.

Kyree rented one of those cabanas on the water, and we planned to spend the day together, just the two of us. As I stepped out of the shower, he walked into the bathroom.

"Ayyee, perfect timing," he said as his eyes devoured my body.

"Don't even bring your sweaty body near me," I warned.

He took a few steps in my direction as I dried off. "You didn't mind my sweaty body all over you last night."

He snatched my towel away and wiped the sweat off his face, then tossed it back at me. I let it fall on the floor and grabbed a fresh one.

"That's because I was sweaty, too."

I left him in the bathroom to shower while I decided which bikini I would wear today. I laid my choices out on the bed and studied each one as if I was making a life-changing decision. My ringing phone interrupted my decision-making. The screen displayed an unknown number, so I ignored the call. Before I could go back to my bikinis, it rang again, showing the same number. Rolling my eyes, I went ahead and answered it, putting it on speaker.

"This is Brae—"

"I told you I was sorry, and this is what you do?" the voice said, cutting me off.

"Samuel?" I knew it was him, but since it was an unknown number, I asked to be sure.

“You know who the fuck this is, Braelynn. After all the shit I’ve done for you, I make one little mistake, and you’re gone.”

“Little mistake? Nigga, you put your hands on me. Ain’t shit little about that.”

“I said I was sorry. Damn! You act like I punched you in the face. How the hell you move out without even telling me?”

“Who is that?” I heard Kyree behind me.

“Is that a dude, Braelynn? You out there whoring just like I thought!” Samuel yelled.

Oh shit!

Kyree snatched the phone from my hands before I could respond to either of them.

“Aye, nigga! I’m only gon’ say this one time, then I’m hanging up, and when I hang up, don’t call this number back again. You put your hands on the wrong one, and if I ever lay eyes on you, I’m fucking you up on sight. I protect what’s mine, and Braelynn is mine. You got that? Play with me if you want to.”

He ended the call, tossed my phone on the bed, and went back into the bathroom. I stood in the same spot, holding my towel up, turned all the way on with his actions. After gathering myself, I tiptoed into the bathroom, and Kyree was brushing his teeth. Walking up behind him, I snaked my arms around his waist and kissed his back. When he finished, he turned around to face me, wrapping his arms around my waist.

“You good?” he asked after kissing my forehead.

“I’m fine.”

“Why’d you answer his call?”

“I didn’t know it was him. It was an unknown number, and he called back-to-back.”

“Did he threaten you?”

“No. He was just talking shit. I’m not worried about Samuel.”

“Just because you ain’t worried don’t mean that nigga won’t try some slick shit. I’m gonna change my flight and come home with you,” he offered.

I pulled back to get a good look at him to see if he was serious.

“What? No, baby. You don’t need to do that. Besides, I’m staying with Jae until I find a place.”

“I don’t feel comfortable letting you go home, not knowing what you’re walking into.”

“Samuel is not crazy. He—”

“Listen, baby. Not only did you move out without telling him, you already moved on to another nigga. That’s a huge blow to a man’s ego. He already put his hands on you once, so I guarantee you he’ll try to do it again if I don’t let him know what’s up. Either I’m flying home with you, or you’re coming with me. I’ll give you some time to think about it, but don’t take too long. I need to know so we can change the flight.”

He kissed my forehead and left me in the bathroom as I tried to figure out what had just happened.



ABOUT AN HOUR LATER, WE WERE TAKEN BY CANOE TO THE cabana that Kyree had rented for the day. Once we got settled, we had lunch and enjoyed being in each other’s presence.

“Let’s discuss the pros and cons of us going to Seattle or Chicago.”

“Us, huh?”

“You damn right. Wherever you decide to go, that’s where I’m going,” he said.

“If we go to Seattle, you’ll delay the progress of your new shop. I don’t want you to fall behind because of me.”

“I guess it’s decided then. You’re coming to Chicago.”

“Wait, what?”

“You’re right. I planned to get have the contractors and designers start working on the shop when I got back. For you, to make sure you’re safe, I don’t have a problem with delaying it a few days. But, if you come to Chicago, you’ll be safe with me, and I can do as I had initially planned.”

“Even if I come with you, eventually, I’ll have to go home.”

“The next time you touch down in Seattle, whether it’s this Friday or a week from now, I’ll be with you. When we get there, you’re taking me to that nigga’s house or place of business, so I can beat his ass. I guarantee his punk ass won’t fuck with you when I’m finished with him.”

“Ky, I can’t let you do that. I promise you Samuel will have you arrested. He’s not about that life like that.”

“How do you expect me to let you go home, knowing that he got away with putting his hands on you once? I can’t let that slide, Brae.”

I released a deep breath because I knew that nothing I said would convince him to let this shit go.

“Let’s make a deal. I’ll come to Chicago for a week, but when I go home, you can’t come. By then, I’m sure Samuel will have cooled off.”

He was shaking his head before I finished telling him my proposition.

“Naw, that’s not gon’ work. I’m coming with you, even if I only stay for a couple of days. I need to meet my future mother-in-law anyway.”

He said that last part so smooth I almost missed it.

“Your future mother-in-law?”

“I said what I said. Now that that’s settled...”

He leaned over and closed the curtains to the cabana, giving us complete privacy, then made himself more comfortable by lying down.

“C’mere,” he said, directing me to his lap.

I was already right next to him, so I threw my leg over his pelvic area and straddled him. When our eyes met, I suddenly felt bashful. His gaze was so strong that I had to look away.

“Look at me,” he demanded.

I did as he asked, and it felt as if he could see into my soul. I’d asked God a million times how I could feel so strongly for him so quickly because it seemed impossible.

“I know you’re worried about how we’re gonna manage a long-distance relationship.” I nodded. “Do you want it to work?” I nodded again. “I do too, and that’s all we need to make it happen. Stop worrying, okay?”

“You promise?”

“I do.”

Both of his hands went to the strings on either side of my bikini bottoms. He pulled them loose, and I lifted up just a little, allowing him to toss them aside. Doing the same with my bikini top, I was now naked.

“You are so fucking beautiful, baby.”

I leaned forward to meet his lips, and while I focused on the sensations that kissing him sent through my body, he did some kind of trick move and slipped out of his swim trunks. I moaned when I felt his bare dick rub against my bare pussy. I wound against him like it was nobody’s business, and it felt so damn good.

“Hmm, shit,” I mumbled against his lip.

“This shit slippery as hell, baby. You ’bout to cum?”

I didn't need to answer, because my pussy answered for me as she leaked all over his dick. While I recovered, he rolled over so that he was on top of me. When I opened my eyes, his dick was standing at attention, and he was pulling a condom out of the package. After covering himself, he put both my legs in the crooks of his arms and pushed himself inside of me.

“Ahh shit!” He froze momentarily before saying. “Every time is like the first time.”

The rest of the day was on a repeat of talking, eating, and making love until the sun went down.

Kynee



“When I told my parents that you were coming to Chicago, my mom made me promise to bring you to her before it got too late,” I told Braelynn as I let us into my apartment.

“You told them I was coming?”

“Of course. If my mom found out you were here and I kept it a secret, she would kill me.”

We stepped inside, and I locked the door behind us. Although it was the middle of the afternoon, my apartment was dark because my blinds were closed. I flipped on the light next to the door before leading her inside, leaving our luggage by the door.

“There isn’t much to it, but I can give you a tour if you want.”

“Okay.”

“Well, from here, you can see the living room, kitchen, and dining room.” I pointed to each as I said it, and she looked around. “This is the bathroom, guest room, and my room, which has a full bathroom over there.”

“It’s nice. I was expecting you to be a little messier,” she said as she walked further into my bedroom.

“What? I think I’m a pretty neat person. I mean, I’m not anal about it, but I like to keep a clean house.”

“You were kinda messy in Belize, baby.”

“That’s because I was on vacation, and I knew someone was coming to clean up after me.”

“Yeah, okay. Let me find out your mom came over to clean for you while you were out of town.”

I touched my chest and pretended to be hurt. “Damn, now I know what you really think of me.”

She turned to face me. Standing on her toes, she kissed my cheek and moved past me, leaving the room.

“We’ll see,” she tossed behind her. “What’s on the agenda, besides going to see your parents?”

I followed her over to the couch and sat next to her.

“First, we need to go grocery shopping so I can test out your cooking skills while you’re here.”

She gasped and bumped my arm with her shoulder. “Boy, I can cook, but since that’s what we on, I’ll be testing out your skills, too.”

I laughed. “I’m telling you right now, ya man can’t cook. Most of the time, I eat takeout or go to my parents’ house. That’s the one thing my mother didn’t require of us growing up.”

“It’s a good thing I don’t mind teaching you, because I will *not* be the wife that’s cooking every day.”

Chills ran through my body when she said wife. When I didn’t respond, she continued.

“You don’t know how to cook anything? Not even simple shit like breakfast food or a grilled cheese sandwich?”

“You’re gonna be my wife?” I finally responded.

“Huh? Kyree, what are you talking about?”

“I asked if you were gonna be my wife.”

“Umm, I mean, it’s kinda soon to be thinking about all that,” she replied nervously.

“But you must be thinking about it because you said it.”

“I said what?”

“You said that you will not be the wife that’s cooking every day. I heard you loud and clear, so that means that you’ve been thinking about it.”

She shrugged her shoulders and attempted to stand, but I pulled her onto my lap, wrapped my arms around her, and showered her face with kisses.

“You don’t have to admit it,” I said between kisses. “It’s a fact, either way. Now let’s go before I have your fine ass bent over this couch.”

“Why is your ass so nasty?”

“The question is, why do you like my nasty ass?”

“Whatever! Let’s go.”

Minutes later, we left my apartment. As I drove toward the grocery store that I frequented, Braelynn looked out of the passenger side window. I’d learned from being around her this past week that when she was quiet, she was in deep thought.

“What are you over there thinking about?”

She didn’t respond immediately, but when she did, she turned to me and said, “Take me to your shop.”

I glanced her way and saw the excitement in her eyes. I was sure she didn’t have a clue what that did to me. To have a woman by my side that supported me the way she did meant everything.

“Yeah, we can go to the shop.”

“Yay!” she said, doing a little dance in her seat. That shit made my dick hard.

I made a U-turn and drove in the direction of the shop. Both my apartment and my shop were located in the Hyde

Park neighborhood of Chicago, about fifteen minutes away from each other.

We made small talk until we pulled up in front of the building. Before I could put the car in park, Braelynn hopped out and was standing in front of the door.

“Hurry up, baby,” she said, doing the same dance she did in her seat on the way here.

“I’m coming.”

She moved to the side, and I unlocked the door, letting her enter first. Nothing had been done to the place because everything was set to start on Monday.

“Come on.” I grabbed her hand. “Let me tell you my plans.”

We walked through the whole shop, and I described to her my vision. She commented with positive words of encouragement with each idea that I shared.

“I also decided that I’ll be hiring an even number of male and female mechanics.”

“Oh my God, baby. Really? That is so dope.”

“You inspired me to do that. If I hadn’t met you, hiring female mechanics wouldn’t have crossed my mind.”

She wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed my lips before saying, “Are you even real?”

“I think the same thing about you multiple times a day.”

We kissed passionately for a few minutes before I pulled away.

“If we don’t stop, we’ll be christening this place, and I don’t have any rubbers on me, so that can’t happen.”

She sighed. “Okay, fine, but in the future, make sure you’re always prepared. There’s no telling when I’ll want to drop it like it’s hot.”

Turning her ass in my direction, she bent over and twerked on my semi-hard dick.

“Oh, that’s cold, baby.”

I tapped her on the ass, and she giggled before turning back around and putting her arms back around my neck.

“Baby, I am so proud of you. The day we met and you told me your goal, I knew then you would make it happen. That’s some real boss shit, baby.”

Again, her level of excitement did something to me. Aside from my parents and my brothers, no one has ever shown me this level of support. This woman definitely had my heart already. I had no control over how fast I was falling for her.

“Let’s go before I impregnate your ass in here.”

I locked up the shop, and we went to my car. After helping her inside, I walked over to the driver’s side. Just before I got in, my phone rang. Pulling my phone out of the pocket of my sweats, I looked at the screen and smiled.

“Hey, Ma.”

“Don’t you ‘hey Ma’ me. I told you to bring my future daughter-in-law to me as soon as you got off that plane.”

The Bluetooth connected, and my mother’s voice could be heard through the car.

“Ma, you didn’t say to come straight from the airport.”

“Are you calling me a liar, son?”

“No, Ma, of course not. We’re on our way now.”

“Okay, I’ll see you soon.”

Ending the call, I shook my head and chuckled.

“I told you she’d be trying to have us married. I hope the pastor ain’t there waiting.”

“Your mom is so cute. We haven’t even officially met yet. How does she know I’m not crazy?”

“I don’t know, but if you were, she’d know. The first time I mentioned Leah, before she’d ever laid eyes on her, she told me that she didn’t have a good feeling about her and she wasn’t the one for me. I never thought she was either, so I didn’t think much of it.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Yeah, like you said, mamas be knowing. It’s like they have some kind of superpower.”

My parents lived in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago. It was about twenty minutes away from where my shop was located. On the way there, we drove in comfortable silence as Braelynn held my free hand. When we pulled up in front of my parents’ house, I looked her way, and she was already focused on me.

“Don’t be nervous. This is really just a formality. She already loves you.”

Braelynn



“It’s settled,” Kyree’s mom, Stella, said suddenly. “Ky, when are you going to propose so we can get started planning this wedding.”

Kamden and Kolby had come over as well, and we had just finished eating the marvelous dinner that she had prepared. It had been a while since I’d had meatloaf, mashed potatoes, mac ’n cheese, green beans, and homemade cornbread. Whew, I was in heaven. The warm welcome that I received from Stella and her husband, Isaac, was almost overwhelming and nothing like when I met Samuel’s parents.

“Ma,” Kyree said. “Slow down before you scare her away.”

“Oh no, son. I can feel it in my spirit. You two are in love. Your hearts are already there, but your minds are trying to make it all make sense.”

Kyree’s gaze met mine, and I could feel the eyes of the rest of his family on us. Neither of us spoke, but thank God his father saved the day.

“Stella, leave them alone. If it’s supposed to happen, it will, on God’s time, not yours, baby.”

“My time and God’s time are the same. How do you think I know they’re soul mates?”

Now, all eyes were on her, and when I tell you that she was serious as a heart attack. And nobody argued with her, either.

“Welcome to the family, Braelynn!” Kamden said.

“Yup, I’ve always wanted a big sister,” Kolby added.

Everyone at the table erupted in laughter, including me. I felt right at home with his family.

“Okay, Ma, Dad, Braelynn and I have to go to the grocery store. I have no food at my place, and I need to test out her cooking skills before she leaves.”

“Braelynn, baby, make sure you teach him how to make a few meals. I sure do regret not making these knuckleheads spend more time with me in the kitchen while they were growing up. But honestly, it was the only time I could be alone.”

“Dang, Ma. That’s cold,” Kolby said, acting hurt.

“It’s the truth. The three of y’all drove me crazy half the time, and your father was just as bad.”

“I can imagine being the only woman could get rough sometimes,” I said.

“For the most part, I loved it. They’ve always taken good care of me, but sometimes, the noise and rowdiness just got on my damn nerves. They didn’t know what it meant to use their inside voices, and they thought every piece of furniture we had was a piece of playground equipment.” She shook her head as she complained, although I knew she was doing it in love. “That’s why I know God is gonna bless me with at least one granddaughter.”

I couldn’t help but smile at her as she talked about the men in her life. The love she had for them radiated from her smile.

“Okay, Ma. Are you done embarrassing us now?” Kyree said as he rose from the table.

“I have to help your mom clean up before we leave. Go chill with your brothers and father,” I told him.

“Baby—”

“You heard what she said,” Stella told him. “Go chill. I won’t keep her more than an hour.”

Kyree put his hands up in surrender, and the four of them proceeded to leave the dining room, leaving me and Stella to clean up.

“Thank you for offering to help me clean up. You know that wasn’t necessary,” she said once we were alone.

“Of course it was. My mother raised me right.” I winked at her before taking a few dishes into the kitchen.

We made a few trips back and forth from the dining room to the kitchen until we had all the dishes.

“I don’t use the dishwasher very often. I’m old school. But I also recognize the value of my time and energy. After cooking big meals sometimes, I don’t feel like washing dishes. Today is one of those days. I’ll rinse, and you can load.”

I thought it was cute that she felt she needed to explain that to me. I definitely wasn’t that old school, and neither was my mother. Hell, I grew up using the dishwasher.

“No need to explain it to me. I was hoping that you planned to use the dishwasher.”

We got started on the dishes and worked in silence for the first few minutes before she finally said something.

“I hope I haven’t been too forward. It’s just that Kyree went through a tough loss in his early twenties. Since then, he’s made a habit of dating women that he knows he’ll never love. You’re the first woman that he’s opened his heart to since he suffered the loss.”

“Wow! That’s... that’s deep.”

“It is, but I know that you can be trusted with his heart. I feel it all up and through my spirit. My spirit has never told me wrong. When he’s comfortable, he will share with you what happened, but don’t press him.”

I nodded because I didn't know what to say. As we finished with the dishes, we engaged in some lighter conversation. I told her about my family and what I did for a living, and although she was impressed and slightly intrigued that I was a mechanic by trade, she was more interested in the lingerie.

“Ohhh, lingerie, huh? I'm gonna have to take a look and order a few things.”

“Eww, Ma. I didn't need to hear that!” Kyree said when he came into the kitchen.

“Eww nothing, boy. How you think you and your brothers got here? I've been keeping your daddy happy in the bedroom for over thirty years. Go sit down somewhere.”

“Come on, Ma! I can't erase that from memory.”

“Nobody told you to come in here, eavesdropping on grown women's conversation. She'll be out when we're done.”

I was in the corner dying from laughter. He looked at me and shook his head before leaving as I wiped the tears from my eyes.

“I don't know why kids think their parents aren't human beings. Hell, we probably have sex more now than we ever did since we don't have to worry about their asses interrupting us.”

If she kept this up, I was gon' pass out. I was literally in tears.

“I hope you aren't like that with your mother. I know you said your father passed away, which I know isn't easy to handle, but do you encourage your mother to date?”

After I gathered myself, I replied, “My sister and I have been very supportive of her getting back out there. She was extremely hesitant to go on her first date. It was about a year and a half after my dad died.”

“I'm sure it took some time. I can't even imagine, but I'm glad you don't expect her to be alone for the rest of her life.

She needs companionship just as much as you. You know that, right?"

"I do."

"Good. Now let me give you back to your man before he has a hissy fit."

We met in the middle of the kitchen, and she gave me the most loving hug.

"You make my son very happy," she said when she released me. "It's been a very long time since I've seen him this way. I know the both of you are hesitant because your hearts are moving at lightning speed, and your brain can't wrap its mind around the idea of loving someone so fast."

I nodded in agreement.

"Don't try to understand it. Don't try to stop it. Allow your heart to feel what it feels. Your mind will get on board sooner, rather than later."

She embraced me again before we went to the living room, where the men were talking with ESPN as background noise. When Kyree noticed us, he stood and came my way.

