



something you
WON'T FORGET

MONICA WALTERS

SOMETHING YOU WON'T FORGET

A BEROTTE FAMILY BOOK
MONICA WALTERS

OceanofPDF.com

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P R E F A C E

Hello, readers!

Thank you for purchasing and/or downloading this book. This work of art contains explicit language, lewd sex scenes, and topics that may be sensitive to some readers. For a full disclosure, click the link below.

<https://bit.ly/3wmjgON>

This is book three of a new family of books... The Berotte Family (pronounced Bee-Rot). It starts with the father, and the following books trickle down to the kids. So if some things seem incomplete where the sub characters are involved, that was done intentionally. Those issues will be resolved in their books. It is highly recommended that you read the previous books of this family series before indulging in this one.

Love On Replay

Deeper Than Love

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

Dylan and Skyler are something serious! Whew! I hope you enjoy the ride this story is going to take you on.

Monica

P.S. - Thank you to my cousin, Skyler Arbuckle, for allowing me to use her name, image, and portions of her life while

writing and promoting this novel.

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PROLOGUE

Dylan

“FUCK, girl. You a nasty ho. Take all this dick.”

I was deep in Chanell’s asshole, and that shit had me sweating. It was tight, but I knew she wasn’t a virgin to this shit. She took my dick too easy back there. I didn’t have to go slow or nothing like that. She took the dick like I had slid it in her pussy. She was squirming and tooting her ass up at the same time.

“Oh fuck, Dylan! Yeeeesss! This dick is the truth, baby! Shit!”

I smirked as I fucked the shit out of her ass. If her husband didn’t know she was getting fucked up by somebody else by now, then that nigga was blind. I’d never seen him, nor did I know his name. I didn’t care. All I cared about was fucking his wife. Well... it wasn’t like I approached her. She came to me. Most women came to me. The tide had definitely turned on that front. I used to have to approach women. That was during my scrawny, ugly duckling phase.

By the time I turned twenty and my grown man looks had come in, I’d been on the fast track, making up for lost time... shiiid, and everybody else’s lost time. I was far from that ugly duckling phase now. I was in different pussy every week it seemed. However, Chanell was the nastiest bitch I had ever been with. I called women like I saw them. If I called her a ho or a bitch, that was exactly what she was. I wasn’t hating

women or no shit like that. I had a sister and a mother that I had no recollection of.

Although I had a quiet demeanor, I was extremely straightforward. There was no guesswork required when dealing with a nigga like me. My heart was off limits. Even at twenty-six years old, I wasn't ready. Well... I hadn't met the woman that could possibly slow my ass down. Whenever I met someone real, I knew I would be capable of slowing down. At least I hoped I would be.

When Chanell's asshole nuttled for me, that was when I knew I was slightly sprung on her ass. I loved sex with her. She got my dick the hardest, and that proved to give me stronger orgasms. The way she screamed my name like I was the best she fucking had, stroked my ego just right. The best part was that it didn't sound fake or over the top. The shit sounded genuine. While I didn't need her to tell me that my dick was a force to be reckoned with, validation was always nice.

“Dyyylaaaannnn...” she whined.

I loved when she did that shit, because I knew immediately afterward, she was going to squirt. She didn't disappoint. She wet the bed up while playing with her pussy. I closed my eyes and nuttled so hard in that latex. We'd had multiple sessions over the past few months, and I was beyond satisfied every time. My body was trembling, and my damn toes had curled so hard I thought I was going to catch cramps in them. “Fuck!” I yelled.

When I slid out of her, I collapsed on the bed next to her. She turned her head to me, and I could see the tears that had fallen down her cheeks. She always cried during sex with me. I used to think that it was because she felt guilty for cheating on her husband. She said he was always out of town and was probably fucking around too, but I didn't believe her. I felt like it was one isolated event that made her cheat, and then it became habit.

I never believed her when she said I was the first person she cheated on him with. She approached me, and she was

way too comfortable about doing so. We were cool at work and would speak to each other all the time, but one day I wore a suit to work and showed them what my runway status looked like, and she'd been on one ever since. Being that I was a P.E. teacher, I never wore anything outside of sweats, wind pants, and t-shirts.

As we lay there panting, trying to catch our breath, she rolled over to me and slid her hand down my chest. That shit was a hell-no. I didn't cuddle with no-damn-body, and I wasn't about to start with a woman that wasn't mine. I moved her hand and sat up as she said, "Dylan, this has to be our last time. I'm pregnant."

I turned my head to her so fast I had to have given myself whiplash. My face immediately scrunched up, and my shoulders tensed. Reading my expression, she sat up as well. "It's not for you. I'm pregnant for my husband. I found out last week."

"So why you just now saying something? I was with you last week."

"It was the day after, Dylan. I can't keep seeing you while I'm pregnant with his baby. I just figured I would get one time for the road."

I slowly shook my head. I played it cool on the outside, but on the inside, I was panicking like a bitch. The last thing I needed was a kid. I was nowhere ready for fatherhood. I strapped up every time, and I was adamant about that shit, but I also knew condoms weren't one hundred percent. *What if this is my baby?*

Standing from the bed, I got dressed, knowing I needed to get the fuck away from her. If this wasn't her husband's baby, there was going to be trouble. If anything was gonna slow my ass down, it had to be this shit. I couldn't fuck up and create a life when I had yet to get my shit together. Financially, I was straight, but I was a selfish ass nigga at times. I fucked around and liked to hit the scene occasionally. I supposed even my thinking at this moment was selfish.

When I finished getting dressed, I looked over at her and said, “It was good while it lasted.”

Grabbing my keys, I left the hotel room a mental mess, hoping that that bitch wasn't lying to me. While I wasn't ready to be a father, the last thing I wanted to be was a deadbeat. That wasn't who Sheldon Berotte raised. If anything, a final slap in his face would be for me to create a life and not take care of it. He'd raised me and my four siblings alone... the epitome of an amazing father. I could never let him down in that aspect... ever.

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Dylan

Five months later...

“IF YOU SPENT MORE time in the gym than you did shimmying, moving this armoire wouldn’t be killing yo’ ass.”

“Shut up, Chad. I’m a personal trainer. I’m always in the gym.”

“Shiiiiid, apparently you ain’t doing something right. But us Q-Dawgs... we handle shit. I should have gotten my bruhs to come help us move Mama Nissa stuff. You and Shy full of shit. Weak ass niggas.”

I rolled my eyes as Chad talked noise, as he normally did. Him being able to handle the armoire better than me had nothing to do with frat. He was just a big ass nigga. He was taller and bigger with more muscle mass. This shit was heavy as hell though. Plus, it didn’t help that I didn’t get enough sleep. As much as I loved pussy, I hadn’t had any since the last time I was with Chanell. Her confession fucked me up mentally.

After the fucked-up shit she did at my sister, Alexz’s, party a month ago, trying to get with Arrow, she had been ruling my damn thoughts. Not only that, but after I put Arrow up on game, she started blowing my line up. Last night she called all fucking night. I knew I should have blocked her, but given the fucked-up situation, I didn’t want to. That all changed after

last night. We worked together, so she knew where to find me. That ho was calling every thirty minutes and at one point, every five minutes. She was obviously lying to me about how she was moving.