"Bro, you super thirsty," Kamden teased.

"Right," Kolby agreed.

"Naw, I'm just ready to go."

He hugged and kissed his mother's cheek, then tossed a wave to his brothers and father, barely giving me time to say my goodbyes. When we were both settled in the car, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"It wasn't that bad. I feel like you were more nervous than I was," I told him.

"Shit, I ain't brought many women to meet my parents. The few that have made the cut, my mom was not the woman you saw in there."

"Really? She's so sweet."

“Not if she doesn’t think you’re the one for her son. My brothers have never brought a woman home based on my experiences. She loves you.”

“Well, I am loveable.” I popped my imaginary collar.

He looked at me briefly before looking back at the road.

“Yeah... you are.”

Kynee



“E bony, I get that you think we’re too young to get married, but we don’t have to break up.”

“Ky, I’m about to go away to school, and I don’t think either of us are prepared to maintain a long-distance relationship.”

“We still have the rest of the summer, and we can at least see how it goes for the first semester.”

“That’s not what I want though, Ky. I want to be able to enjoy my first year of college as an eighteen-year-old student. I don’t want to have to worry about what’s going on here and whether or not you’re messing around with someone.”

I looked at her with confusion because I didn’t understand where this was coming from.

“Have I ever made you feel like you couldn’t trust me?” I asked.

She shook her head as tears began to fall from her eyes. I didn’t know why she was crying, because she was the one that kicked this whole conversation off.

“No, you never have. But it’s different because we can see each other all the time. I won’t see you for weeks, maybe months at a time,” she cried.

“Be honest with me. What’s really going on? Are your parents pressuring you to do this? Is that what it is?”

When she couldn’t look me in my eyes, I knew that’s what it was. I nodded my head as it all came together.

“You know, your parents have never been that fond of me. I know they only tolerated me because they didn’t think we’d last as long as we have. I thought I had done a good job showing them, and you, how much I love, cherish, and respect you.”

“Baby, you have. I promise you have. But what they said makes so much sense. We’re young. We still have so much life to experience. We love each other now, but things change—”

“But they haven’t changed. Why are you trying to end things when nothing has changed about the way we feel for each other?”

“Because I have to, okay! I have to do this! I gotta go!” she shouted through tears.

I watched her walk out of my parents’ house into a torrential downpour, and I did nothing to stop her. I was hurt, angry, and, most of all, confused. Just yesterday, we talked about getting married, and today, she doesn’t even want to be in a relationship.

When I finally approached the storm door and looked out the window, Ebony was doing a U-turn and out of nowhere—

“Baby! Baby! Kyree, wake up!” I heard as my body shook back and forth.

My eyes popped opened, and I sat up in the bed with a jolt. The woman calling my name wasn’t Ebony. I looked around the room, trying to get my bearings, and it all came back to me.

“Baby, you okay?” Braelynn whispered.

“Yeah, I’m good. I had a crazy dream.”

“No, that was one heck of a nightmare. You were tossing, turning, and shouting. You’re dripping with sweat. You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine, baby.”

I fell back on the pillow and took a few deep breaths.

“I’ll get you some water and a cool towel.”

She slid out of the bed and was gone for a few minutes, returning with a bottle of water and a cool, damp cloth. After opening the water, she gave it to me and watched me sit up and take a few sips. When I gave it back, she put the cap back on and used the damp cloth to gently wipe my forehead.

“You want to talk about it?”

I shook my head. “Not right now.”

“Okay.”

She snuggled in my arms, and minutes later, I could hear her soft snores. I knew it would take me a while to fall asleep after that dream. I hadn’t dreamed about Ebony in years. That particular dream, it’d been even more years. I wasn’t sure what triggered it, but I hoped it doesn’t make a reappearance.



BEFORE I KNEW IT, THURSDAY HAD COME, AND WE WERE flying to Seattle tomorrow morning. I hadn’t spent much time with Braelynn between work and checking on the progress at my shop. She kept busy with her own work for the lingerie company and didn’t complain about my absence. I could definitely get used to having her here.

“You ready, baby?”

Since we were leaving tomorrow and hadn’t spent much time outside of my apartment, I was taking her to dinner tonight.

“Give me five more minutes,” she yelled from my bathroom.

“You said that five minutes ago. Hurry up, I’m hungry.”

“Boy, hush.”

“If you take much longer, we’re having grilled cheese sandwiches and some fries.”

“For some reason, I feel like you’ll find a way to mess up that simple meal,” she said, sarcastically.

“Wow! That’s cold, baby.”

“Cooking just ain’t your thing, and that’s okay. Thank God you’re great at other things.”

This week, she was determined to teach me how to make a few simple meals. The shit went all the way left, and she told me I was a lost cause. I walked into the bathroom to see what the hell was taking her so long and stopped in the doorway.

“Dammmnnn, baby. How you get all that ass in that dress?”

She smacked her lips together. “Boy, you know I ain’t thick. Stop playing. But I do need to get back to the gym. Fooling around with you, I’ve been slacking.”

“Naw,” I said, grabbing a handful of both of her ass cheeks in both of my hands. “You look amazing, baby.”

“Naw, I’m not about to let you set me up. When I get home, I’m going my ass back to the gym. Move so I can finish getting ready. You must not be that hungry.”

“Shit, you got something I can eat right here.”

I reached around her body and cupped her pussy as best I could in the dress she was wearing and pressed my dick against her ass. She batted my hand away and bumped me with her ass.

“Kyree!”

“Bumping your ass against me ain’t gon’ help, baby.”

I could tell that she was getting annoyed, so I kissed her on the neck and left her alone. A few minutes later, she came out of the bathroom.

“I’m ready.”

When I went in the bathroom, I was so focused on her ass that I didn’t notice anything else. This was the first time I’d seen her in makeup since the day we met. She didn’t ever need to wear it as far as I was concerned, but it definitely enhanced her already-beautiful face.

“I swear you make me want to lock you in this apartment and keep you all to myself.”

“Since you can’t do that, let’s go. I’m hungry.”

“Oh, now you’re hungry? I’ve been hungry for the last thirty minutes.”

I followed her out the door and was mesmerized by everything that was her. When I noticed the heels she was wearing, I hesitated before locking the door.

“I told you we have to walk a couple of blocks to the restaurant. You gon’ be good in those shoes?”

“They aren’t that high. I’ll be good.”

“Okay, but if I need to carry you, you know I will.”

I put my arm around her and walked down the hall. As usual, Braelynn had all of my attention as I placed kisses on her cheek and neck. I was so distracted by her sexy giggles that I didn’t notice someone coming down the hall.

“Who the fuck is this bitch, Kyree?” I heard in front of us.

I looked up, and Leah was standing there with one hand on her hip, wearing a mean mug on her face.

“Bitch? Who the fuck you calling a bitch?”

This could *not* be happening. Braelynn got in Leah’s face, causing me to insert myself between them. There was no way I

would have my woman fighting some nonfactor ass female because of me.

“Leah, don’t you ever in your life approach me on some disrespectful shit, calling my lady out her name.”

“Your lady?” she said, visibly shocked.

“You heard what the fuck he said,” Braelynn said as she tried to come from behind me.

“Is that why it was so easy for you to move on? Were you already fucking her?” Leah questioned.

“Just that one time when he was in Seattle,” Braelynn tossed out there.

“Are you—” Leah began.

“None of that matters. We aren’t together now, so if you don’t mind, I’m about to take my lady to dinner. You have a good night.”

“Fuck you, Kyree! This shit ain’t over!”

Braelynn and I continued down the hallway, then out of the building, leaving Leah where she stood. The weather was decent for Chicago in late May. It could honestly go either way at this time of year.

“So that was your ex, huh?”

“That it was.”

“She’s a pretty girl, but she was definitely about to get the pretty face of hers fucked up with the ass beating I was about to give her.”

“I’m glad it didn’t come to that. I never want you to feel like you have to fight over me,” I told her.

“Oh, don’t flatter yourself, baby. That fight would have had nothing to do with you,” she said, setting me straight.

“Alright, Minnie Mayweather. I’m still glad it didn’t come to that.”

We walked in silence for a few beats before Braelynn changed the subject, thank goodness.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked.

“To this restaurant called Jah Grille. It’s Caribbean food, and I think you’ll like it.”

“I’m certain I will.”

“My mom wants us to stop by before we head to the airport tomorrow.”

“She told me when I talked to her earlier,” she said with a smirk.

“Oh, I forgot y’all besties now.”

The two of them talked every day since they officially met, and they had lunch twice while I was at work. Braelynn and I had to work because another woman didn’t stand a chance with my mother.

“Don’t hate. Your mom is dope. I can’t wait to get her and my mom together. When they talked on the phone—”

“When did they talk on the phone?”

“My mom called while we were out shopping, and they ended up chatting for a bit.”

I forgot they had gone shopping, too. I didn’t know what my mom was gonna do with Braelynn gone.

“Anyway, when they were talking, I think I heard your mom say something about visiting each other’s city.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I guess that’s cool. At least we don’t have to worry about our families not getting along.”

We arrived at the restaurant, and I gave the hostess my name. Once we were seated, we looked over the menu. I recommended a few things to Braelynn that I enjoyed, and when the waiter came back, we placed our order.

“Have your brothers said anything about Jae and My?”

I laughed. My brothers had plenty to say about Braelynn's sister and best friend. However, they were not things that I was going to repeat.

"Yep!" was all I said in reply.

"What did they say?"

"Baby, if I tell you what they said about your girls, are you gonna tell me what your girls said about them?"

She nodded her head in agreement. "Good point."

"I refuse to get involved in their shit. Looked like they enjoyed each other's company in Belize, though, so I'll leave it there."

"As you should. Seems to me you got enough shit of your own to be worried about."

She said it in a joking manner, but I didn't know why I thought we were done talking about Leah. How foolish of me?

"I'm not worried about Leah. I thought we had a clean break and that I'd made it clear that we were done."

The waiter brought our food, and we stopped talking while he set everything on the table. After blessing the food and taking a few bites, we resumed our conversation.

"I guess she just felt like risking her life today," she continued.

"Risking her life? Oh, I'm fucking with a 'G', huh?"

"I ain't saying all that, but she was out of line, and she had the right one today."

"Why you always saying shit that make my dick hard?" I put my hand under the table to adjust my package.

"Boy, me breathing makes your dick hard."

"True... but my bad, baby. Leah's ass was out of order with that shit. I haven't talked to her since before I left for Belize, and I blocked her on everything."

“It’s not your fault, but you need to get that hoe in check. I’m never fighting over a nigga.”

“I’m not sure what the hell her problem is.”

“How, exactly, did you break up?” she asked. “This food is amazing, by the way.”

“I knew you’d like it.” I ate a few bites before I told her about the day that Leah and I broke up. She listened intently, and when I was done, she looked at me with doubt.

“Baby, that wasn’t exactly a clean breakup. I mean, it was cleaner than my breakup with Samuel, but it wasn’t clean, clean.”

“Shit, I told her it was a wrap. I didn’t leave any wiggle room. Her ass is just crazy.”

“You just be careful with that one. I have a feeling there might be more drama coming.”

I nodded, taking heed to her warning. I hoped Leah moved on and didn’t look back.

“So,” she began. “I want to ask you something, but if you don’t want to talk about it, don’t feel obligated.”

“Okay.”

“Who is Ebony?”

Just hearing her name aloud caused me to pause. I looked down at my plate and ate a few more forkfuls of my food before looking back at Braelynn. Taking a deep breath, I told her about Ebony.

“Ebony was my first real girlfriend. We started dating during my senior year, her sophomore year, of high school. We continued to date after I graduated, and I thought she would be my wife.”

“What happened?”

“During the middle of the summer, before she was set to leave for college, she broke up with me. She said we were too

young for a long-distance commitment, and she didn't want to worry about me cheating on her. It was honestly just a bunch of bullshit from her parents."

"I take it they weren't fond of you?"

"Eventually, I think I won them over, and they liked me as a person. They just didn't like me for their daughter and didn't want her attachment to me to get in the way of her goals."

"So you broke up?"

I nodded. "It was an emotional scene. She left in tears and —"

I stopped to clear my throat and get ahold of my emotions.

"It was raining when she ran out of my parents' house. She hopped in her car and made a U-turn. Another car came out of nowhere and—"

Braelynn covered her mouth, and I could see her eyes filling with tears as I tried to blink mine away.

"The car hit the driver's side door. I tried to get to her, but my father held me back. Both her and the driver of the other car died upon impact."

She took my hand into hers. "Oh my God! Baby, I'm so sorry. What a horrible thing to experience."

The tears fell down her cheeks, and I could feel how genuine her sentiments were.

"It was almost ten years ago, and it's still hard to talk about. I don't think about the accident as often as I once did. Through therapy, I learned to focus on the happy times in our relationship."

"I'm sorry I asked you to talk about it. I didn't know it was —"

"It's okay, baby. I wouldn't have shared it with you if I didn't want to. I know you can relate to how hard it is to lose someone unexpectedly."

She nodded, and I was sure she was thinking about her father.

“I loved Ebony as much as my twenty-year-old-self could love someone. Since losing her, it felt like a part of my heart was missing. That first night we spent together was the first time since she died that my heart felt whole again.”

She gave me a smile as tears continued to fall from her eyes, and we had several moments of silence before we continued eating our meal. We were able to enjoy the rest of our dinner, some good conversation, and music before heading back to my place. When we got back, our lovemaking felt different, like something between us had changed, for the better.

Jaelynn



When we landed in Seattle, Jaelynn was nice enough to pick us up from the airport. Kyree had planned to get a hotel for the three days that he would be in town, but Jaelynn insisted that it was cool for him to stay at her place with me.

“No sense in wasting money. If y’all niggas get too loud, I’ll go stay with Ma for a couple of days.” She joked but was very serious.

Once we got to Jaelynn’s house, Kyree and I didn’t stay long, because my mother was anxious to meet him. After freshening up a bit, we headed to her place.

“Boy, you are much more handsome in person,” was the first thing my mother said to him as she pulled him into a hug.

“Wow, Ma. No hello or anything, huh?” I shook my head.

“Why, thank you, Ms. Lynn. You’re much more beautiful in person as well.”

“Thank you! Come on in and meet my brother David. When my husband passed away, David kind of stepped in around here with the yard work and fixing things. He was adamant about meeting you.”

“Hey, Uncle,” I said, giving him a hug, then kissing his cheek. “This is my boyfriend, Kyree. Kyree, this is my uncle, David.”

They greeted each other and shook hands before my uncle said, “Well, I can tell you right now he’s more of a man than Samuel’s punk ass.”

“Oh my God! Must you bring him up,” I whined.

“Sorry, Brae. I’m just glad you finally got rid of his ass,” Uncle David said.

“I’m hoping we run into him while I’m in town. I owe him an ass whooping for what he did to her.”

Shit!

My mother and uncle gave me a confused look. I forgot to tell Kyree that they weren’t aware of the incident that caused me to finally break up with Samuel. They just thought I’d finally had enough of him and his bullshit.

“Brae, what the hell is he talking about?” Ma asked with a hint of anger in her voice.

“You didn’t tell them?” Kyree asked, a little confused.

“Did that lil’ nigga put his hands on you?” Uncle David asked.

“Sure did! And I came here to beat his ass,” Kyree answered before I was able.

“Baby, please. I told you—”

“You need a ride?” Uncle David offered, interrupting my plea. “I know where that lil’ nigga lives and works.”

“Uncle David! Please don’t encourage him.”

“Why didn’t you tell me, Brae?” Ma asked.

“Everybody! Please!” I yelled. “Can y’all just calm down? It’s not that serious. We got into an argument, and he put his hands around my neck. I punched him in the ear, just like Daddy taught me, and was able to get away. I grabbed an

aluminum bat and beat the shit out of him. I know y'all want to defend my honor, but I took care of it. Samuel is not crazy enough to fuck with me like that again. Sorry for swearing."

The three of them stood there, staring at me for what seemed like a long time. Finally, my uncle said, "That's what I'm talking about, niece. I hope you gave his ass a concussion."

"Braelynn, sweetheart, I'm glad you were able to defend yourself. That'll teach his ass not to put his hands on women. But I'm still upset that you didn't tell me."

"I know, Ma, but honestly, I just wanted to focus on getting my things and leaving."

"You didn't tell me all that. I guess I am fu—I mean messing with a 'G'."

Kyree pulled me into his chest and wrapped his arms around my body. I think he briefly forgot that my mother and uncle were present. After kissing my neck, he whispered in my ear, "I want to fuck the shit outta you," as his hands went down to my ass.

When my uncle cleared his throat, Kyree slowly pushed me away. Looking at my mother and uncle, he said, "My bad. I got a lil' carried away."

The three of us laughed at Kyree's expense before he was let off the hook.

"Now," I said. "Can the two of you promise me that you won't go after him?"

Uncle David and Kyree gave each other a look that told me that they would make no such promise.

"Guuyysss," I whined. "I know he deserves it, but he's petty as hell, and he will use his money to retaliate. You know his family is well connected, Uncle David."

I held my uncle's gaze until he nodded in agreement, then did the same with Kyree.

“Mama, you promise me, too. You ain’t always been this prim and proper.” I looked at her suspiciously because she had been quiet.

“I ain’t gon’ do nothing to his lil’ punk ass,” she replied.

“Good. Now that that’s settled, what else has been going on?”

“Oh, I’m glad you asked. Ms. Janie came over yesterday to see if you could take a look at her car,” Ma told me.

“Did she say what the problem is?”

“No, but I told her you’d be back today and I’d let you know.”

“Okay. I’ll go talk to her and see what the problem is. Baby, you wanna go with? She just lives a few houses down.”

“No, I’ll stay here and chill with your mom and uncle. Is that cool?”

“Of course.”

After talking to Ms. Janie about her car, she kept me for about twenty more minutes, updating me on the neighborhood gossip. That was Ms. Janie’s thing. If we ever wanted to know something, she would be the one to ask.

“I’m sure your mother told you about that young man of yours coming to the block raising hell,” Ms. Janie said.

“Samuel?” She nodded before taking a sip of her coffee. “He and I broke up, but yeah, she told me. I heard Uncle David took care of him, though.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you two broke up. How’d I miss that?”

“I don’t know, Ms. Janie. You can’t know everything all the time.”

“I meant to ask you if the two of you were still together about a month ago when I saw him all hugged up at that breakfast place my son always takes me to. It’s good to know y’all not together no more. I didn’t like him too well.”

Ms. Janie rambled on, not noticing that I stopped listening when she said *about a month ago*.

“Ms. Janie, I gotta go. I’ll come get your car tomorrow morning and take a look at it.”

I stood, and Ms. Janie walked me to the door. I gave her a hug before leaving. Hustling my ass down the sidewalk to my mom’s house, I yanked the screen door. The three of them were talking in the living room, and it looked as if I’d interrupted them.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“You know Ms. Janie knows all the gossip from the block and around town,” I directed to my mom and uncle because Kyree wouldn’t know.

“Yeah,” they replied simultaneously.

“Well, she just told me that she saw Samuel about a month ago hugged up with some woman at Geraldine’s.”

“And?” Ma said.

“And?” I paused. “That nigga was cheating on me.”

“Why do you care?” Kyree asked.

This was the first time I’d looked in his direction since I walked in. His face held a confused and slightly angry expression.

“I was with his punk ass for three years, and now I find out he’s probably been cheating on me the whole time.”

“You cheated on him with me. I’ll ask you again, why do you care?”

“Because—”

“The correct answer, Braelynn, would be that you *don’t* care,” he said angrily but with an even tone.

He got up and walked past me and out the front door.

I ran after him, yelling, “Kyree, where are you going?”

He didn't even look back. When I caught up to him, I touched his shoulder, and he snatched it away and kept going. I watched for a minute as he walked down the block. He couldn't be going that far since he didn't know anybody.

"What the heck is wrong with him?" I said when I went back inside.

"Niece, you really don't know?"

"If I knew, Uncle David, I wouldn't be asking."

He shook his head and looked at my mom. She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head as well.

"Sit down," Ma instructed.

I sat where Kyree had been sitting and waited from one of them to say something.

"I can look at you and Kyree together and see that the feelings you have for each other run deep," she began. "But you can't ignore the fact that you just got out of a three-year relationship. Have you truly examined how you feel about the breakup?"

"Ma, I don't give a damn about Samuel. I should have broken up with him a long time ago."

"Then why do you care, especially since you're not together anymore, that he was messing around on you?" Uncle David asked.

"I don't care like that. I don't want him back or anything like that. It's just... It's just the principle."

"So it's your ego?" Ma said.

"My ego? I—"

"Yes, young lady. It's your ego! You're about to lose the love of your life because you let your *ego* get the best of you. You have Kyree now! Who gives a damn if Samuel was cheating on you? Be happy that he's out of your hair and let that shit go!"

I opened my mouth to respond, but I didn't have shit to say. Ma was right. I let my ego control my emotions, and now I needed to find Kyree and fix this shit.

“I gotta go find Kyree.”

I got up and ran out the door, right into what felt like a brick wall. The impact made me bounce back, but a set of strong arms kept me from falling. I looked up into a pair of eyes that I could swear held nothing but love for me.

“Baby, I'm sorry,” I said.

Kyree



I had to take a minute to calm down. Braelynn had me all fucked up. She had me fucked up in the head because seeing her upset about the actions of another nigga, that nigga being her ex, made me feel some type of way. She had me fucked up in general because she couldn't even tell me why what that nigga did even mattered to her. So I left. I ain't do shit but walk down the block, but I had to get away from her for a minute.

I approached the front door of her mother's house just as she came barreling out, running into my chest. Grabbing her by the waist to keep her from falling, I made sure she was steady on her feet before releasing her.

"Baby, I'm sorry," she said.

Putting my hands in my pocket to stop myself from wrapping her in my arms, I looked her in the eyes. When I didn't say anything, she continued.

"Can you come inside so we can talk?"

I nodded toward the house, then followed her inside, past the living room and into a bedroom. She closed the door behind us and sat on the bed.

"Kyree, it wasn't what you thought."

“Explain it.”

“I don’t still have feelings for Samuel.”

“Are you sure about that? Because the way you were going on about him cheating sure did seem like you still did.”

“I wasn’t mad because I have feelings for him. I’m mad because the nigga thought he could play me. That’s it, baby. I don’t care the way you’re thinking.”

“It didn’t sound like that to me. You cared enough to be in your feelings about it. You cared enough to not bother hiding those feelings in front of me. I’m all in with you. Don’t let me put my heart on the line if you still have feelings for that nigga.”

“I don’t, baby. I swear. It was just my ego talking, okay? It wasn’t my heart. My heart is yours. It’s been yours since the day we met.”

My heart told me she was telling the truth. I believed what she said about her ego because it was my ego that had me taking a walk around the block.

“I didn’t mean to cause you to have doubts about us. I was taken by surprise, my ego got the best of me, and I expressed it the wrong way. I want you and only you.”

I pulled her from the bed and wrapped my arms around her, burying my face in her neck. She hugged my waist and took a deep breath. We remained that way for a long time. When I pulled away, I cupped her face, and our lips crashed together.

“We survived our first fight,” I said when we came up for air.

“I wouldn’t call that a fight. It was more of a misunderstanding.”

“Whatever it was, I didn’t like that shit.”

“Me either. Let’s go so I can ride your dick to make up for my big ass ego messing things up.”

“Oh yeah? I like the sound of that.”

Braelynn



“If y’all gon’ be going at it like y’all were all damn night and into the wee hours of the morning, I’m going to Mama’s. I can’t deal with that for the next two nights.”

I swear to God my sister had no chill. I walked into the kitchen, and that was the first thing I heard. I was glad Kyree was still asleep.

“Jae, you stay exaggerating. We weren’t that damn loud.”

“Oh, you don’t think so?” she said as she did something with her phone.

All of a sudden, I heard the sounds of me and Kyree’s lovemaking. My eyes got wide as I snatched her phone away and turned it off.

“You recorded us? Oh my God, Jae! Why the hell would you do that?”

“Because I knew your ass was gon’ be in denial. Now I got proof, and every time you act like you don’t know, I’m gon’ remind you.”

“Oh my God! I can’t stand your ass. Delete that shit!”

“I’m not deleting a damn thing. You just better not keep me awake all damn night with your overly vocal ass. His dick

cannot be that good.”

She shook her head while I got lost in mine for a minute, thinking about how amazing Kyree’s dick actually was.

“Oh, but it is,” I said, more to myself.

“I’m staying at Mama’s tonight. I should have let his ass get a hotel. That’s what I get for trying to be a nice sister-in-law.”

“We can get a room if it’s that serious, sis. It’s not a big deal,” I offered.

“Naw, it’s fine. I need to spend some quality time with Mama anyway. The place is yours until he leaves.”

“Aww, you so sweet.”

I went to tried to kiss her, and she backed away and put her hands up.

“Hell naw, sis! I know where your mouth has been.”

“You know what? I’m done with your ass. I’ll see you later.”

Going back into the guest bedroom that was now mine, I quietly closed the door behind me.

“What were you two in there fussing about?” Kyree asked.

“I thought you were asleep.”

“I was, but these walls aren’t exactly the thickest,” he said, turning onto his back.”

“Well, that’s actually what we were fussing about. She said she’s staying at Mama’s house until you leave because we were too loud.”

He laughed as he rubbed his eyes. “I kept telling you to be quiet.”

“You also kept—you know what? I’m not going there with you. Just know if I’m loud, it’s your fault.”

“I’ll take the blame.”

He grabbed the back of the T-shirt that I was wearing and pulled me to where my head was resting on his stomach.

“What’s the move today?” he asked as his hand slid between my legs.

“I gotta go to my—ahh shit—hmm.”

I couldn’t focus on answering his question because his fingers were massaging my clit. Instead, I opened my legs wider, giving him more access.

“What was that, baby?”

“Gotta look—fix—damn—hmm.”

Did he really expect me to answer him?

He slid two fingers inside of my slippery hole, and I moved my hips in a circular motion. He took a handful of my hair and somehow sat up, pulling me with him, his fingers continuously providing pleasure. His mouth covered mine, tasting like morning breath and pussy, but you couldn’t tell me it didn’t taste like strawberries and champagne.

“Mmm,” I moaned into his mouth.

He kneaded and prodded until his fingers were covered in my essence, and I was trembling from head to toe. As I came down from my high, he slowly pulled his fingers from my domain while placing soft kisses along my neckline.

“See,” he said between kisses. “You can be quiet if you really try.”

He licked his fingers and left me there to get my bearings. When I saw him again, I was waking up from a nap. I’m not sure how long I was asleep, but he was dressed for the day.

“Wake up, sleepyhead.”

I reached for my phone and saw that two hours had passed. Sitting up and stretching, I said, “Why’d you let me sleep that long?”

“Apparently, you needed it. What’s the move for today?”

Shaking my head, I replied, “I tried to answer you, but you distracted me. I told Ms. Janie I’d take a look at her car today.”

“Aww shit! I get to see my baby in action.”

His excitement made me smile. “I guess so. Let me wash all of this sex off me and throw some clothes on. I’ll be ready in twenty.”

“I’ll be out here talking to Jae. Trying to get her to send me a copy of that recording. You sound sexy as hell.”

I gasped and covered my mouth. Between the two of them, I didn’t know who’s crazier.

Ryneee



Watching Braelynn at work was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen. She was currently in a pair of turquoise coveralls, looking underneath the hood of Ms. Janie's car, and my dick was painfully hard. I offered to help, but she refused it. So I sat back and enjoyed the view.

"It looks like the fuel injector is clogged," she said. "I think I have a few kits out back in the shed."

She took off her gloves and tossed them on a shelf. A little smudge of dirt had gotten on her face, and I had to bite my bottom lip to keep from growling when she approached me.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"No reason. Aside from the fact that for the past hour, I've had to talk myself out of bending you over this car and having my way with you. If your mother wasn't here, it'd be a done deal."

"Baby, you can't be this horny all the time. What are you gonna do when we're thousands of miles apart?"

"I only wanna fuck when you're in my presence. I'm good, otherwise."

She kissed me on my cheek before going out of a door that led to the backyard. I pulled out my phone and saw that I had

missed a call from my mother. I stepped into the driveway and called her back.

“Hey, Ma. How are you?” I said when she answered.

“Hey, son. I’m good. How’s your visit going?”

“It’s going fine. Braelynn is fixing one of her neighbor’s cars right now. It’s not supposed to rain today, so we made plans for later.”

“That’s nice. When are you coming home?”

“My flight is early Monday morning. I gotta go to work and check on my shop.”

“Kolby and your father went by there this morning. I didn’t know you and your designers and contractors working on the weekends, son. What about their families?”

“Ma, working weekends wasn’t required. That’s their choice. I have a six-month timeline, so I’m certainly not gonna tell them not to.”

“Where’s Braelynn?” I heard a male’s voice behind me.

When I turned around, anger consumed me.

“Aye, Ma. Let me call you back.”

I ended the call and put my phone in the pocket of my sweats and asked, “Who wants to know?” although I knew exactly who he was.

He was bold enough to take a few more steps toward me before asking, “Who the fuck are you?”

He knew who the fuck I was. I could tell the moment I spoke that he recognized my voice. I wanted to beat his ass just for playing dumb. I knew I promised Braelynn that I wouldn’t do anything to this nigga, but promises were made to be broken. I snatched his punk ass up so quick and slammed him against the trunk of Ms. Janie’s car.

“You got a lot of fuckin’ nerve bringing your bitch ass over here.”

“Get the... fuck—”

My hands went to his neck, and I tried to crush his airways.

“You like putting your hands on women? Ain’t this what you did to Braelynn? How does that feel?”

Just before he was about to pass out, Braelynn returned, and I released him, letting him to fall to the ground.

“What the hell?” she said when she noticed Samuel. “Why are you here?”

She paid no mind to the fact that he was rolling around, gasping for air. Looking at me with a smirk, she shook her head. I shrugged my shoulders, pretending to be completely innocent.

“Samuel, sliver your ass on outta here like the snake you are since you’re already down there.”

He used the car for leverage and pulled himself to a standing position.

“We need to talk,” he managed to say through a cough, holding his neck.

“Naw, I’m good. Go talk to that hoe you been hugged up with. I ain’t got shit to say to you.”

The surprised look on his face was confirmation that he had been caught. I tried not to be bothered that she brought that shit up, but I went ahead and let her have whatever closure she needed.

“You giving up three years just like that?” he said.

“Honestly, I gave up on us about a year ago, the night of Carlie’s wedding reception.”

He gave her a confused look, and she continued.

“Remember that night, Sam? You left right after the wedding, even though you promised me you’d stay for the reception. Later on, I told you I was staying at Jae’s and didn’t

come home. You wanna know the truth?” She paused. “I didn’t come home because I was riding a real nigga’s dick until the sun came up.”

She wrapped her arms around my waist, letting him know that I, in fact, was the real nigga she was talking about.

“Bit—”

Before he could finish the word, I punched him in his mouth with my free hand. He stumbled but caught himself before he fell to the ground.

“Why are you still here, bro? Take your ass on.”

He hesitated but eventually left. I kept my eyes on Braelynn as she watched him get in his car. She wore a smirk with a satisfied expression on her face. When he drove off, she finally turned to look at me.

“Don’t get mad, baby. I just had to let that nigga know that he didn’t get away with that shit.”

I laughed before planting a kiss on her forehead. “You petty as hell.”

“That wasn’t petty at all. Petty would have been telling him that the only orgasms I’ve had the past three years were that night.”

“Damn! Yeah, that would have been petty as hell.”

“You not mad?”

“Not at all, baby. Gimme a kiss.”

Braelynn



A couple of months had passed, and Kyree and I grew closer every day. I was nervous about us being in a long-distance relationship, but the time we spent on the phone, whether it was FaceTime, talking, or texting, allowed us to get to know each other on a deeper level. There was nothing that we didn't talk about.

He shared with me a little more about his relationship with Ebony. She was his first love. I could only imagine what losing her the way he did, especially after the conversation that they had, did to him. When I asked if he was still having the nightmares, he confessed that he'd had a couple more and promised that if they continued, he'd make an appointment with this former therapist.

I shared with him the difficult time I had when my father died. My issue was never that he died. It was more about how he died. During my grieving period, I couldn't stop myself from wondering if the heart attack killed him or if he was having the heart attack during the time of the crash. I often wondered what may have been going through his head and if he suffered. It was very therapeutic talking to him about my feelings, even though it had been a few years since it happened.

Many nights, we fell asleep on the phone and would wake up to the sound of each other's voices, depending on who woke up first. The distance was hard, but it allowed us to bond in a different way.

Since my schedule was more fluid and I could work from anywhere, I decided that it made more sense for me to do most of the traveling back and forth. Kyree wanted to split the travel, but I was able to convince him that my plan was better. Within the past two months, I had flown to Chicago to see him three times, staying for four or five days each time.

My birthday was three weeks ago, and when I tell you my man set it off. First of all, the summertime in Chicago was truly a whole vibe. There were so many events and festivals going on. We spent some time at Navy Pier, went on a dinner cruise, took the train to Ravinia Park, and saw Jill Scott in concert. His mother had a barbecue in my honor, and I met more of his family members. It was the most fun I'd had for my birthday in years.

Kyree was flying to Seattle today for the first time since our run-in with Samuel and staying for the weekend. Between the lingerie business, working on cars, and going back and forth to Chicago, I hadn't had time to look for an apartment. Jaelynn said she enjoyed having me as a roommate, but I felt bad cramping her space. I had an appointment for a few places this afternoon, once I picked Kyree up from the airport.

This morning, Myla, Jaelynn, and I were having our biweekly meeting for the boutique. At our previous meeting, we decided to go with our plan to lease a building. Two weeks ago, we found the perfect spot in downtown Seattle that used to be a bridal boutique. We planned to sign a one-year lease for the building, and between the three of us, we could pay the entire year upfront. Unfortunately, when we went sign the lease, the owner informed us that she decided to sell the building instead of leasing it. Since we weren't interested in buying, we had to let it go.

“Did you schedule an appointment to look at those two locations you found?” Myla asked Jaelynn.

“I did. They’re both next week. Thursday and Friday, I believe.”

“Good. I found one that looked promising. Let me pull it up,” Myla said, trying to stifle a yawn.

“You okay?” I asked Myla. “You’ve be sluggish lately.”

She took a deep breath and shook her head. When her eyes filled with tears, Jaelynn and I were at her side immediately.

“My, what’s wrong?” Jaelynn asked.

“You guys have to promise not to be pissed at me or judge me.”

“You know we’re better than that. We all we got. Now tell us what’s up,” I reassured her.

“I think I’m pregnant.”

“Pregnant?” Jaelynn and I shouted.

“I don’t know how this happened. I mean, I know *how* it happened, but I don’t know how I *let* it happen.”

“Wait? Who—Kolby?” She nodded.

“Damn!” Jaelynn said. “That means you’re probably about two months.”

“Are you sure? Have you gone to the doctor or taken a test?” I questioned.

She shook her head. “I haven’t done either, but I haven’t gotten my period since two weeks before our trip. Y’all know my cycle is irregular as hell, so I didn’t think much of it until I threw up this morning.”

“Morning sickness? Oh damn!” Jaelynn blurted out.

“Have you talked to Kolby?” I asked.

“Kolby and I... We text occasionally. We decided that we would enjoy Belize and leave it there. Neither of us are built

for a long-distance relationship, and we didn't feel like it was worth trying."

"Okay. How about we go get you a test before we panic?" I suggested. "I have to get Kyree from the airport in two hours. Let's go now, so I can have time to process this shit."

"Brae, you can't tell him. Even if it's negative, don't even tell him there was a possibility," Myla warned.

"Sis, you know I don't pillow talk with my nigga about my girls. No matter the results, Kyree won't hear shit from me."



"HEY, BABY!" I SAID TO KYREE WHEN HE SLID INTO THE passenger seat of my car.

"Damn, I missed you," he replied, leaning across the console and covering my lips with his.

"I missed you, too. It's only been two weeks, though," I told him when he released my mouth.

"Not being able to touch you for fourteen days is torture, baby."

I pulled away from the curb, and we were on our way.

"I know, but you're here now, so let's enjoy time."

"Most definitely. How many places are you dragging me to look at?"

"Don't be like that, baby. I can't keep imposing on Jae."

"She's your sister, and she already said she doesn't care. If you get your own place, you'll probably have to sign a year-long lease. How long were you planning to do this long-distance stuff?"

"Kyree, it's only been two months. Why—"

"And I'm already tired of it. I need to be able to see, touch you, and be inside of you, every day."

I couldn't help but laugh when I looked over at his ass pouting.

"First of all, when we live together, who hell gon' be fucking every day?"

We pulled up in front of the apartment leasing office for the first place that I was going to see. He got out and walked around to the driver's side to open my door. As soon as I got out, he closed the door and used his body to press mine against the side of the car.

"Do you feel that?" he asked, speaking close to my ear as he rubbed his erection against my stomach.

"Yes," I whispered.

"This is me all fucking day when I'm in your presence. We fucking every day."

He walked away, leaving me panting against the car. I had to get myself together before following him into the office.

After looking at three apartments, of which Kyree didn't like any, we headed to Jaelynn's. When we got there, Jaelynn was in the kitchen making a feast of Mexican food, and Myla was in the La-Z-Boy, taking a nap. The positive pregnancy test results threw us all for a loop. Jaelynn and I had to calm Myla down and reassure her that this wasn't the end of the world. I was sure seeing Kyree was going to put her in her feelings.

"Hey, bro!" Jaelynn said from the kitchen.

"Wassup, lil' sis. You making all this food for me?"

"I mean, we can say that if it makes you feel special."

"You cold, but that's cool. I'm gon' eat it regardless."

He left to take his bag to my room, and I went to the kitchen to talk to Jaelynn.

"Is she good?" I whispered.

"She'll be alright. We talked a little more after you left and figured out that her reaction isn't about being pregnant. It ain't

like we teenagers, and she has a great support system.”

“Then why did she freak out?”

“Because she doesn’t know how to tell Kolby.”