With the way she flirted with Arrow, there was no way I was the only man she was fucking besides her husband. No way in hell. She was an entire ho... fucking around with whoever wanted to fuck. I supposed she was the female version of me.

After setting the armoire down in the master bedroom, Chad pushed me out of his way and went back outside. I just wanted to rest. Just as I was about to sit on the bed, I decided to go to the bathroom. That would be easier to get away with. Isaiah and Chad were the muscles. Shyrón and I, not so much. I didn't know why they just didn't hire movers like Alexz and Axton had done. Axton moved in with Alexz last weekend. As soon as his house sold in Houston, they would be purchasing a bigger home together.

I was happy for my baby sister, but I couldn't help but wonder how she found love before all of us. Well... I knew why I hadn't found love yet. I honestly didn't know what the hell it was, but I was sure when I felt it, I would recognize it. I'd never experienced the love of a woman, besides the love from my sister, and at twenty-six and dealing with this bullshit with Chanell... I was ready. Fucking around didn't benefit nobody. It was only a temporary solution for a bigger issue.

I hadn't met a woman that intrigued me to want more. The way I carried myself didn't help. As I sat on the toilet, contemplating the way my life was going, there was a loud knock on the door. I rolled my eyes as I heard, "Get yo' lazy ass out of there. That's the oldest trick in the book, Dylan. I know because I used to do the shit. We almost done."

Chad knew he could irritate my entire being. Normally, we got along well because I was so laidback, but when it was time to get something done, he was the worst. Isaiah was the oldest, but Chad was the bossiest. They were only two years apart but Alexz, Shy, and I caught the blues growing up. Well, mainly Alexz and me. Shy loved doing whatever Chad did until it was

time to pledge. He wasn't feeling the Omegas, nor were they feeling his ass.

Flushing the toilet, I got up and opened the door. I wasn't using it, but I wanted to make him think I was. I even let loose a lil gas to make it believable. Chad frowned up as I said, "A nigga can't even take a shit around yo' ass."

"Nigga, you need a laxative. You stank! Come on so we can get this shit done. We only have one more dresser to bring in. Isaiah and Shy bringing in the last bed, and DJ and Jamel have brought in most of the boxes already."

I shot him the finger, and before I could follow him out, he said, "Muthafucka, I ain't hear no water. You need to wash yo' nasty ass hands."

I fanned my hand in front of his face as he jerked back. I laughed so hard as he nodded repeatedly. "Quit rushing me then. I would have washed my hands already."

If Dad hadn't have gotten rid of some furniture, we would have only had to move Mama Nissa's stuff into storage until she could figure out what to do with it. Her furniture was newer than his though. The twin beds in mine and Shy's old room had been there since I was young. It was time to get rid of that shit.

After washing my hands, I helped Chad carry in the dresser then went to the kitchen to see what Mama Nissa was cooking for us. It was smelling so good. I didn't know how we were concentrating to get everything inside. I went to the stove, standing next to her, then kissed her cheek. After looking into the pot to see the smothered okra, my stomach growled. "Mm. This looks so good."

She smiled at me and said, "I heard that smothered okra, fried chicken, and corn on the cob was your favorite meal."

I glanced in the pot again and saw sausage, shrimp, and chunks of chicken breast in the okra and salivated. "Yes, ma'am, it is. Thank you."

"Anything for you, baby boy."

I swore, if a mother's love felt like this, I now knew why I was missing something I'd never had. A woman's love was powerful, Dad had once told me, and Mama Nissa was proving that to be true. While Alexz had grabbed ahold of her and wouldn't let go, I fell for her immediately too. I just didn't know how to really express that to her. I believed the kisses on the cheek probably told her everything I wasn't saying. She would always smile so big whenever I kissed her.

I smiled at her then walked toward the couch as my phone rang. That had to be Chanell's ass because my phone had been dry as hell for the past two months. If it wasn't one of my siblings, then it was Arrow. He was like one of my siblings since his brother was dating my sister. Pulling it from my pocket, I saw it was an unknown number. I rolled my eyes because I knew it was probably her, since I'd blocked her number last night. If it was someone wanting a personal trainer, they would leave a message.

As I turned the TV on, Dad walked inside, and I watched him go to Mama Nissa at the stove. The way he loved her and cherished her made me even more proud that he was my dad. Listening to her giggles as he kissed her neck was refreshing. However, I was broken out of my admiration of them when Jamel plopped down next to me. "If I never move another damn box in my lifetime, I'll be just fine."

I chuckled, because I felt the same way. I wasn't fond of physical labor... not when there were other alternatives. Thankfully, it was cold outside, so we weren't being scorched in the process. Moving was the worst, but since it was Mama Nissa, I made an exception. "I feel you, Mel. What's up for tonight? When you leaving?"

"Shiiiiid, whatever. I'm not leaving until tomorrow evening. We all ought to go shoot pool or some shit. Ain't like any of us got women to cater to. I'll hit up Arrow and see if he wanna come down and hang," he said as he took out his phone to text him.

That shit sounded like a winner. It would help keep my mind off Chanell blowing my shit up. She would just have to talk to me Monday when we got back to work. My mind was

working overtime though, because I didn't know if something was wrong. She was about eight months pregnant. If not eight months, then she was close to that shit. I'd asked her for a DNA test, but her ass refused to do one, because she said it wasn't mine. I just wanted to be in the clear.

I was starting to believe that she didn't want the damn test so she could bother the hell out of me... holding me hostage to her until she had the baby at least. But she could go fuck a bitch with a strap-on. She had a better chance at that than me dipping in her again. *Stupid ho*. Clearly, I was reformed because of her. I hadn't had sex in five fucking months. That shit was unheard of. Chanell's ass had scared me straight.

"Arrow said he's already here helping Axton get his new office set up. We just have to let him know where we wanna meet."

"A'ight. We just gotta get with everybody else. Axton may wanna go too. He gon' be pissed when he find out that we all went out without him."

"Well... he always stuck up Alexz ass." He laughed. "Sis got that nigga on a short leash."

I chuckled too, but the way they loved each other became more appealing to me every day. I was in my feelings, big time, and having a woman that could understand me was all I wanted. My career was set, and I was even thinking about going back to school to broaden my scope in the school district. It was time to establish some roots, and I just hoped that my reputation wouldn't proceed me.

"Y'all look tired," my dad said when he came to the front room where Jamel and I were seated.

My brothers weren't far behind him. They looked just as tired as we were. Before we could say anything to one another or respond to my dad, the back door opened, and Alexz yelled, "I brought dessert! Banana pudding and lemon cake!"

Those were two of the Berottes' favorite desserts. Most times, we had one or the other. Every now and then, we ventured out. "Hell yeah!" Chad said.

I rolled my eyes. Banana pudding was his favorite, and the nigga could probably kill the entire thing by himself. Everyone yelled out their thanks to Alexz as she headed to the kitchen with Mama. Although Anissa had only been around for seven months or so, we'd all started calling her Mama Nissa. Most times, Alexz, Shy, and I just said Mama. It wasn't like our real mom was alive to where we had to distinguish between the two. But I supposed since the three of us didn't remember our biological mother, it was easier for us to do that.