“Tell Kolby what?” we heard behind us.

“Shit!” Jaelynn and I both shouted.

“Baby, don’t be sneaking up on people. You scared us.”

“My bad! Did y’all need to tell Kolby something?”

“What? Oh no, we were talking about my ex, Kobe. He’s been sniffing around lately, and I’ve been trying to be nice to his ass.” Jaelynn lied.

Thank goodness she was thinking on her feet because I had no idea what to tell him.

“You need big bro to talk to him?” Kyree offered. He really took his big brother role seriously with Jaelynn and Myla.

“Naw, I’ll handle it. Thanks for offering, though.”

“Let me know if you change your mind. How long before the food is ready? Your sister dragged me all over Seattle, wasting her time looking at apartments. I’m starving.”

“Oh, yeah. It’s almost ready. How’d apartment hunting go?”

“It was fine.”

“A waste of time.”

Kyree and I spoke at the same, and I gave him an eye roll for his comment.

“It was not a waste of time. One of them is a strong maybe.”

“What are you guys—oh, hey, Kyree,” Myla said when she came to the kitchen.

“Wassup, sis? You good?”

“Yeah. Just tired. I’m actually gonna head home. I got some... There’s some stuff I need to do.” Myla left the kitchen quickly.

“My, hold up. You’re not staying for dinner? I thought you —”

“No, I’m good. I’ll stop by for leftovers tomorrow.”

Just like that, she was gone. Jaelynn and I gave each other a worried look, and Kyree caught on.

“Is she okay?”

“Yeah. She’s just got some stuff going on. She’s fine.”

Thankfully, he didn’t press, and we went on with our evening. Before we went to bed, Jaelynn made us promise not to keep her up all night fucking.

“I can’t make those types of promises, lil’ sis,” Kyree began. “I can’t help how lethal my stroke game is and how your sister responds.”

Both of them get on my last nerve.

The word "Kynree" is written in a dark brown, cursive font. Below the letters 'y' and 'n', there is a black silhouette of a typewriter.

When I lost Ebony, I wholeheartedly believed that I would never feel for another woman the way I felt for her. I truly thought that it was impossible. I knew that, one day, I'd find a woman that I loved enough to marry, have children, and build a life with, but I was sure that my love for her would not be greater than the love I had for Ebony.

Braelynn proved to me that I was wrong. The way I felt about Braelynn didn't take away from how much I loved Ebony. I just had no idea that I was capable of loving someone as deeply as I loved Braelynn. I hadn't said those three words to Braelynn yet, although they'd been on the tip of my tongue hundreds of times. I would venture to say that I've loved her since the day we met. We hit the three-month mark a few days ago and were managing this long-distance shit pretty well, but I couldn't see doing this much longer. I needed her with me, every day.

I had just dropped Braelynn off at the airport, and I could already feel the shift in my mood. This always happened for a couple of days after we parted ways. We wouldn't see each other for a month because our schedules were packed. My plan for the rest of the day was to grab something quick to eat and take a nap until she called me once she landed.

After I finished eating the Philly cheesesteak sandwich I'd picked up for dinner, I took a shower, put on a fresh pair of sweats and a T-shirt, and flipped through the TV. Apparently, I dozed off and was awakened by a knock on my door. I looked at my phone to see that only about thirty minutes had passed.

The person on the other side of the door knocked again, and when I looked out of my peephole, I sighed with annoyance when I saw Leah. She knocked again as I stood there, debating whether or not to open the door.

“Ky, I can hear the TV. I know you're in there.”

I unwillingly unlocked and opened the door but not enough for her to come in.

“Wassup?”

“Seriously, Kyree? I can't come in?”

“Do you need something, Leah?” I asked, patience running out.

“You know what? I never knew you could be such an asshole. I came to have a serious conversation with you, but since you acting like I've wronged you in some way, here you go!”

She shoved a bag into my chest and stomped away. I closed and locked the door, glad that she didn't cause a scene. When I sat back on the couch, I turned the bag upside down and emptied the contents.

“The fuck?”

I picked up the Ziplock bag that contained a pregnancy test that read positive, then looked at the ultrasound.

“Quinn, Leah. August thirty-first. Seventeen weeks two days... What the fuck? I can't be reading this right.”

After doing some quick math in my head, I shot up from the couch and ran back to the door, unlocking it as quickly as I could and yanking it open. To my surprise, Leah was leaning

against the opposite wall. I looked down at her stomach, and sure enough, she had a small bump.

“I guess you’re ready to talk?”

She pushed herself off the wall and into my apartment. I closed the door and went back to my couch, sitting on the far end, away from Leah.

“Are you trying to say this is my baby?”

“Wow! Really, Ky? Whose else baby would it be?”

“I don’t know, because it sure the fuck can’t be mine. I wrapped up and pulled out every single time we had sex. So whoever else you been fucking, you better go find that nigga.”

“How dare you! I wasn’t fucking nobody else, Ky. This is your baby.”

I put my head in my hands and squeezed my eyes shut. This could not be happening. I must be having a nightmare.

“Aarghhhh!” I growled in frustration. “Get out.”

I went to open the door, standing there with it open until she decided to get her ass up. She stepped into the hallway but had more to say.

“Kyree, you can keep ignoring me, but I won’t let you deny our baby. I’m not raising this baby by myself, so I’ll give you some time to get rid of your little girlfriend. We will be a family.”

“I want a DNA test, ASAP!”

“A wha—are you serious?”

“Hell the fuck yes! I’ll set it up and let you know when and where.”

“Fuck you, Ky! How dare you ask me to risk our baby’s life.”

“That’s not my fucking baby, and until you can prove it, stop saying that shit.”

I slammed the door in her face and leaned against it.

“Fuck my life!”

Of course, my phone started ringing with a FaceTime call. I knew it was Braelynn, but I couldn't talk to her right now. When I didn't pick up, she called right back, and I still didn't answer. By the time I got to my phone, she had sent a text, telling me that she made it home safely and to call her.

I sat on the couch in the same spot for hours after Leah left, trying to mentally go through every time we'd ever had sex, which was impossible. I always used my own condoms, and I knew I pulled out every time. You couldn't pay me to believe that I'd slipped up, especially not with her. That couldn't be my baby.

I had missed calls and text messages from Braelynn and everyone in my immediate family except my father. I couldn't bring myself to talk to anyone. I was in literal shock.

I heard the locks on my door turning, and when I looked in that direction, Kolby and Kamden walked in and came to the living room. I should have known that it wouldn't be long before my mother sent them to check on me.

“Damn, bro! Are you really sitting your ass here with your phone in your hand? You got Mama about to call the damn national guard. You got Braelynn ready to hop back on a plane. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Kamden had always been the most outspoken of the three of us. Not that Kolby and I had a problem speaking our minds, but Kamden was just on another level most times. When I didn't respond, he looked at Kolby, then back at me.

“Yooo, bro! What the fuck is up?” Kamden continued to press.

I shook my head, trying to figure out what to say. “I think I fucked up.”

They both came and sat on either side of me on the couch. Kolby noticed the pregnancy test and ultrasound on the coffee table right away.

“What the hell is this?” he asked before looking at it more closely.

“Is that a pregnancy test?” Kamden asked. “Brae pregnant?”

“Nooooo... You got to be shitting me. Not Leah!” Kolby said after reading the small text on the ultrasound.

“Leah? Broooo, you got Leah pregnant? Aww, hell naw. Ma gon’ kill you. Shit! Braelynn is too,” Kamden summarized.

These two weren’t making me feel any better, not that they could. I still couldn’t find the words to express myself.

“No wonder your ass ain’t answering the phone for nobody. You probably gon’ have to go in hiding.” Kamden joked, pissing me off.

Before I knew it, I’d pushed Kamden back on the couch and had a hand on his throat.

“Shut the fuck up! You always think some shit’s a joke! Ain’t—”

“Ky,” Kolby yelled, pulling me off Kamden. “Calm your ass down. Kam is not to blame for your fuckup. Kam, shut your ass up. This shit ain’t funny.”

Kolby pushed me over to the love seat, and he and Kamden remained on the couch.

“Ky, talk to us, bro.”

“Leah brought her ass over here with this bullshit. Told me it was mine but refuses to get a DNA test.”

“Is it possible? Does the timing match up? Does she look pregnant?” Kolby questioned.

“She looks pregnant, and the timing matches up, but it’s not possible. I wrapped up and pulled out every time, bro. I ain’t never nudded in her, not even with the rubber on, man.”

They both shook their heads. “Shit happens, bro. I hope it’s not true, but...” Kamden said.

“I told her I’d send her the info with the time and place to take a DNA test. I just hope she shows up because I need to prove that this baby isn’t mine as soon as possible.”

“You can’t force her to take the test. If she doesn’t, you’ll have to wait until the baby is born, and that’s not until five months from now,” Kolby pointed out.

“You can’t ignore Braelynn or Ma for that long.”

I ran my hand down my face and released a deep breath that didn’t calm me at all. *Fuck my life!*



THE VERY NEXT DAY, I FOUND A CLINIC THAT PERFORMED noninvasive paternity tests. Maybe Leah hadn’t done her research, but from what I read, this test could be done very easily, and there would be absolutely no risk in harming the baby.

I unblocked her number in my phone and called her, hoping she would answer. It rang several times, and as I was about to end the call, she finally picked up.

“What?” she said with too much damn attitude.

“We have an appointment tomorrow morning for a DNA test. I’m about to text you the address and time.”

“I already told you that I’m not risking my baby’s life to prove to you something I already know. Fuck you if you don’t believe me!” she shouted through the phone.

“There’s no risk to the baby, Leah. Do some damn research and have your ass there bright and early. You think this is a fucking game? This is my life, my future we’re talking about. A future that I had no plans for you to be a part of. Stop playing with me! You better show the fuck up!”

“Well, that’s too bad. I will make your life and hers a living hell if you think you’re gonna move forward without me. Our baby deserves a family, and I’ll make it happen, no matter the cost.”

I couldn’t listen anymore and ended the call, letting out a scream that I was sure could be heard throughout the building. After texting Leah the name and address of the DNA testing facility, I tossed my phone aside and got ready for work. When I picked up my phone as I was about to leave, I had a text message from Leah that read, *Fuck you!*

The level of frustration I felt was unmatched. I still hadn’t called Braelynn back, and that was fucking with me more than anything. Since we reunited, a day hadn’t gone by that we didn’t talk. I couldn’t imagine what was going through her mind right now, but I needed to get my head together before I talked to her.

My workday dragged on for what seemed like forever. Thank God I wasn’t working on anything major today, although I was still exhausted by the time I left. I’d left my phone in the car because I didn’t want to deal with the guilt of ignoring calls. Sure enough, I had multiple missed calls from Braelynn and my mother.

When I started my car, I waited for my Bluetooth to connect and listened to Braelynn’s last two voicemails.

“Kyree, if I ever see you again, I swear to God I’m fuckin’ you up!”

It hurt to hear the anger in her voice. We hadn’t had so much as a disagreement since that shit about Samuel cheating.

“Baby, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to threaten you. It’s just, I’m going crazy not talking to you and not hearing for myself that you’re okay. Call me, please. I lo—I—miss you.”

The pain in her voice was even harder to hear, but I didn’t miss her almost saying that she loved me.

“I love you too, baby,” I said aloud.

It would take a week for me to get the results of the paternity test, and that was only if Leah showed up. There was no way that I could ignore Braelynn for that long. Not only that, but I knew my baby would be on a plane to come whoop my ass before the week ended. I couldn't let my silence be the cause of her pain for that long.

Since my mom had been blowing me up all day, I decided to stop by my parents' house before going home. If I avoided talking to her any longer, I had no doubt that she will beat my ass.

"Ma, Dad," I said after letting myself in.

"Kyree Isaac Ross!" Ma yelled from the kitchen.

"Hey, Ma. Where's Dad?"

"Boy, don't you come in here acting like shit is sweet. I've been calling you for a day and a half. Do you know what happens to sons that ignore their mothers? They go to hell. Now tell me what hell is going on."

I looked up at the ceiling and blew out a breath. "You may need to sit down for this."

"Oh, Lord. Boy what have you done?"

She sat down at the kitchen table, and I did the same.

"Leah—"

"I knew it! I knew it! I knew it!" She hopped out of the chair and began pacing back and forth. "I knew that lil' heffa had something to do with this. What did she do, son?"

"Ma, calm down, and please, sit back down."

She begrudgingly sat down while shaking her head and mumbling under her breath.

"There's not an easy way to say this, so here goes... Leah's pregnant."

As soon as those last words left my mouth, she swung the towel that she was holding in her hand and slapped me across

the head.

“I told you not to get that girl pregnant! I told you!”

She was out of her seat and pacing again.

“Ma, I swear I don’t think it’s mine. I always used protection, and I was extra careful.”

She stopped in front of me and put her hand on her hip.

“Son, if you had sex with her, it doesn’t matter how careful you were. The possibility is there. I don’t want to deal with that crazy ass girl for the rest of my life, either. But we didn’t raise you to run away from your responsibilities.”

“I know that, Ma. I wouldn’t do that. I just don’t believe her, and she’s refusing to do a DNA test.”

“Well, son, those tests can be dangerous. Whether it’s your child or not, you can’t expect her to take that risk.”

“Things have changed, Ma. I found a place that does a noninvasive test. It’s no risk to the baby. I made an appointment for tomorrow, but she’s refusing to come.”

She finally sat back down with a suspicious look on her face. “If the baby won’t be put at risk, why is she refusing to take the test?”

“Because the baby ain’t mine.”

We sat silently for a few minutes before Ma said, “What did Braelynn say? I know she’s upset.”

I looked at the floor, embarrassed that I had been avoiding her calls.

“Ky, you have talked to her, haven’t you?” I shook my head. “Son, you can’t leave her in the dark. She’s probably worried sick.”

“I know, Ma. I don’t know what to tell her.”

“You tell her the truth. There’s no way around it.”

“But if we do the DNA test, it only takes a week to get the results. I can—”

“You can’t avoid talking to her for that long. You’re a grown man, Kyree. Act like it.” She hit me with the towel again. “Face your battles. I know you don’t want to hurt her, but you can’t let her jump to her own conclusions about why you stopped taking her calls. Again, we didn’t raise you to run away from your responsibilities. You’re responsible for her heart, and you damn well better take care of it.”

With that, she threw the towel at me and left me in the kitchen, knowing exactly what I needed to do.

Jaelynn



“**S**is, you can’t worry yourself sick. You haven’t eaten since you landed. Just eat a few spoons of this soup. It’s your favorite, chicken and rice from Panera,” Jaelyn pleaded with me.

As good as that sounded, I had no desire to eat. I’d been sick to my stomach for the past four days. Whatever Kyree’s reasons were for ignoring me, they must’ve been serious, because even his mother was short and vague with me.

“Just leave it there, Jae. I’ll eat some later.”

“No you won’t. You’re just saying that so I can leave you alone. I’m not leaving out this room until you eat.”

“Oh my God, Jae! You’re so damn annoying.”

I sat up on the bed and took the Panera bag. Jaelynn stood there and watched me take the container of soup out of the bag, open it, and eat a few spoonfuls. I couldn’t lie, after not eating for a few days, the soup was just what I needed.

“There! Are you satisfied now?”

“Not really, but I’ll take what I can get. Keep eating. I’ll be right back.”

She didn’t need to tell me to keep eating. This soup was delicious. By the time she came back with a bottle of water, I

had eaten the whole bowl.

“See? Don’t you feel better now?”

“No, I don’t feel better. The man I think I’m in love with went ghost on me, and I don’t know why.”

“Brae, you’re definitely in love, and the same goes for him. I don’t know what’s going on, but it must be serious for him to do something like this. Normally, I’d advise you to say fuck him and move on. My gut ain’t telling me to say that this time. I’m sorry, sis. I don’t have any advice to give you except to wait it out.”

I fell back onto the bed and sighed deeply. This whole situation was torture, and I wasn’t sure how much longer I could go without talking to him or knowing what was going on.

“I can’t wait any longer to know what’s going. I’m going to him.”

“Sis, you sure about that?”

“It’s been four days, Jae. I’m positive. I can’t live in limbo like this. I need to know if... if this is over or...”

Just the thought made me sick.

“Fine! Then I’m going with you, just in class we gotta throw some hands.”

“Hand me my laptop,” I asked her.

As I was looking up flights, Myla walked in. I couldn’t help but roll my eyes at her. She would be on my shit list until she decided to tell Kolby that he was about to be a father.

“I see you finally rose from the dead,” Myla said.

“Hey, My,” Jaelynn greeted.

I continued looking for flights, not even acknowledging her comment. She knew I wasn’t talking to her right now unless it was related to the boutique. Jaelynn thought I was

being too hard on Myla, but I wasn't budging until she did the right thing.

"Jae, there's a flight tomorrow at one. That work for you?"

"Yeah, that's cool."

"I'll cover the cost of your ticket since you're tagging along with me."

"Where are you guys going?" Myla asked.

"Chicago. She's about to find out what's going on with Kyree."

"If you were smart, you'd book a flight so you can tell that man about his baby," I told her without looking up from my laptop.

"Don't start, Brae, damn! Don't you have enough to worry about?"

"Actually, I have more than enough to worry about, but that doesn't mean I can't see when my best friend is being dumb."

"That's your opinion, Brae. Kolby and I had an understanding, and me having a baby was not a part of the plan."

"Well, he should have thought about that when he willingly had unprotected sex with you, My. You didn't do this by yourself. I can't see him not accepting responsibility or not wanting to be a part of his child's life. They weren't raised like that."

She stood there with her arms folded across her chest, biting the inside of her mouth.

"You know what? You're right. Let me mind my own damn business."

"Okay, okay, okay. I'll come with." Myla decided.

"Finally!" Jaelynn said. "I was getting tired of the tension between y'all."

“Hush and go get my purse. I need my wal—was that the doorbell?”

“Yeah, but I’m not expecting guests.”

She went to see who was at the door, and I yelled behind her, “Bring my purse.”

“We good?” Myla asked.

“We were never not good, My. I just wanted you to do the right thing.”

“I know. I—” she began.

“Umm, Brae. Can you come here for a second?” Jaelynn called out.

“You don’t see my purse?” I asked as I slid off the bed.

When I walked into the living room, the last person I was expecting to see stood before me.

“Kyree?” I whispered.

Seeing him made me momentarily forget that I was pissed at him because I was also worried. All I wanted was to be in his arms. I ran to him before I could even think about it and jumped in his arms. He lifted me up, and my legs went around his waist.

“Baby, I’m sorry,” he whispered with his mouth close to my ear. “I didn’t mean to worry you.”

Then it clicked. The past four days flashed through my mind, and the anger came flooding back. I pushed away from him and hopped out of his arms so fast it took him by surprise.

“Why have you been ignoring me?” I punched him in the chest. “I thought we were building something, and then you go ghost on me for four fucking days. No call, no text, no got damn email. Is that the type of shit you on?”

“Baby, it’s not what you think. I—some shit went down, and—I needed some time—a minute to process.”

“Brae, why don’t you guys go in your room for some privacy?” Jaelynn suggested.