“So what's up on going shoot pool tonight, y'all?” Jamel asked the room.

They all nodded as Isaiah said, “Sounds like a plan. I could use some relaxation. Work been stressful as hell.”

Zay worked at the health department. Seeing some of the shit he saw as a counselor there had to be hell on his mental. Teenage pregnancy, people with untreated STDs, and abuse were some of the issues that plagued most of his clients. Trying to help people get on the right path in life had to be overwhelming, especially when you had rebellious teenagers who didn't want to listen. That was why I chose to work at the elementary level in the school district. I couldn't handle dealing with those grown ass kids.

“Where we going? Fast Eddie's?” Shyrón asked.

I shrugged as DJ said, “Fast Eddie's is cool with me.”

It was set then. After discussing a time, Chad texted Axton to see if he wanted to go. Not long after, I heard Alexz's phone ringing. We even invited my dad. Alexz could hang out with Mama tonight. I was more than sure they would find something to do. “So I guess I'll hang out with Mama. Just make sure those niggas don't try to rope you into bullshit,” I heard Alexz say.

Chad immediately stood from his seat and headed to the kitchen. He loved fucking with Alexz, and I believed she loved it as well. That was why she said that shit so loud. She wanted us to hear her. Within seconds, we heard them going back and forth. Dad slowly shook his head. “I still can't figure out where I went wrong with those two.”

I chuckled along with everyone else when we heard Alexz scream and the back door open. I swore it was the same shit every time we were all together. As Mama called us to the kitchen to eat, my phone vibrated. I pulled it out of my pocket to see a text from an unknown number. I took a deep breath, getting ready for the bullshit. *I'm in the hospital. I had the baby prematurely. My husband is threatening to leave me because the baby is dark skinned. Luke, the light-skinned Nupe, is my husband, and I'm obviously not dark skinned either. Maybe you were right to want a DNA test. If he's not Luke's then he's yours.*

My face was hot as hell. There was no way this could be happening. I slid my hand down the back of my head as my thoughts ran wild in my mind. I didn't want to be connected to Chanell for the rest of my life. If this was my baby, I wouldn't have a choice but to handle my business. In the meantime, the turnup with the fellas tonight would be much needed. Hopefully, Shy wouldn't mind driving, because I planned to get fucked up.

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S kyler

“I’M JUST TIRED, Mama. That’s all. This case is eating my breakfast, lunch, and dinner. When it’s over, I’m getting drunk and passing out.”

My mother chuckled quietly as she sprinkled pecan pieces on her famous sock-it-to-me cake. She could wreck any diet. My mama was a cook from heaven, and that was the reason I had to pray to God for restraint. I loved food, but with all the health issues that ran in my family, I knew weight gain would only accelerate the possibilities of those health issues manifesting in me. Diabetes and high blood pressure had wreaked havoc through the Fontenot family, and I refused to allow that to be my fate.

“I know you can’t discuss the case with me, but I hope you are talking things out, even if to yourself. Don’t let it consume you.”

“I’m trying not to. I’m thinking of asking for help with it. Working on my own with this may be beyond my level of expertise. It’s difficult to defend. I searched the web for cases like it and who handled those cases and won. A man named Shyrón Berotte came up in my search. He’s in Beaumont. I believe I’m going to reach out.”

“You can’t ask anyone at the firm you’re working at?”

“Those white people hired me to be their token negro. They’ve never tried to help me. I honestly think they want me to fail. It will make them feel like they were right in discriminating against black people. The minute I can get away from there, I will.”

“Are you considering leaving Dallas?”

I took a deep breath as I thought about it. Mr. Berotte had a new firm that he’d started, and I was hoping that he and I would be able to discuss me joining him. The first step was getting him involved in this case so he could see me in action. He was a very successful black attorney that volunteered in the black community and spearheaded a couple of programs for at-risk black kids. He looked amazing on paper, and I could only hope that he would be the same in person.

Maybe he would see my potential and want to work with me. Other than my parents and sister, nothing was keeping me in Dallas. I mean... I had friends, but none of them were close enough to me to keep me here.

“I am, Mama. Mr. Berotte has a ninety-five percent success rate. He wins almost all his cases. He has a new firm, and while Beaumont isn’t all that exciting of a place to live, the firm seems like it would be a place I can grow. Besides, Houston is only a little over an hour away.”

“I think it’ll be good for you to venture out. Of course, we will miss you, but I think you should spread your wings and fly.”

“Thank you, Mama. I’m nervous, but I’m going to call his office in a little bit. Hopefully, he’s available.”

“Good for you, baby.”

I smiled at her as she turned her back to me to stir her stew. A change of scenery would be good for me. Seeing Jaxton every time I stepped foot in his courtroom seemed to affect me more than I wanted it to. It was like my heart would break all over again. He cheated on me with a fucking district attorney. I’d fallen in love with him after a year of us being together. He was an established judge and very prominent in the

community. After him, I vowed to never date another man with a law degree. Those fuckers were good at lying and hiding shit.

He was my worst experience. The sex wasn't the best I'd had, but I felt like we could work on that, because I fell in love with his personality. He was funny and affectionate. The minute he stopped being those things with me, I knew. I knew something was going on. My spirit was sensitive, and I could pick up on energy shifts pretty quickly. It took me longer to catch him, because he was decent at hiding shit. However, when I followed his ass one night, I was in for the shock of my life. Not only was he fucking the district attorney, but they also had a child together. So basically, I was the side chick.

Although I broke up with him and didn't look back, my heart was still somewhat in ruins. I'd broken up with him a year ago after us being together for almost two years, and I still wasn't completely over it, despite that fact that he seemed to be. I'd even gone on a date to see if that would help me forget about him. The guy I went on the date with was a jackass, so that didn't help at all. I shut down all prospects after that. I was done with the dating scene for a while. I needed to rediscover my happiness with myself... a beautiful, black woman, who was intelligent as hell and deserved to live life on her own terms.

I was trying to do that, but I was lonely. At twenty-seven years old, this was my first time being without a boyfriend for an extended amount of time. My mama used to fuss because she said she couldn't keep up with who I was seeing. I wasn't sleeping around, but I did date quite a few. My body count was only four, and I was in a relationship with all of them at some point. Jaxton was the only one I had jumped in bed with rather quickly. Everything I'd done with him had become a regret, and I hated that with a passion. Maybe one day, I could look back on it and see the lesson in it, but as of right now, this pain was totally unnecessary.

Standing from the table, I made my way out of the kitchen to sit in the den so I could make my call. This case was so fucking stressful. My client was being accused of child abuse.

The little girl was his stepdaughter, and he was there for her more than her own father was. So, he did discipline her. It was his in-laws that saw a welt mark on her leg and took things overboard. Then the little girl started saying that he touched on her. I felt like all of that was rehearsed. Someone was telling her to say that. The allegations alone had destroyed my client's career as a football coach.

That was what this call would be about. It was all hearsay. The only proof they had was a picture of the mark on her leg. This case was sensitive though. I wasn't sure if other evidence was to come. I believed my client. Until some clearcut evidence proved him guilty, he deserved my best. Placing the call, I waited as the phone rang. Most likely, I would be leaving a message. However, I was surprised when he answered.