Kynee



Without responding, she turned to go to her room, and I followed, closing the door behind me.

“You needed time to process?” She went right in. “Since the day we met, I thought we were here.” She used two fingers to point back and forth from my head to hers.

“We were—I mean we are. But this shit ain’t something that you should have to deal with. You deserve so much more.”

“What shit? What is it? What happened?” she spat out questions a mile a minute.

I took a long, slow, deep breath and closed my eyes. Having to do this was killing me, but I didn’t know what else to do.

“Leah is pregnant.”

“Wh-Wha-What?” she stammered as she backed away from me.

“Leah is—”

“I heard you!” she screamed. “Are you sure? Are sure it’s yours?”

“No, I’m not sure if it’s mine. She’s refusing to take a DNA test. She didn’t show up for the one I scheduled. I’m

sorry, baby. I didn't know how to tell you."

Suddenly, her expression changed. It was like something clicked in her head, and she came barreling toward me.

"Did you cheat on me?" Her little fists were beating against my chest. I put my arms up to block her blows and moved back until I was against the wall. "Is that why you went ghost? How could you?"

I grabbed her wrists and pulled her chest into mine.

"Calm down, Braelynn! Ain't nobody cheated on your ass. She was pregnant when we broke up."

She stopped squirming and looked me in my eyes. Her chest continued to heave up and down as she processed my words.

"When I found out Sunday, I didn't know what to do."

"You pick up the damn phone and call me. That's what you do."

She yanked her wrists from my grasp and walked away. Her hand went to her forehead, like she was trying to suppress a headache.

"Baby, my head was all fucked up. I didn't know how you would react."

"If she was pregnant before I came into the picture, why are you acting like this is the end of the world?"

"Because it is!" I yelled. "It's the end of the world that I planned to have with you."

She took slow steps in my direction, then stopped suddenly, still too far away for me to touch.

"What are you—are you saying—I don't understand."

"I don't want to do this, baby. I swear, this is the hard as hell."

"Ky, no! No, I won't let you. It doesn't have to—"

"It does! I love you too much to—"

“You love me?” she whispered.

I nodded my head while whispering, “More than anything.”

“Then why are you doing this?”

“Because you deserve better than somebody else’s baby daddy and dealing with baby-mama drama. I’m letting you go so you can find a nigga with less baggage, that’s worthy of a woman like you. Leah has already promised to make our lives a living hell, and I don’t want to put you through that.”

Tears fell from her eyes at a rapid speed as she blinked even faster.

“You’re not even giving me a choice?” she cried. “I should be able to choose if I want to accept you and your baggage.”

I shook my head but couldn’t find the words. This woman that I randomly crossed paths with was ready to ride for me. I was trying to free her of that responsibility and let her go before we fell any deeper.

“I’m in love with you!” she shouted through tears before coming to stand right in front of me. “You made me fall in love with you. Do you know what that means, baby? It means that I’m not letting you push me away when you need me the most, especially about some shit that happened before we reunited.”

While she shouted, she repeatedly poked me with her index finger. When she finished, I grabbed her by the wrists, pulled her even closer, put her arms around my waist, then cupped her face in my hands.

“You’re in love with me?” I asked.

She looked up at me before saying, “Since the day we met.”

“You love me enough to deal with me and my baggage? Because I’m trying to save you from a lot of headaches. Shit that you shouldn’t have to go through.”

“I do,” she replied as she nodded. Suddenly, she pushed away from me, and I could tell from her expression that she was about to let me have it again.

“I can’t believe you hopped your ass on a plane to break up with me. Are you crazy? You would have been better off doing that shit on the phone. You’re lucky you got here when you did because I was minutes away from buying a ticket to come fuck you up. You don’t—”

To shut her up, I snatched her back into my arms and covered her mouth with mine. She relaxed and put her arms around my neck. I snaked my tongue into her mouth, and she willingly received it. My hands went to her cup her ass and lift her... well, I tried to, but she wasn’t cooperating. Releasing her mouth, I looked at her.

“I know you feel that,” I said, referring to my hard dick.

“I do, but I ain’t so sure you deserve any of this pussy. You did come here just to break up with me.”

“Oh, it’s like that?”

“Exactly like that.”

She moved around me and went to the bathroom. When my dick softened, I went to the living room and was surprised to see Kamden and Jaelynn near the door talking.

“Damn, bro! It’s good to see you alive and well. The way Brae was going in on you, I thought for sure you’d have a black eye or be missing a limb.”

“It was touch and go for a minute, but we worked it out.”

“Naw, she worked it out. I’m glad one of y’all got some damn sense. Told yo’ ass you was doing too damn much.”

Before I could reply to his dumb ass, Braelynn walked in, and her and Kamden greeted each other.

“You brought your brother for backup, baby?” She joked.

“They came for moral support,” I confessed.

When I decided to catch a flight to Seattle, I was not in a good headspace, so my brothers refused to let me come alone. I was glad Braelynn refused to allow me to put an end to us.

“Oh, Kolby is here, too?” She looked around. “Oh, shit. He must be with Myla.”

Her eyes got wide, and she looked at Jaelynn, who gave her a nod.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Myla’s pregnant with Kolby’s baby,” Kamden answered.

“Word? That’s—interesting.”

“Yeah. They went to go talk.”

I thought back for a second before saying, “So y’all were talking about Kolby when I walked in the kitchen that day.”

“Sure was, but it wasn’t our business to tell,” Jaelynn said.

“Damn... How’d he take the news?” I asked.

“Hard to tell. He was upset that she didn’t tell him sooner. I think he’s cool about the baby,” Kamden told me.

“Good... That’s good for him... for them,” I said, reflecting on my fucked-up situation. “Well, I’m sure Kolby will be tied up for the night. You can head to the hotel, Kam. I’ll be here with my woman.”

I took her in my arms from behind and leaned down to place a kiss on her neck. She shivered right out of my grasp and turned to face me.

“Oh, I’m your woman now?” she teased.

“Yep. My ride or die.” I kissed her neck.

“I’ll ride. but I’m not dying for your ass,” she said with a sexy smirk.

“Oh, it’s like that?”

“The way you just had me worried for four days, then came up in here and tried to break up with me. Boy, you got a

lot of making up to do.”

She turned around to face me and put her arms around my neck.

“I got a few ideas about how I can make it up to you.”

“Tell me.”

“First, I want you to sit on my fa—”

“Ahhhh! I don’t wanna hear it. Take that shit in your room, Brae! Kamden, I’m going to the hotel with you because I know these two about to be loud as hell. I ain’t Braelynn or Myla, so don’t try no slick shit. Your fine ass ain’t gon’ have me losing my mind or pregnant. I’ll meet you in the car,” Jaelynn rambled off before disappearing into her bedroom.

We all looked in the direction that she went and then burst out laughing.

“Kam, you and my sister didn’t—”

“Noooo! Hell noooo! We just cool. I already know Jaelynn would have my ass in jail.” He shook his head as he spoke. “I’ll see you in the morning, Ky.”

When he left, Braelynn said, “I thought for sure they fucked in Belize.”

“The only fucking I care about is between me and you. Didn’t you say I had a lot of making up to do?” She nodded. “Then let’s get started.”

I tapped her on her ass and chased her into her bedroom. It was gonna be a long night.

Braelynn



It had been a few days since Kyree's surprise visit, and everything with us was back to normal. I spent half the day taking care of anything related to the boutique and the other half fixing cars in my mom's garage. Kyree was getting closer to the grand opening of his shop, and I was probably excited enough for both of us. I talked to Ms. Stella a few times since everything went down. She was happy that we worked things out, but she didn't hide her disappointment in the fact that Leah was having her first grandbaby. Thankfully, she didn't dwell on it.

When she found out that Kolby was expecting a child, she immediately wanted to meet Myla. Since that wouldn't happen right away, she had Kolby FaceTime her, and she'd been calling Myla every day. When I told her that Myla and I had been friends since seventh grade, she was even more anxious to meet her in person.

We were still on the hunt for a building to house our lingerie boutique. We'd attempted to lease three different buildings, and they all seemed promising until we went to sign the paperwork. The owners always had some dumb ass excuse as to why we couldn't move forward. We were beginning to think that these weren't coincidences.

The last place we looked at was owned by the parents of an old associate from high school. We got along pretty well back then and were still cool when we saw each other out and about. I sent her a text and asked if I could treat her to lunch. She agreed, and I was headed to meet her before I went to my mom's and got started on the cars for the afternoon.

"Hey, Tori!" I said when I approached our table. "Sorry I'm running a little late."

"It's cool. I've only been here a minute." She stood, and we gave each other a quick hug.

"Thank you for meeting with me. I'm not even gon' beat around the bush. You know, Myla, Jae, and I have been looking for a building for MyLynn's Bedroom Boutique."

"Yeah, my parents said you were interested in their building, but you guys changed your mind at the last minute."

The waiter came over with some waters, and we both quickly looked at the menu and placed our orders.

"Is that what they said?" I asked. "Because that's definitely not true."

"Really? I'm not sure why they would tell me that then."

"That's why I wanted to meet with you. We've found multiple buildings that we were interested in, and every time we try to meet to sign the lease, the owners bail out. I think someone is sabotaging us."

"Seriously? Y'all got enemies like that?"

"Shit, I didn't think we did, but I'm beginning to think otherwise."

"Well, how can I help?"

That's one thing I've always like about Tori. She's always been a genuinely nice person. Her and Samuel's families ran in the same circle of rich people, although her parents were a little more down to earth. Growing up, I didn't know Samuel,

because he went to private schools, but Tori's parents insisted she go to public schools.

"I have a feeling that Samuel has something to do with us losing these buildings."

"Samuel? Samuel Livens? Don't tell me you're still dating that asshole."

"Now you tell me!" I laughed. "Why didn't you warn me the first time you saw us together?"

"I'm sorry, girl. I thought y'all was in love or some shit. I take it you came to your senses."

"Finally! And our breakup wasn't pretty, which is why I think he may have something to do with this."

"How though?" Tori asked.

"I've been trying to figure that out. You know his family has connections all over this city."

"True." Tori sat and thought for a minute. "I'm not sure if I can help in that aspect, but I'll ask my parents straight up why they lied to me about why y'all didn't lease the building."

"Can you? You think they'll be honest this time?" I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "It's obvious something is going on for them to lie in the first place. I'll let you know what they say."

"Thanks, girl."

Our food came, and we spent the next forty-five minutes catching up. Tori agreed to let me know something as soon as she could.

The name 'Kynree' is written in a large, elegant, cursive script. Below the name, there is a black silhouette of a typewriter, positioned as if it were the base of the lettering.

The past month has been the worst. I missed the hell outta Braelynn and couldn't wait to get my ass on the plane Sunday morning. I just needed to get through two more days. Dealing with Leah has been absolute hell. I'd attempted to convince her to take the DNA test at least once every day, and she continued to refuse. On top of that, she popped up at my apartment at the most random times, claiming that she was making sure that I wasn't still entertaining other women, although she was only worried about Braelynn. I was pretty much at my wits' end with her, and I didn't know what else to do.

Kolby had a lot on his plate with his impending fatherhood and the mother of his child being thousands of miles away. It was crazy how our situations were so similar yet so different. He and Myla were growing closer, and he was contemplating pursuing a relationship with her, which I thought was great. Even with all he had going on, he was still trying to help his big brother out. He suggested that I play nice with Leah. I didn't even want to breathe the same air as that woman, but I decided it was worth a shot. It seemed to me that she was going out of her way to be difficult, but maybe if I changed my approach, she would make things a little easier.

I sent her a text and asked if she wanted to meet for dinner. Apparently, restaurant food didn't sit well with her, and she asked if she could cook for me... at my place. I didn't want her in my space, nor did I want to be in her space. I couldn't give her an answer right away, because I had to call Braelynn and get the okay.

"Hey, baby," she answered.

"Hey, you busy?"

"Not really. What are you doing?"

"I need to run something by you, and if you ain't cool with it, just let me know."

"Ookkaayy."

"Leah is still being difficult, so Kolby suggested I take a different approach with her and be nice. I invited her out to dinner."

"I mean, I trust you, so I guess that's fine."

"There's more, baby. Apparently, restaurant food has been making her sick. She wants to come to my place and make dinner instead."

"What? I don't know about that, baby."

"Me either. That's why I'm calling you. I don't want her in my space, but I can't think of another way to have a levelheaded conversation with her crazy ass."

"That's true. I'm sorry she's putting you through all this unnecessary bullshit. Go ahead and let her come over, but you be extra careful. I trust you but not her conniving ass."

"You sure? Because—"

"It's fine, baby. Call me later. I love you."

"Love you, too."

I said a little prayer before calling Leah back so we could settle on a time. I also sent her enough money to cover whatever groceries she might need through Cash App.

I was only working half days at this point and spending the other half getting my shop ready. The grand opening was a month away, and I wanted to be excited, but this shit with Leah was like a dark cloud hovering over my life. My parents, brothers, and Braelynn planned this huge event for the opening, plus a party later on that night. No one in my family owned their own business, so this was a big deal for all of us. When my mom thought that I was ending things with Braelynn, she threatened to cancel every goddamn thing.

Leah wasn't going to make this easy for me; she'd already proven that. When she found out that Braelynn and I were still very much in a relationship, Lord only knows what she'd do. I almost fucked up and let Leah manipulate me into ending my relationship. I couldn't tell you how many times I'd thanked God that my baby bossed up on my ass and let me know what was up.

When I got home from work and checked on my shop, I straightened up my apartment and took a shower. By the time I was dressed in a pair of sweats and a long-sleeved T-shirt, Leah was calling me to come and help her with the bags. I begrudgingly took my ass outside to help her. Once we were back inside, I put the bags on the counter in the kitchen and went to the living room to watch TV until the food was done.

“Well, hello to you, too,” Leah shouted from the kitchen.

“Oh, my bad. I figured greeting was unnecessary because we've already communicated today. Wassup?”

“You're not gonna keep me company while I cook?”

I didn't plan on it.

“Sure.” I put the TV on a hip-hip music channel and went to sit at the kitchen table.

“Some romantic music would have been nice,” she commented.

“Naw, this is fine.”

While she took everything out of the bags, I stared off into space. Taking my phone out, I went straight to Braelynn's Instagram page. *Damn, I didn't think it was possible to miss someone as much as I missed her.*

"I thought maybe we could cook together," she suggested.

Is it bad that the sound of her voice annoyed the hell outta me?

"Leah, you know I can't cook. I'm good."

She huffed and rolled her eyes as she continued emptying the bags. I went back to looking at Braelynn's pictures. I hadn't realized until now how many pictures she had taken and posted of us. Anyone looking at her pictures, from the first one she posted of us in Belize, to the most recent on from her last visit, could see the love we had for each other. *Damn, I missed my baby.*

The only thing that could be heard while Leah was cooking was the banging of pots and pans and the opening and closing of cabinets. I didn't have much to say. If we were at a restaurant, I'd probably be more comfortable, but right now, all I could think about was how much longer she'd be in my space.

I finally pulled my eyes away from my phone and looked at Leah as she moved around my kitchen. She was wearing a pair of Ivy Park leggings with a hoodie, both black. Leah was very fit and took pride in her appearance. For her to be five months pregnant, she wasn't very big. In fact, so far, she looked to only have gained weight in her stomach. Her face, her breasts, and her ass didn't look any bigger than it had when we broke up.

"When is your next doctor's appointment?" I asked.

"Next month. Why?"

"I was thinking maybe I should go."

Her eyes got big, and she smiled nervously. "Really? I mean, that would be nice."

“When is your due date?”

“Some time at the end of January or beginning of February,” she replied.

I wasn’t a genius, but I thought the doctor gave an actual estimated date, not a date range.

“The doctor didn’t give you a date?”

“Umm, yeah. January 31st.”

I nodded, thinking that I wished I had paid more attention to all the times we fucked because this baby couldn’t be mine. As I looked at her, I thought back to the night we met at the club. I was definitely physically attracted to her, but I couldn’t find an ounce of attraction right now. It wasn’t that she wasn’t attractive, pregnant and all. I simply didn’t see her like that anymore.

“If you’re not going to talk to me, you can go back to the living room and watch TV until dinner is done. It’s kinda weird with you just watching me.”

Kolby said to play nice, I reminded myself.

“What do you want to talk about?” I asked.

“I don’t know, anything. How’s your little shop coming along?”

Little?

Taking a deep breath, I said, “See? That’s ninety-five percent of the reason I stopped fucking with you. Just no damn respect for what I’m trying to accomplish.”

I got up to leave, and she stopped me by pulling me by the arm.

“What are you talking about? I asked how your shop was coming along. How is that disrespectful?”

“It’s so normal to you that you don’t even notice it. My ‘little’ shop is coming along just fine. Let me know when the food is ready.”

I went back to the couch and remained there until dinner was done. When I went back to the kitchen, she had candles lit and had lowered the lights. I shook my head and sat down across from her. After she blessed the food, we began to eat. She made baked salmon, and asparagus with noodles in some kind of lemon butter sauce. The first few bites were good, and I followed it up with a gulp from the glass of wine she'd poured. I sighed when I realized that it was Braelynn's favorite wine that I kept here for her visits.

"Thank you for letting me come by and make you dinner. I know I've been difficult as of late, but my hormones are really going crazy."

I nodded and ate another forkful of noodles.

"I'm guessing you're acting this way because I refuse to take the DNA test."

"Pretty much."

"Kyree, don't you get it? I know this is your baby. How do you think it makes me feel for you to question that?"

"How do you think it makes me feel that you refuse to do something so simple to help me be at ease? I know that I used protection and was very careful to pull out."

She shook her head. "This conversation is pointless. I'm not going to change my mind, so..." she rambled on.

I tuned her out and continued to eat and drink, with little to nothing to say. When I had eaten half my meal, I looked up at Leah staring at me, and my vision was blurred. I blinked a few times but still couldn't see clearly.

"You okay?" I heard her say.

I reached up to rub my eyes, hoping it would clear my vision. It didn't help.

"Kyree, are you okay?" I heard Leah say again.

When I tried to answer her, my stomach started to bubble, and I shot up out of the seat, trying to get to the bathroom in

the hallway. Since I couldn't see clearly, I stumbled over a few things on my way. I made it to the toilet just in time to empty the contents of my stomach. By the time I felt like I was done, I was exhausted and dizzy.

I remained on the floor and leaned against the wall, taking deep breaths and praying that the worst was over. I heard the water running, and I opened my eyes to see Leah's silhouette standing in front of the sink. I closed them again and began to prepare myself to stand. Before I could get to my feet, Leah was leaning over me with a cool towel.

“Are you okay? Was it the food? Are you allergic to fish?”

I didn't have an answer for her. I'd eaten salmon before and had no problems. I shook my head because I felt another round of vomit coming up. Thankfully, Leah moved back, and I made it to toilet. Another ten minutes went by before I felt like it was safe enough for me to leave the bathroom.

Using the sink for balance, I lifted myself from the floor. My vision was still blurred, and I was beginning to feel drowsy. I used the wall to guide me to my bedroom, and when I made it to the bed, I passed out.