“Shyrón Berotte. How can I help you?”

I cleared my throat as I felt my mouth go dry. My nerves had kicked in overdrive. “Hello, Mr. Berotte. My name is Skyler Fontenot. I'm an attorney with Jones, McCullen, and Wisenhoff. I'm reaching out to you for advice and possible help with a case.”

I waited to hear what he would say, nervous that he would end the call or simply decline. My body was trembling, and suddenly, I felt like I had to piss. “Go on, Ms. Fontenot.”

I exhaled slightly, and apparently, he heard me because he chuckled. “I'm not as aggressive outside of the courtroom. I try to be helpful, because I was once where you are... needing a chair. Instead of speaking by phone about the details of the case, send me your files by email, or you can come in person. Are you far away?”

“Thank you so much. You don't know how much I appreciate this. I'm in Dallas, but I can make a trip this coming weekend to go over some things, if you aren't too busy.”

“What day?”

“I can actually be there Thursday evening. I won’t need to leave until Sunday morning.”

“That sounds like a plan. I’m assuming you aren’t happy where you are if you aren’t asking anyone there for help.”

“Can I be honest, Mr. Berotte?”

“You don’t have to. I already know. I’m familiar with that good ol’ boy law firm. I’m surprised they hired a woman of color. I can tell by your voice that you’re a sista. That’s okay. I got’cho back.”

He was a lot cooler than I thought he would be. Instead of holding back my true intentions, I decided to put all my cards on the table. “Thank you for that. It’s important that black men support and uplift black women. I’ll be forever grateful to you.” After pausing for a moment, I continued. “Mr. Berotte, I’m actually looking for a change. I want to relocate, and I was looking at your firm. I wanted you to see my potential when you worked with me. I would love to work at your firm.”

“That’s what’s up. Have your resume with you when you come, and we can discuss it when you get here. Maybe I can show you around town or get my sister to, if that makes you more comfortable. I could use the help, and honestly, I would prefer to hire one of us.”

I felt so damn comfortable with him already. Not in a romantic way, but in a brother, sisterly love type of way. “Mr. Berotte, thank you. I feel like you’re telling me you’re going to hire me anyway, but I’ll wait and be sure I can move cohesively at your firm before I tell these people here to... excuse my language... to kiss my ass.”

He laughed, and that only made me even more comfortable. “You ain’t gotta be excused,” he said, dropping the professionalism as well. “I’m ’bout that life. So I know where you coming from.”

“Thank you so much again. I can’t wait to get there and meet you. It’s been a pleasure speaking with you.”

“Thank you, Ms. Fontenot. I can’t wait to meet you and get a look at this case.”

“See you soon.”

When I ended the call, I stood from the sofa and screamed with joy then danced, doing the ‘cut the check’ dance I learned from TikTok. My mama came running in the room, and when she saw me dancing, she exhaled. “Girl! What the hell wrong wit’chu? You scared me half to death!”

I laughed as I hopped up and down. “He practically hired me over the phone. I’m going to Beaumont Thursday! He’s going to help me with the case and check out my potential, but he pretty much said that he wanted to hire me!”

She started screaming right along with me, mimicking my excitement. We grabbed hands and began spinning around as my sister joined us, scaring the hell out of me. I didn’t even know she was in the house. She and I were only a year apart and grew up as best friends. That was why I really had no need for close friends that had the potential to be fake. I had all the friend I needed in her.

“What the hell y’all jumping up and down for? What are we celebrating?” Lexi asked.

“I basically got another job in Beaumont.”

The excitement left her for a moment. “Beaumont?”

“Yeah. I need a change of scenery, sis. Plus, I believe it will be an amazing opportunity working for Shyrón Berotte. He’s extremely knowledgeable about all things law.”

“I’m happy for you, but I don’t want you to leave me.”

I poked out my lip then pulled her to me in a tight embrace. My mama wrapped her arms around the both of us. “We have family in Port Arthur and Beaumont, so you won’t be alone. I can make some calls to let them know you will be in town if you want.”

“I’ll let you know. I may be busy the entire time. Now once I move, maybe I can kick it with them.”

“I’m so proud of you, baby. SMU prepared you for this.”

I smiled at my mama. I’d gone to Southern Methodist University. My ancestors were once enslaved by one of the

founders of the university. I'd studied critical race theory, and this connection was vital to my studies. I published an article about it in the SMU Law Review with the help of Dean McInnis from University of Colorado Law School. She was instrumental in embracing my ties to the school. This was why this case was so important to me. Mr. Campbell's stepdaughter was white.

After sending files to Mr. Berotte from the case and I'd talked to my mama and sister a little longer, I headed home. I was trying to wait for my dad to get home, but he hadn't made it yet. He was an attorney as well and worked hard as hell. He was great at what he did, and he was who had inspired me to become an attorney.

I was anxious to get to Beaumont, and I almost wanted to take off now. Mr. Berotte made me excited as hell. My current employer gave me the case because they felt like I wouldn't be able to win. But they could kiss my ass. I was going to win this case no matter the cost. Mr. Campbell would remain a free man. His only fault was trying to incorporate traditional black culture into an unreceptive white family.

Once I turned into my apartment complex, my phone rang. I just knew it would be my daddy, but it was Mr. Berotte, or at least I was thinking it was him. The number had a '409' area code. "Skyler Fontenot. How may I help you?"

"Hello, Ms. Fontenot. It's Shyrón Berotte. I looked over some of your case records, and I think you would be a good fit here. So I suppose I'm hiring you over the phone. I know you don't really know me, but I'm asking you to trust me. Call your client and have him fire his attorney representation, but let him know that he'll still have you. We gon' get him off. This is a clear race and culture situation. His wife's people are racists. I've already done some research on it. With your critical race theory background, I do believe you are underestimating yourself. That's okay though. We gon' get that ego where it should be."

"Wow. Are you serious?"

"As a fiend looking for his next hit."

I giggled, feeling extremely excited for the first time in a long time. “Mr. Berotte, thank you for taking a chance on me. I suppose I should look for apartments while I’m there.”

“Yep. I’ll get my assistant on it. What do you need? I’m paying your moving costs.”

I couldn’t stop the tears from falling from my eyes. When God stepped up for you, He stepped up beyond your wildest dreams. “Just a decent neighborhood and a two-bedroom will be sufficient.”

“Got’chu. Don’t cry. You are going to be as much of an asset to us as we will be for you. I can’t wait until you get here so I can introduce you to the rest of the team.”

I supposed he could hear the emotion in my voice to know that I was overwhelmed and expelling that through my tears. “Thank you again. See you soon.”

I lowered my head to my steering wheel, thanking God for this opportunity. I didn’t know what it was about Mr. Berotte, but I trusted him. He was extremely young and already had his own firm. That was proof enough that he was the real deal. People trusted him to handle their legal battles, and he was only twenty-nine years old. How was that possible? Whatever the reason, I was grateful. It was like God was showing me that when He was in control, everything else just fell into place.

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Dylan

“I CALLED you and texted you all weekend and have been calling all damn week. You never responded to me.”

“Quit playing games, Chanell. I need to know how the DNA test came out with your husband. You could have texted that information without me having to respond.”

“Well... you’re a father, Dylan. My husband isn’t the father. He’s divorcing me. So apparently, you must have used some defected condoms. Maybe you poked holes in the shit so I wouldn’t know you were trying to make me yours.”

I slid my hand down my face as this heifer sat on this phone and said that shit all nonchalantly like she wasn’t trying to destroy me. “Why in the fuck would I do that? You think I want a baby wit’cho ho ass?”

“Fuck you, Dylan. You can’t fuck over your responsibilities though. You need to go and see your son. His name is Nixon Reid. Once you sign the birth certificate, he can have your last name.”

“You out yo’ fucking mind if you think I’m just gon’ take your word for shit. I ain’t signing nothing without a DNA test. So arrange that shit, or you on your own.”

I ended the call in her face as I sat at my desk on my conference period. I angrily swiped the papers off my desk. This had to be a fucking nightmare that I couldn’t wake up

from. I was going to have to call Alexz and talk to her about this... her or Dad. There was no way I could sit on this shit. This bitch was going to drive me insane. Standing from my seat, I picked up the papers from the floor as someone appeared in my doorway. I could tell it was a woman by the feet. When I stood up straight and saw my principal, I wanted to roll my eyes. I didn't have time to do shit else, and whenever she came to see me, it was always to ask for a favor.

“Good afternoon, Coach.”

“Good afternoon, Principal Harris. What can I do for you?”

“How are you with basketball?”

I frowned slightly, confused as to why she needed to know that. “What do you mean?”

“The kids are wanting to start a basketball team like a couple of the other elementary schools, and I wanted to know if you would be interested in coaching them before I looked for someone else.”

“I know quite a bit. I played in school. I'd love to coach them. Is there a schedule already?”

“Not yet. There's going to be the hard decision of who will be on the team. You can have tryouts, preferably during the week after school. If not, Saturday will be fine also. Only fourth and fifth graders for now.”

“Okay. Sounds like a plan. Will there be transportation to and from games for the players? Will there be cheerleaders?”

“Yes, and yes. However, we can have a meeting and discuss the particulars, and you can setup a tryout date. There's no rush. This will be for next school year. So only present-time third and fourth graders can try out.”

“Okay. Just let me know when the meeting will be.”

“Alright. Let me talk to Mrs. Daniels to see what her availability is. She'll be handling the cheerleaders. Thanks, Coach Berotte. Have a great weekend.”

“You too.”

When she left, I inhaled a sharp breath. I was more than sure that would be an extra paycheck, and it would keep me busy when the time came. In the meantime though, I needed to be sure that Chanell set up that DNA test. If this was indeed my baby, I didn't want to doddle. I wanted to be there for my child from the beginning, despite how scary this shit would be. He deserved to have his father in his life. The hardest part would be dealing with Chanell's triflin' ass, but that shit was my fault. Like Alexz and my dad had said, she should have been off limits. I knew she was married.

After taking another deep breath, I grabbed my phone and keys and did something I probably shouldn't have... I headed to St. Elizabeth Hospital.

STARING at the little chocolate drop made my heart soft. He was in ICU, but I could clearly see the name tag on his bed... *Nixon*. As I stared through the window, watching the ventilator breathe for him, I prayed. I didn't pray for me. I prayed for the baby... for Nixon. He needed a fighting chance. According to Chanell, he was seven weeks early. She was only a little over thirty-two weeks. I researched it a little bit, so I knew his lungs weren't fully developed. They'd probably administered steroids to get those to develop a little sooner.

He was so small and seemed to have other issues as well because of the other machines connected to him. I wanted to know the particulars, but I didn't want to get attached either. I had a feeling that he wasn't mine. Chanell was playing games. She acted like she was so sure that he was her husband's baby, but suddenly, he wasn't. I wondered if she had even told him who the baby could possibly be from. Luke and I weren't line brothers, but he was a Nupe like me. We were in step shows together. When I was in my freshman year at Texas Southern University in Houston, he was a senior.

TSU was our stomping ground for so much foolishness. However, by the time he met Chanell, we'd lost touch. He'd already graduated and was working in Beaumont. I wasn't

sure how they met, not that I cared to know, but the world was way too small for us to end up fucking the same woman.

After staring at Nixon for nearly thirty minutes, I texted Chanell. *What room are you in?* My mind was screaming, *don't go see that bitch!* My heart was saying something different... It was saying to go talk to her and get an understanding between us about the baby. I made my way to the elevators feeling the softest I'd ever felt in my life. I didn't want no bullshit, but again, I'd put myself in this predicament by messing with her ass in the first place. Her text came through. 3123.

I stopped the elevator on the second floor to go back to where I was. I should have known they wouldn't have the mother and baby on separate floors. My mind was fucked, and I hated that Chanell was about to see me in this state. However, I knew that kindness would get me a long way in this situation. I should have been a better judge of character, but shit... I wasn't shit either. Just five months ago, I was telling her how much I loved her pussy and fucking her asshole.

After getting back to the third floor, I slowly made my way to her room. My feet felt like they had lead in them. This was not how I saw my life going. I was supposed to get my shit together and find a woman that I would love beyond myself. That was who I was supposed to build with... move out of the apartment I was in and buy a house, stop spending money on cars and frivolous things, and start a family with.

When I got to her door, I knocked, and she said, "Come in."

I took a deep breath and made my way inside, only to stop dead in my tracks. Luke was standing there with a frown on his face. For a brief moment, his eyebrows lifted. I knew he was shocked to see me, and I was just as shocked when Alexz had told me he was her husband. "Yooo! You fucking my frat brother!" he asked as he turned back to Chanell.

I slid my hand down the back of my head. She set me up. I should have followed my mind instead of my soft ass heart.

However, I could feel that shit growing hard rapidly as I watched her smirk at Luke. This bitch had no heart at all. He looked back at me, his face red as hell, and asked, “You knew this was my fucking wife?”

“Naw. Man, I swear, I didn’t know. I knew she was married though, so I’m just as guilty. But had I known you were her husband, I wouldn’t have.”

He nodded repeatedly. “You didn’t fucking care, that’s why. Y’all some cold muthafuckas, and Chanell, you gon’ pay for this shit. I promise. I was married to you. You should’ve kept your fucking legs closed. You made a vow to me.” He turned to me again. “Frat, we supposed to be brothers. You say you didn’t fucking know, but you didn’t even care enough to ask. That’s cold. You betrayed the brotherhood, man. I got something for yo’ ass too.”

I didn’t bother saying a word. He was right, and I was hoping I didn’t get kicked out of the fraternity because of this. I had no intent of ever coming face to face with Luke. I looked over at Chanell and said, “You knew that I wouldn’t have messed around with you had I known Luke was your husband. You knew exactly who I was when you propositioned me... three times! You came at me, knowing I would eventually fuck you if you were throwing the pussy at me. You know my sister too. Why the fuck would you wanna set me up? I don’t get that shit. You don’t even know me.”

“Ain’t nobody set your ass up. I was not trying to get pregnant for you.” She huffed then addressed Luke. “I’m sorry, Luke. Despite what it looks like, I didn’t want to break your heart. I should have never married you. I love you, but I can’t stop fucking around.”