Braelynn



It was late, and I didn't know how long I'd been asleep. My vibrating phone woke me up, and I reached for it on my nightstand. Releasing a yawn, I rubbed my eyes with one hand while holding my phone up to my face with the other. When I saw Kyree's name, I sat up, and my heart began to race. He didn't usually text this late, but we didn't get a chance to talk after his dinner with Leah because I fell asleep a lot earlier than usual. Entering the passcode to unlock my phone, I selected the text.

The first thing I saw was pictures. The first one was a candlelit table with a bottle of wine and two place settings. The second one almost caused me to throw my phone. It was Leah and Kyree in his bed. I knew it was his bed because I'd bought the sheets they were lying on. His head was on her ample chest, and he looked asleep as she smiled into the camera. The third picture was of his hand on her pregnant belly. Looking at it made this situation even more real, and I felt nauseous. Above the picture was a text that I knew I shouldn't have read, but I guess I was glutton for punishment.

I told you it wasn't over. Well, it is for you.

I was pretty sure she sent that from his phone without his knowledge, but the pictures didn't lie. I went back and forth with myself about whether or not I should reply or call but

decided against both. Instead, I blocked his number, then blocked him from my social media accounts before trying to go back to sleep, but the tears wouldn't let me.

Eventually, I cried myself to sleep because the next morning, I woke up with a raging headache. Once I took care of my basic hygiene, I went to the kitchen to make myself a breakfast shake. Jaelynn was already there, eating a bowl of cereal. When she saw my face, she frowned.

“What’s wrong with you? You good?”

“I got a text late last night from Kyree’s phone.”

Her eyes got wide. “Okay? What did he say?”

“He didn’t send me a text. I said it was from his phone.”

“Sis, you’re talking in circles.”

“Leah, his baby mama, sent me a text from his phone. It was a picture of them all hugged up in his bed.”

The more I thought about it, the more pissed I got. I was starting to think that all the lines he fed me that night he came to break up with me were bullshit.

“Nooooo!” she said, shocked.

“One of the pics was his hand resting on her belly.”

“Tell me you’re lying!”

“I wish I was.”

“Did you reply back?”

“I thought about it, but what for? It wouldn’t change anything. Clearly, he’s made a choice. A month ago, he came here to break up with me, and my dumb ass talked him out of it. I should have let him have it his way. I guess now they can be one big, happy family.”

As I spoke, the tears I was fighting began to fall, and Jaelynn came to console me.

“I don’t understand,” I cried. “If he truly loved me and wanted to be with me, nothing would stop him from doing it.”

People raise kids in separate houses all the time. Maybe it's her he really wants."

"I don't know, Brae. I think his feelings for you are genuine. I can't speculate about what may have happened for him to change his mind. It doesn't make sense to me either."

After letting me cry on her shoulder for a few more minutes, she went back to her cereal, and I finished making my shake. This was not how planned to start my day.

"Brae, isn't he coming here tomorrow?"

"That was the plan, but I blocked him from contacting me. Oh, can you block him, too? Because whether or not she sent that text without his knowledge, they were in the bed together, and he was asleep on her chest. I'm done."

"I hear you, sis. I'll block him."

"I'm gonna go for a run when I'm done with my shake. You wanna go with?" I asked her.

"Yeah, I'll go with."

Later that afternoon, after Jaelynn and I had come back from our run and showered, we were sitting around bouncing ideas off of each for our lingerie line. My phone rang, and I was surprised to see it was Tori.

"It's Tori," I told Jaelynn before answering and putting it on speaker. "Hey, Tori. How are you?"

"I'm good. I was calling you because I finally got a chance to talk to my parents about the building. You're not gonna believe what they said."

"Oh shit! Let me hear it."

"Apparently, a couple of days before they were set to meet with you guys to sign the final paperwork, they got a better offer. So they met with the people to discuss further, and guess who the people were?"

"Samuel and some of his people?"

“Yep! She said he expressed serious interest and made a hefty offer, a lot more than what they were asking. Of course, with them trying to retire, they took the best offer. But get this, after they met with you guys and told you the bad news, Samuel gave them the runaround about signing the paperwork, and a few days later, he reneged.”

“What? Are you serious?”

I looked at Jaelynn, and she was stunned by this information, as was I.

“Yep. So basically, the building is still available if you guys are still interested. My parents were too embarrassed to call you back and find out.”

“Wow! I can’t believe he would go through such lengths. Let me talk to Jae and Myla, and I’ll get back to you. Thank you so much, Tori. I really appreciate you.”

“Of course. You know you my girl. I’ll talk to you soon.”

I ended the call, and Jaelynn and I stared at each other for a moment.

“Can you believe that nigga?” I finally said.

“That’s the most hating ass shit I’ve ever heard of. That’s probably what happened with the other two spots. He must have some insider information.”

“Obviously, but who and how?”

“We need to find out. Let’s call My and see if she’s busy. We gotta put our heads together for this one.”

Jaelynn called Myla to see if she was up for company. The baby was already zapping her energy. Luckily, she was feeling great and told us to come on over. When we arrived at her place, we were welcomed by a delicious smell.

“What are you cooking? It smells amazing,” I said as soon as we entered.

“Well, hello to you.” Myla joked with me. “Hey, Jae.”

“Hey, My. It does smell good in here.”

“My bad, bestie. All I had was a shake today, and I didn’t realize how hungry I was until I smelled your food. How are you and my baby feeling?”

I put my hands on either side of her baby bump when I asked. She looked adorable in a pair of royal-blue leggings and a simple, white T-shirt.

“Today the little peanut is behaving, thank goodness. That’s why I’m in the mood to cook. Well, that and Kolby is flying in tonight.”

“Oh, are we intruding? Do you need us to leave?” I asked.

“No, he doesn’t land for a couple hours. I have a doctor’s appointment on Monday, and he wants to be there.”

“Aww, that’s sweet,” Jaelynn cooed.

“We can be gone by the time he gets here. Umm, what did you make, and is there enough for four?”

She laughed. “Yes, greedy, there’s plenty. I’m making veggie burrito bowls. Give me about fifteen more minutes, and we can eat. Now, what’s the tea?”

“Well,” Jaelynn began. “There’s actually two different teas.”

Jaelynn and I sat at her kitchen table while she finished cooking, and I told her why I was done with Kyree. She was in disbelief.

“Bestie, I’m so sorry. I can’t believe he would do something like that,” she said as she hugged me because, of course, I was crying again. “That doesn’t sound like him.”

“Maybe I should have let him break up with me. He’s a grown man. He knew what he wanted, but I convinced him otherwise. He probably just wanted one last fuck before we ended it.”

“Niggas ain’t shit!” Jaelynn cheered.

“They really not,” Myla agreed.

After a few more minutes of talking shit about men, I got myself together so that we could talk business. We updated Myla with the information from Tori. Again, she couldn’t believe her ears.

“How do you think he’s finding out about the places we’re looking at?” Myla asked.

“That’s why we’re here, to brainstorm. My first thought was social media. Have either of you shared any of the listings that we were interested in on your Facebook pages?”

“I barely use my Facebook,” Jaelynn answered.

“Me either. Maybe he has someone spying on you,” Myla suggested.

I frowned up my face as I thought about how weird that would be.

“I don’t think Samuel would go to that extent.”

“Sis, he’s already gone to that extent.” Jaelynn reminded me.

“True.”

Then it something hit me, but it was so farfetched that I was hesitant to suggest it.

“What about our realtor?”

Myla turned away from the stove, and Jaelynn looked up from her phone.

“I will beat her ass,” Jaelynn spat.

“If you think it’s her, we need to find a connection and some proof,” Myla added.

“How?”

We went back and forth with ideas while we ate the delicious dinner that Myla prepared. By the time we finished eating and helping her clean up, we had a few ideas.

“Until we figure this out, Tori said her parents will accept our previous offer. Or should we circle back to the first two places and see if they are suddenly available again?”

“Whether we go with that place or not, we should circle back and see if those other two places are back on the market. That would support what we already know,” Myla suggested, and Jaelynn and I agreed.

We sat around and talked for a little longer, and as we were preparing to leave, Myla’s doorbell sounded.

“Uh oh, your boo is here,” I teased, although I knew that Kolby and Myla weren’t officially a couple. Just because my situation was suddenly fucked up didn’t mean I couldn’t have hope for my girl.

“Stop, Brae! You know we aren’t together.”

Myla opened the door without looking through her peephole, and Kolby immediately let her know that wasn’t cool.

“Do you always answer the door without checking to see who it is?” he fussed before he stepped inside.

“I’m not expecting anyone but you.”

He pulled her into his arms for a hug, and when he released her, his hand went right to her stomach.

“You still need to check. Too many crazy people out there, and you got precious cargo in here. How’s my baby treating you today?”

They might not have been an official couple right now, but I didn’t doubt they will be soon, definitely before the baby arrives. Watching them was putting me in my feelings a little bit, so I knew it was time to go.

“Today was a good day,” was all she said in response.

“Oh, hey, Jae, Brae. I didn’t see y’all over here. Wassup?”

“That’s because you only got eyes for my girl,” Jaelynn teased.

He and Myla gave each other a look that they probably didn't think we noticed.

"Hey, Kolby. We were just leaving. My, I'll check on you tomorrow," I said as Jaelynn and I moved toward the door.

We hugged both Myla and Kolby as we made our exit. However, Jaelynn had a little something she wanted to say to Kolby before we left.

"Tell Kyree that was some fuck shit he let ole girl do last night."

Kolby was clearly unaware of what Jaelynn was referring to, based on the confused look on his face.

"What are you talking about? Who is ole girl?"

"Jae, let's just go. This isn't Kolby's problem."

"No, wait," Kolby touched my arm. "What happened?"

I did not want to repeat this story for the *third* time today, and Jaelynn sensed my irritation and told it for me.

"He let that hoe send pictures of them together to my sister in the middle of the damn night."

He scrunched his face up. "What? Ky wouldn't do that."

"Ohhh, but he did. Jae, let's go. Tell your brother I'm done with his ass."

"Hold up! I'm vouching for my brother. He wouldn't do that shit. You still got the text?" I nodded. "Let me see it."

I went to the text and gave him my phone.

"Oh, hell naw. I'm telling you this can't be what it looks like. I know this looks... compromising, but that nigga loves you."

He pressed something on my screen a few times, I assume, sending the text messages to himself, then gave me my phone.

"You should talk to him before jumping to conclusions," he pleaded on his brother's behalf.

“I’m good.” I lied.

Jaelynn and I left, and I almost broke down on the way to the car. I didn’t want to believe that me and Kyree’s whole relationship was a lie, but right now, that was what made sense.

Kynee



I woke up the next morning with a headache out of this world. Last night was a complete blur. The last thing I remembered was throwing up my insides. I had no recollection of how I got in my room. The T-shirt I was wearing was on the floor, but I still had my sweats on. The kitchen was spotless, showing no sign that Leah had cooked dinner, not even the leftovers. After searching my apartment for any clues about the previous night, I sat on the couch and tried to figure out what may have happened. I came to the conclusion that Leah must have drugged me. I couldn't come up with an explanation, because there was nothing wrong with me prior to having dinner with her. She had to have put something in the food or wine.

After getting my head together, I called Braelynn to tell her what I remembered about the previous night. She didn't pick up, so I left her a voicemail, asking her to call me. I called Leah, but she didn't answer either, not that I thought she'd admit to anything. I waited a little while, and when I didn't hear from Braelynn or Leah, I became anxious about the possibilities of what could have happened last night. I decided to pay Leah a visit.

When I pulled up in the parking lot in front of her building, I looked for her car to make sure she was home. I approached

the entrance and tried the old code to enter her building. Luckily, it hadn't been changed, so I went inside. When I got to her unit, I knocked on the door.

“Josh, can you get the door, baby?” I heard Leah say.

Josh? Baby? This was about to get real interesting.

I heard the locks being turned, and the door opened. A tall, light-skinned, preppy-looking nigga appeared, and when our eyes connected, he looked confused.

“Uhh, can I help you?” Josh said.

“Yeah. I'm looking for Leah.”

“Who's at the door, baa—umm, who are you?” Leah stuttered when she saw me.

“You gon' stand there and act like you didn't come to my house last night and drug me?”

I knew she'd deny it, but I wanted to see her reaction.

“Drug you? I-I didn't drug you.”

“What's going on here?” nerdy ass Josh shouted.

“Baby, he's lying. I don't know what he's talking about.”

“Lying? I recorded the whole damn thing. Why the fuck would I lie?” I held my phone up for dramatic effect.

“You didn't!” she gasped.

“Yes the fuck I did. I don't want no parts of you, so what the fuck would I lie for?”

Josh's eyes went back and forth between me and Leah.

“Leah, who is this man?” Josh asked without an ounce of base in his voice.

“I—umm—well—he's my ex,” she confessed.

“The ex that you're trying to pin that fucking baby on? Did you forget that part?”

“Now why would she do that?” He folded his arms across his chest and gave me a smug look. “This baby can’t be yours. Leah and I have been together for almost two years.”

What the fuck? The guilty look on Leah’s face was priceless. I couldn’t lie, though. This discovery made me happy as hell.

“Look, Leah, you got a whole ass nigga right here that’s willing to be your lap dog. I don’t know why you insist on trying to fuck up my life, but I suggest you move the fuck on. Keep this shit up, and I’m gon’ embarrass you and your family in ways that you can’t even imagine.”

“Fuck you, Kyree.”

“Listen, bro,” I directed to Josh. “I’m gon’ say this and be on my way. She can’t be trusted. I know that baby ain’t mine, but you might wanna make sure it’s yours.”

I looked at Leah again and held up my phone where the recording was supposed to be.

“Try me if you want to,” I warned.

I walked away, leaving them behind to settle that shit. I heard the door close as I walked down the hallway, and I could hear them arguing on the other side. I’d never felt more relieved in my life.

A few hours had passed since I left Braelynn a voicemail and sent her a text. It was odd that she hadn’t at least texted me back. As I drove, I called her through my Bluetooth but still didn’t get an answer. Ending the call, I called Jaelynn, getting the same result. I was started to get a little concerned, but I didn’t panic.

Before heading home, I stopped by my parents’ house. When I got there, I pulled up behind Kamden’s car. Inside, my parents were putting away groceries.

“Two of our sons here at the same time? What happened?” Ma said.

“I just came to see if you were cooking,” Kamden said as he looked in the grocery bags and started picking stuff out.

“If you don’t get outta the way,” Ma warned, pushing Kamden in the shoulder.

“So we know why this one is here. What brings you by, son?” Dad asked.

“Why y’all acting like I need a reason to come over? I visit you guys all the time.”

“I can tell by the look on your face that there’s a reason for this visit,” Ma said. “Things still running smoothly for your new shop?”

“They’re great. Everything is still right on schedule.”

“Well, tell us why you’re here,” Dad pressed.

I sat at the table across from Kamden and watched them unload the groceries. There wasn’t any need for us to attempt to help, because my mom would just tell us to get out the way.

“Last night, Leah made dinner for me at my apartment.”

Kamden looked up from his phone, and my parents stopped what they were doing and looked at me, but no one said a word.

“It’s not what you think. You know I’ve been trying to have her take a DNA test. Kolby suggested I be extra nice to her to see if I could get her to agree. He told me to take her to dinner.”

“Well, how the heck did the lil’ heffa end up at your apartment? I don’t like where this is going, son,” Ma rambled.

“I’m getting there. So anyway, she said that restaurant food made her sick and offered to cook dinner for me at my place. I called Braelynn before I agreed to it, and she was hesitant but told me it was fine.”

“Boy, if you don’t get on with this damn story,” came from my dad’s impatient ass.

“Okay. Long story short, I think she drugged me because I woke up this morning with a headache and—”

“What?” they all blurted out before I finished my statement.

“Yeah, I know. I’ve never felt so much pain and discomfort so suddenly in my life. When I had nothing else inside me, I was able to get up and make it to my room, and that’s the last thing I remember before everything went black.”

“That’s crazy!” Kamden said. “It definitely sounds like she might have slipped you something.”

“What the hell did you do to that girl for her to be doing some mess like that?” Ma fussed.

“He ain’t have to nothing. It’s that Ross charm,” Dad bragged, popping his imaginary collar. Ma just rolled her eyes at him.

“Oh, there’s more. I went by her place to see if she would confess. Some clean-cut, mixed, Poindexter-looking dude named Josh answered the door. Apparently, they’ve been dating for a minute.”

“Awww, dam—daanng!” Kamden said with his fist covering his mouth, correcting himself when he remembered where he was.

“I knew that girl was evil... evil and trifling. You would think since her family got a lil’ money that she’d be raised better. That’s some hoodrat shit. Got two men thinking they fathered your child,” she said, shaking her head in disgust.

Did she say hoodrat shit? I swear my mama only cursed when it had something to do with Leah. Well, maybe some other times but not often.

“I told y’all that baby wasn’t mine. Josh better be smart and make sure it’s his. Anyway, I told her I recorded the whole thing, and I was gon’ blast her and her family if she kept this stuff up. When I left, her and dude were arguing.”

My parents had finished putting away the groceries, and we had moved to the living room.

“Well, at least you don’t have to worry about being that thang’s baby daddy. I’ve been praying real hard about that whole situation, and I see the good Lord is still in the business of answering prayers,” Ma said.

“Hell—I mean, heck yeah. I can’t wait to tell Braelynn. Speaking of, my flight is early, and I haven’t even packed.”

I stood to hug my parents and give Kamden some dap before leaving. On the way home, I called Braelynn again and got no answer. Something was definitely up, and I was really starting to get worried.

Braelyn



I knew when the doorbell rang that it was Kyree. I couldn't believe that he had the audacity to show up at my house. Last night, Kolby called him on three-way. I hung up on both their asses, which was why I didn't know why this nigga was ringing my doorbell.

“Brae, you know he's not gon' leave. Answer the damn door!” Jaelynn whispered-yelled.

“I'm not answering the door. You answer the door and tell him I said to get thee fuck on! We're done!”

Kyree had gone from laying his finger on the doorbell to pounding on the door and yelling my name.

“If I go to that door, I'm letting him in. You need to stop being stubborn and hear the man out. If he wanted Leah, do you think he'd be going through all this trouble?”

Jaelynn stood there at the door to my room waiting for me to do or say something.

“Ughhh! Fine!”

I pushed past her and went to the front door, where Kyree was on the other side, pleading to be let in.

“Baby, open the door and let me explain. I promise you, it's not what you think.”

“Pictures are worth a thousand words, Ky. If you wanted to be with Leah, you should have said that shit. Go the fuck away!”

“I’m not leaving until you open this fucking door and talk to me.”

“You’ll leave if I call the police,” I threatened.

“Brae, stop playing with me. If I stay out here all day, you ain’t gon’ call the police. Now open this damn door!”

I rolled my eyes, even though I knew he was right.

“Say what you have to say through the door.”

“Baby?”

“Say what you have to say through the door, Kyree!”

“Leah drugged me. She slipped some shit in my food, and I blacked out.”

“Why would she go through all that trouble when she’s already having your baby?”

“Because the baby ain’t mine. She got a whole ’nother nigga. Can you just open the door so I can tell you what happened?”