“Set up the DNA test,” I said before Luke could respond to her ass. “I don’t believe for one second that I was the only one you fucked outside of your marriage. You told me your room number, knowing that I would come face to face with Luke. You wanted to start more shit.” I turned to Luke. “I’m sorry. For whatever it’s worth, I swear I wouldn’t have fucked her had I known she was your wife. I was stupid, foolish, and selfish.”

I turned and walked out the room as Chanell yelled for me. I was done with her ass. She was the type of bitch that made being a good person hard. I would have to get Shy involved in my bullshit just so I wouldn't have to deal with Chanell. I wanted nothing more to do with her ass, but at the same time, if this was my baby, it would be a long ass time before I could completely wash my hands of her.

After getting to my car, I called my dad. We'd been talking a lot lately because of this shit. I tried to give him his space though. He had a new love in his life... new fiancée that had moved in. He was living again, and I hated to bother him with this. The phone rang three times before he picked up. "Hello?"

"Hey, Dad. You busy?"

"Just out here in the backyard. I'd left my phone on the railing of the porch. What's up?"

"I just wanted to talk to you about my bullshit."

"Okay. You wanna come in person or talk on the phone?"

"The phone. I don't want to see *and* hear your disappointment."

"Son, you know I love you. There is nothing that will change that. I was disappointed in your actions when you first told me. I'm past that. It's time to be proactive and handle issues as they arise. Come on over. We can have a drink."

"Thanks, Dad. I appreciate you."

"That's what I'm here for, Dylan. See you in a lil bit."

He ended the call, and I swore I wanted to cry. *How could I have brought a baby into this chaos?* This shit was forcing me to talk way more than I liked to. I was good with laying back in the cut and observing everybody else. I was hoping that things would go back to normal soon, but I realized that things would never be the same again. Despite the turmoil I was in at the moment, I felt like that could possibly be a good thing.

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S kyler

WHEN I GOT TO BEAUMONT, I'd gotten a hotel room and just chilled out the rest of the evening. I was tired from all the work I'd put in during the day and getting Mr. Campbell to fire Jones, McCullen, and Wisenhoff. Despite my previous thoughts, I quit before I left, giving them my resignation letter. While I said I would wait two weeks, they insisted that I made yesterday my last day. The only case I had pending was Mr. Campbell's, and being that he had fired them, I had no caseload. I didn't get here until nine o'clock last night, so I just crashed.

As I sat outside Mr. Berotte's firm, I prayed that I had made the right decision. When I got out of the car, Mr. Berotte was coming out of the front door. I approached as he was walking away. "Mr. Berotte?"

He turned my way, and while I expected his eyes to drift, they didn't. That was confirmation sign number one. He wasn't interested in my physical qualities. "Ms. Fontenot?"

"Yes," I answered with a smile.

He smiled back and made his way to me with his hand extended. "It's great to meet you. Welcome aboard. Come on inside so you can put your things down, and I can introduce you to everyone."

I followed him inside the building to see it was impeccably designed. While it wasn't as big as I was expecting, it was extremely nice. There was a lady at the front desk that he introduced to me as Jocelyn and two other attorneys named Clinton and Perry, who they'd nicknamed Perry Mason. I had to chuckle at that. He also introduced me to their two assistants. His assistant was the last to greet me. He had her busy doing research on my previous law firm just in case they tried to retaliate for me taking Mr. Campbell. I found that to be extremely proactive of him, and I appreciated that.

Once all introductions were made, he brought me to what would be my office. It was more spacious than what I expected. There were two chairs in front of the desk, a big, picturesque window, and a couch and chair that sat on the other side of the office. Black art hung from the walls, and the mission statement of the firm sat on the desk, where only I would be able to see it. It made me laugh out loud. *It is our duty to fight for our clients, even if that means we have to scrap in the streets. When they go low, we go to hell and drag their asses.*

He laughed with me. After I gathered my composure, I said, "Wow. This is nice, Mr. Berotte."

"I don't half step. You gon' find out soon enough," he said, dropping the professionalism.

"That's a good thing. Don't let me hold you up. You were going somewhere?"

"Just to the courthouse to pick up some documents. You wanna tag along? I'll show you where most of the work is done and battled out."

"Sure."

There was no hesitancy in my bones, and that was another confirmation that this was where I belonged. My soul felt at peace, and I was ready to get to work. It had been hard to find employment that catered to the things I believed in. I could tell that Mr. Berotte would teeter totter on the line for a client, if he didn't cross the line altogether. I could almost foresee him

going too far at times, but his heart seemed to be in the right place.

“Mr. Berotte—”

“You can call me Shy or Shyrón. I hope it’s okay for me to call you Skyler. We’re very laidback and informal around the office. Somewhat family oriented. I’m trying to be slightly professional until you’re comfortable though.”

I chuckled. “You can drop it. I’m not stiff. It’s definitely okay for you to call me Skyler. I would actually prefer that. Ms. Fontenot is my mother.”

He smiled as we continued to his car. Once he opened the door for me and went around and got in, he said, “Most likely, we will get plenty of research and strategy done when we get back. My family and I are having a barbeque tomorrow that you’re more than welcome to attend.”

“Oh cool. Absolutely. How many kids do you have?”

He frowned immediately. “I ain’t got no kids or a wife. The family I was referring to is my dad, his fiancée, and my siblings. Don’t be tryna marry me off prematurely now. I’m receptive for when she comes along, but sis ain’t made it yet.”

I chuckled at his explanation. Trying to prepare myself for what and who I would see tomorrow, I said, “My bad. How many siblings do you have?”

“If you count my soon to be stepbrothers, six. I have five brothers and one sister. She’s the youngest of the bunch.”

“Wow. Poor her.”

“Naw. Lucky her. She spoiled as hell. I feel sorry for her boyfriend.”

I chuckled. “So where do you fall in the bunch?”

“Well, amongst my biological, I’m right in the middle.” He thought for a second, then said, “Shit, if you include Anissa’s two sons, I’m still in the middle.”

I liked Shyrón. He was cool. If his family was as cool as he was, then I would enjoy my day tomorrow.

IF GOD CHOSE to come back and walk this earth again in human form, this would have had to be him. *Jesus, Mary, and Joseph*. I was sitting here at the dinner with Shyrón, watching everyone get ready for the festivities. It wasn't as cold today, so they'd put up the tent so we could all sit outside. However, I was still sitting inside the house. We were one of the first to get here. His father was extremely nice, and so was his fiancée, Anissa. Shy's sister arrived shortly after us, and she was friendly as well.

But the dark chocolate specimen that had just walked through the door had captured my attention and wouldn't let go. He was over six feet, maybe six two or so, had thick lips, dreamy eyes, and a beard that made me produce natural conditioner. Not to mention, the waves in his black hair was making me seasick. He looked like a younger version of Big Daddy Kane. *Slow down, Skyleer*. I tried to play on my phone to keep my eyes off him, but when he came in the living room where I was seated, his eyes met mine, and he froze. He turned to look behind him, then looked back at me and walked out. That was strange, but whatever. To get the mystery man off my mind, I began thinking about all the progress we'd made on Mr. Campbell's case.

Coming here was one of the best decisions I'd ever made. Shyrón was so damn knowledgeable. Half of the shit he was teaching me was stuff that couldn't be learned from books. It was life's experiences that taught those things. Although he was only a couple of years older than me, he seemed to have way more experiences than I had. Mr. Campbell was in good hands, and after our Zoom meeting with him yesterday, I believed that he knew he was in good, capable hands as well.

When the music cranked up outside, I decided to make my way out to see if there was something I could do to help. When I walked through the kitchen to head outside, I could see Jesus 2.0 talking to Shyrón. There was also an old school car parked in the grass. It reminded me of the song... *Gangsta*

white walls, TV antenna in the back. I loved that song by William DeVaughn. Shy's sister was putting tablecloths on the tables, so I went out to help her.

After glancing over at Shy and Jesus 2.0, I asked her, "You need help?"

"Please? Those muthafuckas don't give a damn that I'm struggling with this breeze blowing the cloth off before I can get it straight."

I chuckled at her bluntness. I was more than sure she had to be that way growing up in a house full of boys. They'd made her tough. As we straightened the tablecloths and put the weight in the middle of the tables to keep them from blowing off, she said, "Thank you. I appreciate the help. Dylan over there watching you. That's why he can't function."

"Who's Dylan?"

"Our brother. He's between me and Shy. They were standing over there talking a minute ago."

Jesus 2.0 is their brother? He didn't look a thing like them. Shy and Alexz looked a lot alike. As I recalled his face to memory, I could see that he looked like Mr. Berotte, their father, just a little darker. I smiled at her but didn't respond. I didn't need to be worried about a man. I was here to get a new start... alone, not by confusing it with a man. *But damn, he is so fine.*

Once we were done, I could see Shy approaching me, his brother not far behind. My body temperature skyrocketed. The swag they exuded when they walked was just sexy. Shy was definitely more laidback around his family. He even wore a grill. That took me by surprise. The nigga looked like a sexy ass thug, almost the complete opposite of the professional I met yesterday. I wouldn't even know that he was an attorney by looking at him. He wore a fitted baseball cap, a t-shirt, wind pants, and tennis shoes with a couple of gold chains around his neck.

When they got close, Shy said, "Skyler, this is my brother Dylan. Dylan, this is Skyler. She's a new attorney at the office."

She's from Dallas, so I thought I would bring her over here to have a good time with us."

He smiled slightly then extended his hand. "Nice to meet you, Skyler. Sorry about earlier," he said as Shy walked away. "I didn't want to be ogling a woman that belonged to my brother, so I had to make sure before I openly admired you. You're beautiful."

My cheeks had to be red as hell. Straight forwardness had to run in this family. "Nice to meet you also. Thank you, Dylan." *You are a fucking masterpiece.* My thoughts were on overload. "What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a P.E. coach at an elementary school and a personal trainer."

"That's good to know, since I'll be moving to the area soon. I'll need a gym to go to."

"Oh, I thought you'd already moved."

"No. I wasn't expecting to be hired so quickly. Hopefully, I'll be moving by next weekend though. I have to hire movers." I glanced at that beautiful car again and asked, "Is that your car?"

"Yeah. You like it?"

"Yes. It's beautiful. Can I take a look?"

"Sure."

He extended his hand, and I looked down at it. While I didn't want to hold his hand, I didn't want to be rude either. When I slid my hand in his, my knees nearly buckled. Even this little bit of contact with him was taking me on a ride I shouldn't have been on. When we got closer to the car, I saw it was literally a Cadillac... diamond in the back, sunroof top... gangsta whitewalls with antennas in the back. I was sure the small antennas were to spark up nostalgic memories. I looked over at him excitedly and started singing the song.

He laughed, and I swore it spoke to the depths of me. It was like I was picking up on something heavy going on with him though. While he seemed happy, his eyes didn't portray

that. He opened the door, and I was speechless. “Oh. My. God. This is so beautiful, Dylan.”

“Thank you.”

He leaned against the car as I excitedly looked through it, imagining I was in a Dolomite classic. Although the inside reflected all the technology this world had to offer, the surface remained authentic to the seventies. Before I could get carried away, I got out of the car. I had to act like I had somebody’s home training. My eyes met his when I stood up straight. “That car is amazing.”

“Thank you. I see you can appreciate a classic.”

“Absolutely.”

“I have a vintage Mustang as well. It seems that’s where I sank most of my money over the past few years.”

He chuckled, but again, it seemed to be masking something dark. I grabbed his hand and squeezed it. “Thank you for letting me have a whole fit over your car.”

When I tried to pull away, he held my hand tighter. I looked up at him just as he was licking his lips. *Dear God.* “You think maybe we can kick it sometimes?”

I tilted my head to the side as I stared at him. Before I could ask, he said, “As friends. That’s it. We seem to have a common ground to build on.”

I gave him a slight smile. It seemed he needed a friend right now. Although I knew he had siblings, it just seemed he was searching for something. “Once I get settled... sure.”

“If you need help, I don’t mind helping.”

“Not if you have heavy stuff to move. The nigga is lazy as hell. What’s up? I’m Chad. Welcome to Beaumont.”

I glanced over at the man that resembled their father as well as Dylan pushed him and said, “Shut up, fool.”

“I’m Skyler. Thank you.”

He shook my hand and walked away, then started barking. Alexz immediately yelled at him as another man entered the

backyard doing the same thing. “This is going to be memorable.”

Dylan chuckled. “It’s the same shit every family gathering. Chad is the one that clowns the most. Everyone has come to expect that out of him and loves that about him. He’s the second oldest.”

“Who was the other guy that came in barking?”

“DJ. He’s our soon-to-be stepbrother, but he and Chad have been friends for a long time. That’s how our parents met.”

“That’s cool.”

“Yeah.”

Things fell into a comfortable silence between us for a moment, until he said, “You wanna go sit back down? I’m gonna help them get shit together, or I’ll never hear the end of it.”

I chuckled. “Yeah. Let me see if Alexz needs help with anything.”

He smiled slightly as I walked away to meet her under the tent. She was staring at her phone with a frown on her face. “Is there anything else you need me to do?”

She quickly pulled her phone to her chest. “No. Everything is done. We’re just waiting on my boyfriend and other brothers to get here. Thanks.”

I nodded and walked away since it seemed I was being dismissed. Before I could get too far, I heard my name being called. I turned to see Shy coming toward me. “Mama Nissa is requesting you in the kitchen.”

I smiled slightly and made my way inside the house. When I entered the kitchen, she turned and smiled at me. “We need all the estrogen we can get around here. Isaiah and Jamel still aren’t here yet.”

I smiled at her bubbly spirit. “I see.”

“So I see you’ve met everyone. I hope you feel welcome.”

“I have, and I do. Thank you.”

“I must admit, I thought Shy was liking you for more than an employee. He doesn’t bring people around too often. He assured me that wasn’t the case. I *do* see that *one* of the Berotte men has taken an interest though.”

I looked away for a moment. I didn’t know if I could restrain myself if I were ever alone with him. Knowing that he was feeling me, I should probably stay away from him. She interrupted my thought process and said, “Besides Isaiah, he’s the sweetest. Quiet, but very affectionate. At least toward me he is.”