His level of frustration was increasing, along with my level of curiosity. As soon as he heard the locks turn, he pushed the door open. I had to take a couple steps back so it wouldn’t hit me. Right away, he pulled me into his arms and buried his face in my neck.

“Baby, I wouldn’t lie to you. I swear to God, on everything I love, that nothing happened. Be logical—”

I pushed away from him and said with attitude, “Oh, so now I’m not being logical?”

“No, Brae, you’re not. You think I’d be going through all this if I wanted that girl?”

I stepped around him to close and lock the front door, then went to my room. Kyree followed, closing the door, leaning

against it, then stuffing his hands in the pocket of his hoodie.

“I don’t want to lose you... I can’t. I should have known Leah was up to some shit, but I never thought she was crazy enough to drug me.”

“Start from the beginning, from the moment she walked into your apartment.”

As he told me the events of the previous two days, he looked me directly in my eyes, and he didn’t stutter or fidget. Honestly, the story sounded too crazy to be a lie, and that alone made me believe him. When he finished, he moved away from the door to sit in the desk chair across from me, rolling it closer to the bed. After taking my hands in his, he kissed both of them before speaking again.

“Baby, I love you, and I’ve been making plans to spend my whole life showing you how much. Why would I fuck that up? I want you and only you.”

I could have put him out of his misery and told him that I believed him, but I wanted to see him sweat a little more.

“If you were unconscious, how do you know y’all didn’t have sex?”

“Because I know where my dick been, Braelynn. What the hell kinda question is that?” he almost shouted. “I was fully clothed from the waist down, anyway.”

He squeezed my hands gently. Closing his eyes, he bowed his head and put my hands against his forehead.

“Listen, baby, I—” he began.

“I believe you.”

He lifted his head and looked at me with relief in his eyes. A half a second later, his mouth was on mine, and he was on top of me. My legs naturally wrapped around his waist as I pulled him closer. He had on a pair of gray sweats, and I was wearing only a pair of thin lounging shorts, with nothing underneath, allowing me to feel his stiff manhood pressing against my moistening lower lips. One of his hands found its

way underneath the T-shirt that I was wearing, and he used his thumb to play with my nipple.

It had been a month since that last time we'd been together, and I missed him and his touch. He ground against me so intensely that I felt myself on the verge of a release. I began to moan into his mouth, and he knew that meant I was close. Suddenly, he tore his mouth away from mine, slid to his knees on the floor, taking my shorts with him, and buried face in my pussy. I was already on the edge, so a few swipes from his tongue sent my ass over.

“Gaaaaadaaaamn! Shhiiitt!” I screamed.

Of course his ass didn't let up. Clamping his arms around my thighs, there was no hope of me being able to squirm my way out of this pussy and ass eating excursion that he was on. He showed no mercy until I squirted all over his face, and even then, I had to beg him.

“Please, baby. I... can't... take... it,” I managed to say between deep breaths.

My eyes were closed, but I felt him moving around. He released my legs, and they fell to the bed, wide open. When I opened my eyes, Kyree was standing before me, butt ass naked, stroking his dick. My mouth watered at the sight of his strong hand sliding up and down his shaft. When I sat up, the tip of his dick was barely an inch away from my mouth. I could see the precum oozing out of the tip. I stuck my tongue out, and he leaned forward, rubbing the head over my awaiting tongue.

“Sssss,” he hissed before our hands switched places.

I engulfed about half his length in my mouth and bobbed my head up and down. My tongue licked his length, going to the base, back up, swirling my tongue around the tip, then covering as much as I could with my mouth again.

I lost myself in pleasuring him. The more he moaned, the more effort I put into pleasing him. His hands went to my hair, and he gripped a handful to control my speed.

“Shit, baby!” he groaned.

His excitement took me to another level, and the next thing I knew, his head was tapping my tonsils, causing me to gag. Gagging created that slippery spit, the spit that makes you lose control of your mouth. When I felt him begin to pulse in my mouth, my head bobbed faster and faster, and then he shot his seeds to the back of my throat.

“Arghh! Fuck!”

Pulling one of his numbers, I latched on as he tried to pull away. I had no idea that my jaws were this strong, and I think I surprised Kyree, too. When he was finally able to pull himself out of my mouth, he fell back into the desk chair that he was sitting in, and it rolled back. His chest heaved up and down as he caught his breath.

My eyes went to his dick, which was still hard. I stood and took off my T-shirt, then straddled him, sliding down on his bare dick.

“Damn, baby!” he whispered as his head popped up. His hands went to my ass cheeks, and he squeezed while he thrust into me from the bottom.

“Ahhh!” I heard myself say.

“This pussy—shit, baby,” he rambled.

Leaning back, I enjoyed the ride and the feel of his tongue on my neck. When his hands moved from my ass, he cupped my breasts, taking turns giving love to both nipples.

“Baby, I’m about to cum,” I mumbled.

I planted my feet securely on the ground and used it as an anchor. Bouncing my ass up and down, I rode his dick like I was a jockey in the Kentucky Derby.

“Ahh, slow down, baby. You gon’ make me shoot this shit up,” he warned.

We’d gotten retested together two months ago, but I’m still not on birth control. My period ended a few days ago, so I

wasn't concerned.

"I'm cummin'! Ahh shit, baabyyyy!"

I felt my pussy contracting around his dick, and I knew the second his volcano erupted because I could feel the warmth of his fluids covering my walls.

"Shit!" he released. "You gotta get up, baby. Go sit on the toilet and let that she drip out."

I laughed. "First of all, that don't work. Secondly, we should be good. I don't think I'm ovulating."

He sighed in relief before saying, "I love you."

"I love you, too."



It was nearing the end of my five days in Seattle, and I still hadn't done the one thing I'd planned to do on this visit. I was becoming anxious because I was running out of time. Not seeing her for a month before this trip damn near killed me. I was over the long distance and ready to have her with me every day. Tonight, we were going out to dinner, and I planned to talk to her about our future tonight.

“Jae, is Myla meeting us at the realtor's office?”

The three of them had a meeting with their realtor about a location they were interested in. Apparently, they'd hit a few roadblocks in their search.

“Myla said something came up. I'm ready, but Brae, I ain't so sure about this. You think coming right out and accusing her of being in cahoots with Samuel will work?”

I looked up from the TV when I heard Samuel's name.
What the hell did he have to do with this?

“What are y'all talking about?” I asked them.

“Brae didn't tell you?”

I looked at Braelynn, and her eyes went to her sister.

“Talk, Brae,” I demanded.

Rolling her eyes at Jaelynn, she told me about their suspicions. I'd admit, it sounded kind of out there, but after my situation with Leah, I believed damn near anything.

"He doesn't want you to be successful without him, so he's doing everything he can do make sure you fail. That's some bitch ass nigga shit."

"Yeah, but we about to blow up his spot. Let's go, sis," Jaelynn said.

"Hold up. Y'all really think this woman gon' admit to some shit?" I shook my head. "I can't see that happening."

"Baby, we have a meeting with her in forty-five minutes. Do you have a better idea?"

"I do."



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, OUR PLAN WAS IN MOTION. BRAELYNN had come to the conclusion that the woman that Samuel was cheating on her with was their realtor. At some point, she'd gone to see Ms. Janie again and showed her a picture of their realtor that she had gotten online, and Ms. Janie was happy to give her confirmation.

"I don't see Samuel's car. I'll wait out front while you guys park around back," Braelynn suggested.

"We'll be close by," I assured her.

"I'm not worried about Samuel's ass," she said while showing me her can of mace. "If he gets too touchy-feely, I'll knee his ass in the nuts, then drown him in mace."

"I know you're a 'G', but it won't get that far," I told her.

"Be careful, sis," Jaelynn said.

Braelynn kissed my lips before getting out and walking to the entrance of the building while Jaelynn and I parked in the back. We crept around the side of the building and found a

spot to wait where we could see and hear them, but they couldn't see us. Just as we got in position, Samuel approached her with a big ass cheesy smile on his face. He immediately pulled her into a hug. and I had to count backward from ten to keep calm.

“Thanks for meeting me,” Braelynn said, taking a few steps back once he released her.

“Anything for you, but why'd you want to meet here?”

“The owners are friends of my dad's. We're thinking about leasing it from them. I know we didn't always agree on things, but I really value your opinion. I wanted you to be here when they arrived to take a look with me.”

She was laying it on a little too thick.

“Is this for your little lingerie shop?” She nodded. “Oh, this isn't a good location for that. Honestly, there aren't many places in town that I think would be a good fit. Selling lingerie is such a low budget, trashy business.”

This nigga is definitely a dream killer.

“See? That's why I broke up with your ass. You can't—I mean, if we're gonna talk about getting back together, I need to see that you support my dreams.”

Shit! She almost went completely off script, but she caught herself.

“I'm sorry, Brae. I do support you. I just think you could do so much better, and I want to help you.” He took a step toward her. “Why don't you cancel your meeting with the owner, and we can go somewhere and talk about us? Then we can put our heads together and come up with a business that would be appropriate for my wife.”

His wife?

“Your wife?” Braelynn said.

“Yes, my wife.”

Then the nigga got on one knee and pulled out a ring. Just as I was about to go break up this little reunion, Jaelynn pulled me back and pointed in the direction of the street.

“Who is that?” I whispered.

“Sandra, our realtor, and she don’t look happy.”

Sandra had a determined yet pissed off look on her face as she approached Samuel from behind.

“Braelynn Michelle Waters, I know we’ve had some rocky times, but I always knew you’d come back to me. I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I promise to be the best husband to you and the best father to our future children. Please, baby, will you take me back and be my wife?”

I couldn’t believe that I’d just watched another nigga propose to my girl, but we couldn’t have planned this better ourselves. Sandra witnessed the entire proposal, and her reaction answered every question we had.

“What the fuck is this, Samuel?” she screamed.

“Sandra?” He stood to his feet and turned around with a look of confusion on his face. “What are you doing here?”

Jaelynn and I came out of hiding just in case some shit really popped off. She’s had her phone out, recording this entire time, proposal and all. Samuel was so focused on Sandra that he didn’t see us stand next to Braelynn.

“Don’t you dare question me when you just got off your knee proposing to this woman. I thought you were done with her.”

“I’m sorry, Sandra. Braelynn is the love of my life.”

“All the shit I’ve been doing for you, making sure all of their offers were denied. Were you just using me?”

“So you were behind it?” Braelynn said, bringing his attention back to here.

When Samuel turned to face Braelynn, his whole demeanor changed when he saw my arm around her shoulder.

“What is this?”

“I knew something was up when we kept getting denied. It didn’t take us long to figure out that you were somehow connected. I can’t believe you, Samuel. How can you say you love me in one breath and then turn around and go out of your way to try to make me fail? That’s not love, you dumbass.”

“You set me up?”

“We sure did!” Jaelynn answered. “And I recorded the whole thing.”

“Since you’re recording, get this. Braelynn, did you know that Samuel was the one who bought and demolished your father’s shop.”

Both Braelynn and Jaelynn had their eyes on Samuel, and if looks could kill, he’d be dead as hell.

“You did that?” She shook her head in disbelief. “How can you be so—so—argghh! I hate you, Samuel Livens! With everything in me, I hate you! You knew how much I wanted to buy that shop.”

Suddenly, Samuel was bent over screaming, covering his eyes. Braelynn had sprayed his face with mace and was already walking toward the back of the building where we parked before Jaelynn and I knew what had happened. We quickly followed her, leaving Sandra to take care of Samuel.



AFTER AN EVENTFUL AFTERNOON, BRAELYNN AND I GOT dressed up and went to dinner at an Italian restaurant called Altura. The vibe was nice, and we were enjoying our appetizer and some wine.

“We haven’t really talked about this afternoon. How do you feel about what happened?” I asked her.

“Mostly pissed off. I still can’t believe that he would go that far. That’s legit kinda crazy.”

“Yeah, I’d have to agree.”

“I was devastated when I found out that the shop was sold, but I still had hope. By the time I got over the fact that Mr. Clayborn had sold it to someone else, it was being demolished. I took that as a sign and pretty much let that dream go.”

“That had to be hard, baby. I’m sorry that he was able to hurt you like that. Are y’all planning to do anything with the information?”

“Like what? Report him?”

“Yeah.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. I feel like reporting him would get Sandra in more trouble than Samuel. I honestly don’t have any beef with her. I’m sure he lied and manipulated her to get her to do that shit, and I don’t want her to lose her job because of him.”

I nodded in agreement. “I can understand that. As long as he knows you have the video, y’all can hold it over his head. He probably won’t fuck with you anymore.”

Our entrées came, and after blessing the food, we took a few bites before I spoke again.

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to talk to you about.”

She looked at me with cautious eyes. “I’m listening.”

“We’ve been doing this long-distance thing for a minute. You know my end goal is for us to be in the same city.”

“I know but it’s only been five months.”

“That doesn’t seem like a long time to you?” I asked, probably a little more aggressive than I intended.

“In the big scheme of things, not really. We have our whole lives to be together, and I feel like we’re still getting to

know each other. What's the rush?"

That was definitely not what I was expecting to hear from her.

"Baby, I'm ready to go to bed with you every night in my arms and wake up with you the same way. I can't go another whole month without seeing you."

She looked down at her plate and moved her food around. When she didn't say anything, I continued.

"I thought being in the same city was what we both wanted. Have you changed your mind? Because you know with my shop opening up, I can't move here."

"No, I haven't changed my mind about moving to Chicago... eventually. I didn't think you would want me to move so soon."

"So soon? How long do you want to keep up this back-and-forth?"

"I don't know. A year at least."

"A year? You want to do this for a year?" I shook my head. "That's a long ass time, baby."

"It's only seven more months, and it'll go by in no time. I'll come and see you more often, and we won't be apart for a full month again. I promise."

I tuned her out after she said *only* seven more months. I wasn't okay with it, but clearly, she was not bothered by the distance.

"Okay," I agreed before focusing on my meal.

After several minutes of silence, she said, "You're mad?"

"Naw, I'm confused more than anything. I thought we were on the same page. Whenever you're ready to make the move, let me know."

I tried to say it with the least amount of aggression that I could, but I'm sure that she could sense that I wasn't happy.

We made it through the rest of dinner with minimal, forced conversation.

Braelynn



It was very obvious that Kyree was upset. Once we left the restaurant, he didn't say another word. He drove to the restaurant using the GPS, and I offered to drive home, simply for the distraction. When we arrived, he didn't even come around to open my door, and when I let us inside, he went straight to my room. A few minutes later, I heard the shower. I sat on the couch in our living room and Jaelynn walked in.

“Didn't y'all shower before dinner? Y'all must have been fucking in the car.” *Why is she like this?*

“Yeah, we did, and we didn't have sex in the car.”

“Damn, sis! In the restaurant? That's a pretty upscale place, and y'all just—”

“Jae, shut up! We didn't have sex anywhere. He's mad because I don't want to move to Chicago and showers are how he clears his head.”

“Oh... Since when do you not want to move to Chicago?”

“I mean, I do, but he wants it to happen yesterday.”

“And?”

“Jae, we haven't even been together for six months and have almost broken up twice.”

“Girl, both of those ‘almost breakups’ were caused by someone else.” She reminded me.

“I just think maybe we should wait.”

“How long?” she asked.

“At least until we’ve been dating for a year. That’s only seven more months.”

She looked at me sideways with her lips turned up.

“Sis, you moved in with Samuel after six months. Even after *everybody* warned you that it was a mistake because we knew he wasn’t shit.”

“Wow!” I heard before I saw Kyree standing at the entrance of the living room.

Fuck!

He turned and went back to the bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

“I’m guessing he didn’t know that, huh?”

“He’s leaving tomorrow. I gotta fix this before he leaves.”

Leaving Jaelynn in the living room, I went to my room and found Kyree on my bed, lying on his back with his hands behind his head. I almost forgot why I was there as I admired his fit body, caramel-colored skin, six-pack abs, tattoos across his chest and covering his arms.

“You’re gonna just stare at me all night?”

Shit, I could.

“Oh, umm, no.” I closed the door behind me and approached him, giving him my back. “Can you unzip me?”

He sat up, unzipped my dress, and was back in the same position before I turned to face him.

“Tell me what’s on your mind. What are you thinking?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“I know you heard Jae say how soon I moved in with Samuel, and I’m sure you feel some kind of way about it.”

I stood next to the bed, holding up my dress and waiting for him to say something. When he didn’t, I walked to my closet and let my dress fall to the floor. Stepping out of my shoes and kicking them to the side, I picked up my dress before hanging it in my closet. After putting on one of his T-shirts, I went back to Kyree. His eyes were closed, but he must have sensed my presence because he opened them.

“Shouldn’t I?” he said, finally responding to my question.

“I was in a dark place at the time, and I made the wrong decision. I’m trying not to make the same mistake twice.”

As soon as that last part came out of my mouth, I regretted it. It didn’t sound as harsh in my head.

“Mistake? Is that how you feel? Does anything about me and what we have resemble that bullshit you had going with him?”

“No.”

“Look... I love you, and at the end of the day, if you’re not ready to take that next step, I have to respect that. Five months may not seem like a long time to you, but I’ve loved you since the day we met. Since the moment we shook hands, I knew I wanted you in my life forever. Baby, that hasn’t changed.”

I believed every word he said, but I still wasn’t sure I was ready to pack up and move halfway across the country. I straddled him in an attempt to end the conversation. However, before I could get comfortable, he grabbed me by the waist and moved me to the side.

“Not tonight, baby. I got an early flight.”

Confused, and honestly a little hurt, I said, “This is how you want our last night to be? We won’t see each other until your grand opening.”

“I’m tired, Brae,” was all he said.

His attitude was blowing me. This man was almost thirty-one years old, and he was acting like a child because he couldn't get what he wants.

“Baby, are you really about to act childish like this?”

He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, placing his feet on the floor. I couldn't see his face, because I was still behind him.

“You think I'm acting childish because I don't want to have sex?”

“No, I think you're acting childish because you're withholding sex because I won't agree to move to Chicago with you right now.”

“If that's how you feel, then I guess you're right.”

He grabbed a pillow from my bed and a blanket from the closet before saying, “I'll sleep on the couch.”

Then he was gone. I fell back on my bed and released a frustrated groan.



WHEN I OPENED MY EYES, I WAS ALONE IN MY BED, AND THE light was still on. I thought I'd only been asleep for a few minutes, but when I looked at my alarm clock, I saw that wasn't the case. I had slept all night alone, and Kyree's old, childish ass was still on the couch. His flight was at eight. and my clock read five. That meant we still had enough time to stop for breakfast at our favorite twenty-four-hour spot.

I hopped out of bed and slipped on a pair of leggings before stuffing my feet into a pair of Converse. In the bathroom, I quickly brushed my teeth, washed my face, and ran my fingers through my Afro puff. Rushing into the living room to wake Kyree up, I was confused when I didn't see him on the couch.

“Where is he?”

The lights in the rest of the house were off, so I went back to my room to get my phone from my purse. Thank goodness, I had a text from him.

Baby, I didn't want to wake you, so I called an Uber. I'll let you know when I land. I love you.

“He didn't want to wake me? Is he serious?”

Dialing his number, the call went straight to voicemail.

“Did this nigga just send me to voicemail?”

Frustrated that he was still acting like a damn child, I grabbed my car keys, hoping I would catch him at the restaurant. I didn't realize it was raining until I stepped outside. Thankfully, the light jacket that I grabbed had a hood. When I got into my car, I tried calling him again, but it went straight to voicemail again.

I pulled away from the curb in frustration. I was mad at him for being mad enough at me to leave without waking me. I was mad at myself for falling asleep and not telling him the real reason I didn't want to move. I was completely in love with Kyree, and I had no doubt that he felt the same way. Even knowing this, I had to be honest with myself. I was scared. I rushed into everything with Samuel, and it ended in disaster. I knew Kyree wasn't Samuel, and I shouldn't be comparing them. My heart knew that Kyree was my forever, but my mind couldn't comprehend how quickly I fell in love.

Ryne



I knew that leaving without fixing things between Braelynn and I was not the right thing to do, but I thought it would be easier. Now, I wasn't so sure that was a good idea. Actually, I was positive it wasn't. Braelynn was right about my behavior. I was acting very childish. I wanted her to move to Chicago as soon as possible, and I was disappointed that she wanted to wait so long.

Earlier in the week, the two of us were at her mom's house, working on a couple of cars. Braelynn needed a part for the car that she was working on, so she left and went to AutoZone. Ms. Lynn had come home, and she and I talked for a little while.

"You love my daughter, don't you?" she asked.

"I'm not ashamed to admit that I've loved her since the day we met, and I fell in love with her soon after we reunited."

"I see and feel the love you have for her... the love you have for each other."

"My mother says the same thing."

"I probably don't have long before you take her from me and whisk her away to Chicago."

I smiled at the thought. “Actually, I plan to talk to her about that before I head back. But Ms. Lynn, I don’t just want to shack up with Braelynn. She deserves so much more than that. I want to marry your daughter if you give me your blessing.”

I reached in my coveralls and produced the ring that I’d picked out. When I opened the little, black box, Ms. Lynn gasped and covered her mouth. Tears gathered in her eyes as she admired my selection.

“This is beautiful, Kyree. Of course you have my blessing. I’d be honored to have you as my son.”

“I chose it myself,” I told her with pride. “And thank you for your blessing. You won’t regret it.”

“She’s going to love it. When do you plan to do it?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Now that I have your blessing, I’ll have to find the right time.”

“You’ll know when the right time is, even if it isn’t this visit. You’ll feel it.”

I realized now that I handled this situation wrong. I let the fear of her turning down my proposal mess with my head. Why would she pack up her whole life and move thousands of miles away from her family, without a real commitment from me? So I was about to take my ass back to her and do this shit right.

Pulling my phone out, I requested another Uber before getting the waitresses attention to ask for the check. When she came back with it, she hesitated before giving it to me.

“Alone today, huh?” she asked.

Ms. Marianne was an older, Black woman, probably in her late fifties, and she served Braelynn and I often when we visited.

“Yeah,” was all I said, reaching for the check.

She moved it out of my reach and sat down across from me.

“Is there trouble in paradise?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Talk to me, young man. Maybe I can help.”

“My girl and I had a disagreement last night. I left this morning without it being settled, and now I feel like sh—crap about it.”

“What was it about?” Martha asked with a look of concern.

“Her moving to Chicago.”

“I take it she doesn’t want to.”

“She wants to wait.”

“You want her to pack up her whole life and move to Chicago with you. Does she got any family there? Friends?”

“Neither.”

“What about her job?”

“She’s a partner in a business that she can do from anywhere, but we’re both mechanics by trade. Next month I’m opening my own auto shop. We haven’t discussed it yet, but I want us to work together, side by side. I’m even changing the name of my shop to include her.”

“Congratulations,” she said with a big smile.

“Thank you!”

“However, there could be a lot of reasons why she’s hesitant. Give her some time.”

“She wants to wait until we’ve been dating for a year. I don’t want to wait seven more months to take the next step. I’m ready now.”

“When you say next step, what do you mean?”

I dug in my pocket and pulled out the ring. Her eyes got huge, and she had a smile to match.

“Wow!” Ms. Marianna said in awe. “If she turned down a proposal with a ring like this and a face like yours, maybe she’s not the one for you.”

She squeezed and patted my hand as she stood to leave.

“Wait! I didn’t propose,” I told her.

She sat back down and waiting for an explanation.

“Why are men so special? And I don’t mean that in a good way, sweetheart. You should have started with that, and you wouldn’t be sitting here like a lost puppy. Why didn’t you propose?”

Putting the ring back in my pocket, I replied, “I got nervous and started overthinking, so I asked her about moving to Chicago. Then everything went left.”

“Well, it sounds to me like you overthought yourself right into the doghouse. I imagine you were upset when she wasn’t excited about moving.”

“I was, especially when I found out later that she moved in with her ex after six months,” I confessed.

“What does her ex have to do with you? See? That’s the problem with men. You take things personal that have absolutely nothing to do with you. Now you need to go fix this mess you created. Get on outta here.”

She got up to leave again but didn’t leave my check.

“Ms. Marianne, the check?”

She looked at it and said, “It’s on me today, son.” Then she walked away.

I left Ms. Marianne a generous tip and gathered my things. It was time for me to do this shit the right way. As expected, Ms. Lynn was surprised when she opened the door and saw me standing there, twenty minutes later.

“What are you doing here? Is everything okay?” she asked.

“I need your help.”

Bracelynn



I raced into the restaurant and looked around for Kyree. I walked to the back area and was disappointed when I didn't see him. There was an empty booth in front of me, and even though we're supposed to wait to be seated, I sat down anyway. I needed a minute to get myself together.

"Looking for someone?" I heard a woman's voice ask.

I looked up and saw Ms. Marianne, one of the waitresses that took care of Kyree and I most of the times that we'd come here.

"Hi, Ms. Marianne. I thought my boyfriend might have stopped here on his way to the airport."

"Is everything okay?"

"It's fine." I lied. Ms. Marianne looked at me with that "don't lie to me" face. "Well, not really."

"Let me put your usual order in, and when I come back, you can tell me what's wrong."

While I waited for my food and Ms. Marianne, I looked out the window and watched the rain fall from the sky with a million thoughts running through my mind.

"Here you go," she said, putting a plate of French toast, bacon, cheesy eggs, and a glass of orange juice in front of me.

“Thank you!”

She sat across from me and watched me bless my food before taking a few bites.

“Talk to me.”

“We had a disagreement last night. This morning, he took an Uber to the airport.”

“I take it you two didn’t clear the air before he left.”

“Not at all.”

“What was the disagreement?” she asked.

I was sure I gave Ms. Marianne an earful. I told her everything from the time he brought up me moving to Chicago, to the conversation we had afterward, even how he withheld sex. By the time I finished, she was probably sorry she asked, but she didn’t show it.

“Sweetheart, you said all that and still didn’t say nothing. Now, what’s the real reason you’re holding back?”

Dang, she read me like a book.

“I made some pretty dumb decisions in my last relationship, and I’m not doing it again.”

“What does your last relationship have to do with this one?”

“Nothing and everything. I feel so dumb for how quickly I allowed things to progress in my last relationship. We shouldn’t have made it past three months and ended up together for three years. Now, I’m with this man that says he knew he wanted to marry me within three hours of us meeting, and I’m scared.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“My heart and my mind are not on the same page.”

“What’s your heart telling you that your mind isn’t agreeing with?”

“My heart knows that Kyree is my forever, but my mind doesn’t understand how it’s possible to love him so deeply, so quickly.”

“Sweetheart, that’s the beauty of love. Your mind may never understand the depths of love in your heart, and I’m not sure it’s meant to. You only live once, and you may only get one chance to experience true love. Don’t waste it.”

I let what she said sink in and took a few more bites of my food. She stood to leave, and I did the same so that I could give her a hug before she walked away.

“Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome, and breakfast is on me today.”

With a wink and a squeeze of my hand, she walked away, leaving me with my thoughts. This time, though, I knew what needed to be done.



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, I LET MYSELF INSIDE THE HOUSE. IT was quiet, so I assumed Jaelynn was still asleep. In my room, I plugged in my phone to see if I had any messages from Kyree because it died while I was eating breakfast. Since I knew he was on a plane, I didn’t take it personal that there were no messages.

After taking a shower and washing my hair, I lathered up my body with my coconut-pineapple body butter, then put on some sweats and one of Kyree’s T-shirts. I wasn’t exactly tired, but I thought sleeping would make the time go a bit faster. Hopefully, by the time I woke up, Kyree’s plane would have landed. As I enjoyed a deep sleep, Jaelynn came in my room like a herd of damn cattle. She knew I hate to be jarred out of my sleep.

“Brae, get up!”

“Jaelynn Mariah Waters! Somebody better be dying for you to be barging in here like you’re crazy.”

She put all her weight on one leg and folded her arms across her chest.

“If you move to Chicago, you won’t have to worry about me barging in your room,” she said with a smug look on her face.

“You do know that I can get my own place here in Seattle, right?”

“Yeah, whatever. Anyway, get up. Mama’s taking us out to dinner. She said she has an announcement to make, and she made reservations at Canlis.” She turned to leave and then added, “Oh, she said to wear something nice.”

“I wonder what this is about. Did she give you any clues?” I asked.

“Nope.”

“Geez. Okay. What time?”

“Four.”

“Dinner at four o’clock on a Thursday? What the hell?” I whispered to myself.

I looked at the time on my phone, and it read two fifteen. I still had no texts, missed calls, or voicemails from Kyree. His plane should have landed a couple of hours ago, and I was disappointed that he hadn’t called.

After calling him and still getting his voicemail, I forced myself not to worry and used getting ready for dinner as a distraction. Since I didn’t expect to go anywhere, I did nothing to my hair when I finished washing it. If I wanted to be ready, I’d better get up and tackle this mop. It sounded like it had stopped raining, so I decided to straighten my hair. It might cause us to be a little late to dinner, but she’d live.

A couple of hours later, I was dressed in a green wrap dress with brown stiletto boots and accessories. Jaelynn was

waiting for me in the living room, looking very cute in a denim dress with matching boots.

“You look very cute, sis.” I complimented.

“Thank you, and so do you. I see you straightened your hair. You haven’t done that in a while.”

“Thanks, and I know. You know straightening this stuff is no easy task. Yours is the same,” I reminded her.

“Yeah, but mine is thicker. I’m too lazy to do that more than once a year.”

“Exactly.”

“I’ll drive.” she volunteered.

One the way to the restaurant, she asked me about Kyree.

“He’s still pissed about last night. I woke up this morning, and he was gone. Took an Uber to the airport and has my calls going straight to voicemail.”

“Damn! He’s deep in his feelings.”

“Definitely, but I could have probably handled it a little better. I didn’t tell him why I wanted to wait to move, so he probably came to his own conclusions.”

“Probably. You know how men are.”

We arrived at the restaurant at about four-twenty. Apparently, Ma reserved the executive room, and more than just me and Jaelynn were invited. Inside the room, there were more people than I expected, which made me anxious to hear my mom’s announcement.

I made my way around the room, greeting everyone, including my mom, Uncle David, Myla, her brother, Myles, and their mother, Dalilah. My mom’s neighbor, Ms. Janie, and a couple of other people from her block were there, along with a few of my mom’s coworkers.

“Okay, I believe almost everyone is here. Let’s bless the food so we can start dinner. I know you all are anxious to hear

my announcement, but you'll have to wait a little longer," she said with a huge smile.

Everyone found a spot at the table, and as I did the same, Ma said, "I want you girls next to me."

Jaelynn and I moved in her direction, and somehow, I ended up at the head of the table with my mom and Jaelynn on either side of me. Just when I was about to protest, Uncle David began to bless the food. We all joined hands and closed our eyes.

Uncle David's prayers were long... so long that I learned to tune him out after about two minutes. While he rambled on, I thought about Kyree and what he might be doing. He probably went to check on his shop, then stopped by his parents' house for something to eat. I was so deep in my thoughts about him that I thought I heard him calling my name. When I thought I could smell his cologne, I really thought I was going crazy. I heard Kyree's voice say my name for the third time, and I finally lifted my head and turned around.



While Uncle David blessed the food with an intentionally extra-long prayer, I snuck into the room with Ms. Marianne and Braelynn’s friend, Tori, behind me. Everyone had their heads bowed, and the only people that were expecting me were Ms. Lynn, Uncle David, Jaelynn, and Myla.

“Braelynn,” I called again when she didn’t lift her head the first two times.

She lifted her head and turned around. When her eyes landed on me, she blinked a few times.

“Kyree?”

She released the hands of her mother and sister, taking two steps to put her in my arms. With her arms around my neck, she kissed my lips before speaking.

“Baby,” she whispered. “What are you still doing here?”

I saw joy within her eyes, but her voice was laced with concern.

“I couldn’t leave town without having an answer.”

“About—”

“Shhh. Let me finish.” I interrupted.

“When I got here on Sunday, I had a plan. First, I had to get back in your good graces after a huge misunderstanding. Let me apologize, again, for putting myself in a situation that would cause you to doubt me. For the rest of our lives together, I will never allow that to happen again. Thank you for being so understanding.”

“Baby—”

“Shhh. I’m not done.”

“Last night, I allowed the fear of rejection to guide me and because of that, I ruined what was supposed to be a special night. But I strongly believe that everything happens for a reason. This was supposed to happen right here, right now.”

“What are you—”

“Sis, can you let the man finish?” Jaelynn said from behind her.

Reaching in my pocket, I retrieved the little, black box that had become a part of me over the last few days. When I was down on one knee, I opened the box and looked up into Braelynn’s watery eyes.

“Since the day we met, our spirits connected. At the time, I didn’t know what it was, but every fiber of my being told me that with you was where I belonged. Not everyone is blessed to experience a love like ours, a love so deep that our minds can’t comprehend it. Braelynn Michelle Waters, I am in love with you. I love you more than I will ever be able to express, and I want to spend the rest of my life finding new ways to love you. Will you marry me?”

“Yes! Yes! Yes! I will marry you!”

KYREE

Epilogue



A month ago, I proposed to my baby, Braelynn. Since then, my mind and spirit have been at ease. Neither of us wanted to have a long engagement and were excited to start our lives together as husband and wife. As soon as the grand opening of my auto shop was over, our focus will be a small but elegant wedding within the next three months.

Speaking of the grand opening, today was the day. I hadn't had a moment's rest over the past month. If it wasn't for my and Braelynn's families, I would be in full panic mode. My family was an essential part of everything leading up to today, and Ms. Lynn, Uncle David, and Myla arrived a couple of days ago and had been a great help since they touched down.

Kolby and Myla were officially a couple, and his overbearing ass would barely let her breathe, but she helped as much as he would allow. Unlike her best friend, it didn't take him long to convince her to move to Chicago. She might be here and settled before Braelynn.

Jaelynn and Kamden were still saying they were “just friends”, although I suspected they might be friends with benefits. It wasn't my business, so I kept my nose out of it. Since Braelynn and Myla would both be in Chicago, they'd decided not to lease a building for MyLynn's Bedroom Boutique and kept everything online. They were still pissed about what Samuel did but also realized that there was a reason for everything.

Braelynn flew in two weeks ago and had been helping my mother and brothers with all the final details. She hadn't officially moved in with me but had started the process. My plate had been full since returning to Chicago as an engaged man. I had to interview and hire mechanics, cashiers, and someone to supervise the children's play area. The search for a cleaning/janitorial service company was a lot harder than I imagined. While in the process of that search, Kamden decided he wanted to start a company doing exactly that. I had already hired Kolby as my accountant, so hiring Kamden only made sense.

Since it was November, and we were in Chicago, no activities were planned for outside. However, we had a DJ, a raffle every hour on the hour to win free services for a future date, and free oil changes and tire rotations all day along with tours. We are also serving hot dogs, burgers, pizza, and several desserts. I looked at my watch to see that it was almost noon. Closing time for today was five o'clock, but I had a surprise for Braelynn that I needed to get ready for. I approached the DJ and grabbed the cordless mic.

“Can I have everyone's attention, please?” I spoke into the mic and waited for everyone to focus on me before I continued.

“First, I’d like to thank everyone for attending today. Big shoutout to my parents and my brothers for all the preparations they put into making today a success. I can’t explain how much their support means to me. Also, I gotta show some love to my soon-to-be in-laws. Thank you all for flying in a couple days early to pitch in wherever you were needed. Thank you to all of my employees for all of their hard work. And last, but definitely not least, where’s my fiancée?”

I paused for a moment and looked for her in the crowd. There was no way that I could miss her head full of big, red curls. When we made eye contact, I reached my hand out to her.

“C’mere, baby.”

She looked sexy as hell in a pair of tight, ripped jeans and a fitted black, long-sleeved T-shirt that said *Taken* on the front. I pulled her toward the exit, and the crowd followed.

BRAELYNN

Braelynn



When our hands connected, Kyree led me to the exit, and everyone followed. When we got outside, he put his arm around my shoulder while my arm went around his waist. I looked to the side and up at him while he continued.

“I know it’s chilly out, but I need you to bear with me for a few minutes,” he told the crowd as we gathered in front of the building. “This woman right here, she’s had my heart since the day we met. I didn’t believe in love at first sight until I laid eyes on her, and I was in denial about it for a long time. We connected mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and yes, physically, on the first night.”

He looked down at me, and the intensity in his eyes made me warm all over.

“Close your eyes, baby, and don’t open until I count to three.”

“What?” I said, confused.

“Just do it before these people freeze,” he demanded.

I closed my eyes and became even more anxious.

“Your excitement that night when I told you about opening my own shop is what fueled me to keep pushing during that year that we were apart. I want you to know that your support meant everything to me. When I get to three, open your eyes and look up. Ready?” I nodded. “One, two, three!”

I opened my eyes and looked up. Immediately, tears came to my eyes, and I jumped in Kyree’s arms. The crowd around us cheered and clapped at sight.

“Baby, oh my God. You didn’t have to do that,” I cried. “This... This means so much to me. Thank you!”

I planted kisses all over his face as tears ran down mine.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

“Like it? I love it. K and B’s Auto Shop. It’s us, baby. That’s you and me. So—Wait a minute. The sign was never messed up?”

He shook his head. “I had to give you a reason for it being covered. That’s also why I told you the stationary and the T-shirts got messed up. That’s what’s in those boxes in the office.”

“I can’t believe you lied to me.”

“You know what else is in the office. The paperwork for you to sign to make us both the owners of K and B’s Auto Shop.”

I gasped and covered my mouth. *Did I just hear him right?* I was speechless, so I turned around and looked back up at the

sign on the front of the building. The tears wouldn't stop falling. Kyree had no idea how much this meant to me, and this gesture made me love him even more than I already did, if that was possible.

When Mr. Clayborn sold my daddy's shop, I was heartbroken and admittedly had given up on the dream of following in my daddy's footsteps. Kyree just made my dream come true. The only thing missing from all of this is my daddy. I had no doubt that he would love Kyree and would be proud of the man I'd chosen to spend my life with.

Finally, my mind was on the same page that my heart had been on since the day we met.

THE END

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