As she talked, I looked out of the window in time to see him hugging Alexz. She was showing him something on her phone. As I stared, I realized she was hugging him. He was only returning the gesture. “He seems like a nice guy, Ms. Anissa. We will most likely hang out and try to get to know one another.”

She smiled brightly. “That’s great. You mind helping me get this rice dressing into a pan?”

“Not at all,” I said as I notice Dylan go to his car and just sit inside it... alone.

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Dylan

THAT HO WAS on my last fucking nerve. I had to come sit in my car to cool the fuck off. She sent Alexz pictures, telling her that was my baby. Thankfully, Alexz already knew of the possibility. Had she not, she would have blasted that shit in front of everybody. I promised to talk to her later. I hadn't heard shit about the DNA test yet, so I knew I had to talk to Shy about it, ASAP. Today wasn't the day though, not since he brought that ball of fire to the house.

When I walked into the house and saw her sitting on the couch, I lost all my good sense. She was so gorgeous. Her hair was already begging me to pull it. However, when she came outside and the sun hit that medium brown skin of hers, I was ready to be all in. Her physical qualities had already drawn me in, but I had to make sure that she wasn't someone Shy had interest in. When he told me that she wasn't, I quickly let him know of my interest so he could relay the message to our other brothers.

Her slender frame boasted modest curves that were just as attractive as all these females that were getting those BBLs. Her natural beauty was mesmerizing. She wasn't any taller than Alexz, about five foot five, but I could tell her persona had made up the difference for her vertical deficiency. When she hesitantly slid her hand in mine, it was like I heard fucking birds singing. I had to pray to God. *Lord, don't let this be my*

forever. My shit ain't together yet. That's enough to scare any good woman off. There was no way I would be able to actively pursue her with all the bullshit Chanell was trying to put me through.

As I sat in my car, in my fucking feelings, there was a knock on the window. I looked over to see Alexz and Skyler. I killed the engine and got out. They were holding plates of food. Alexz said, "I told Skyler that you liked your meat in a different plate. Spoiled ass. You coming to a table?"

"Yeah. Thanks. I can carry it."

I took the plates from them and walked over to the table and sat next to Shy. After blessing my food, I began eating while they clowned around. Chad was the loudest, as usual, bragging about how Mama Nissa loved him more because she always cooked him a side of tripe. I slightly rolled my eyes as Axton joined him and DJ. He'd still been working at getting his office together. He'd be open for business in another couple of weeks, or so he'd said.

I was grateful that Alexz had found a man that loved her as much as he did. Whenever I saw them together, I couldn't help but thank God she didn't move to Atlanta with that fuck nigga. As everyone talked and I did my usual, Alexz and Skyler joined us. I swallowed hard when she sat across from me. It was like my body changed whenever she was near me. *This was what I asked for.* I wanted to feel this way around a woman. I'd been hoping for it, but God was tripping by dropping her in my life now.

My phone vibrated, so I took it from my pocket to see a text from Chanell. *You're not coming to see your son today?*

That bitch was on my last nerve, and it must had been evident through my facial expressions, because Alexz asked, "You cool, bruh?"

I looked up to see her, Shy, and Skyler staring at me. After swallowing hard, I nodded and continued eating. The feel of Skyler's eyes on me caused me to lift my head. When our eyes met, goosebumps popped up on my skin, and I felt a tingle throughout my entire body. This was unreal how fast this was

happening. If she was the one, when I had my drama straightened out, she would still be available. I had to keep that in mind in order not to go insane.

Dad came and sat with us, and while they all talked and clowning, Isaiah and Jamel arrived, completing the party. While I wasn't participating in the conversation as much, no one thought that strange, because I usually didn't. I could tell that it somewhat bothered Skyler, however, because she kept glancing at me. I did my best to ignore her though. Once I finished eating, I stood to put my plate in the trash. Before I could make my way back to the table, I could see all eyes were on me, and I knew why.

I was usually the last person to throw my plate away, because I was all about eating until I couldn't eat no more whenever Dad cooked. Mama Nissa's cooking had become a favorite as well. For me to be the first to throw my plate away spoke volumes to everyone that knew me. Isaiah and Shy made their way to me as I began walking to the front of the house to sit on the porch. I needed some alone time, but because of where I was parked, I was blocked in.

When I got to the porch, Isaiah asked, "Dyl, what's up, bruh? You good?"

"I'm stressed, man. That's all."

"Stressed about what? It must be bad, because a beautiful woman was sitting across from you, begging for your attention, and you were in another world. That's *highly* unusual."

I sat on the swing, and Shy sat next to me as I admitted the truth. "I fucked the wrong fucking broad. I ain't had sex in five months because of that shit."

It was quiet for a second, so I looked up to make sure they'd heard me. Both of them were looking at me with their eyes stretched wide. "She gave you something?" Zay asked.

I rolled my eyes. That was always his first thought since he worked for the health department. "She gave me something alright. She had a baby, and she's convinced it's mine, but she

won't give me a paternity test. She's married, but because of how dark skinned the baby has gotten, the husband did a paternity test. It's not his. Just recently before she had the baby, she was trying to fuck Arrow."

"What the fuck?" Shy said.

"So I'm going to need you to step in," I said, turning to him. "If it's my baby, I want to be in his life, but I'll be damn if I'm gon' be duped into taking care of another nigga's mishap."

He started nodding repeatedly and rubbing his hands together. Although I had summoned the lawyer, somehow the gangsta showed up. "I got something for her pathetic, ratchet ass. Where she work?"

"At Mae Jones Clark Elementary School."

"Nigga, you can't be slanging dick at your place of employment. What the fuck wrong wit'chu? You can't ever get away from her ass. That's a'ight though. I'ma pay her a visit."

"She still in the hospital as far as I know. The baby was born prematurely."

After giving him all the details, he left me alone with Zay. He sat on the step and remained quiet. Out of all my big brothers, he was the most understanding... like Dad. He knew when to push and when to just chill out. I appreciated that. After a few minutes, he turned to me and said, "I had a scare my sophomore year at Howard. Chick I fucked around with said she was pregnant. I was sweating bullets, man. I didn't want to tell Dad and disappoint him. I was the oldest and had to be a good example for y'all."

I sat quietly and listened. This was my first time hearing this story. Zay was the one who always had his shit together. It was surprising that he didn't have a wife by now. He was attentive, sensitive, and all the shit women typically craved. "So what happened, bruh? Was it yours?"

"I want to believe that it was. I was wilding without a care in the world. She miscarried. Not that I was happy that she lost

the baby that way, but I was at the same time. I mean, I was sensitive and shit with her, because she wasn't that type of girl. She didn't fuck around like this chick you just spoke about. We were preparing to tell our parents, and the next day, she started bleeding. That shit scared me straight. I was only nineteen. I wasn't ready for a kid. I made sure to wrap up every time and pull out after that."

I felt his pain when he spoke about it. It was like he hated telling me that. "You okay, Zay? It seems like it bothers you."

"It does. I didn't check on Joyy enough. She ended up dropping out of school. I felt guilty for not caring as much as she did. That was why I never could watch *Madea Goes to Jail*. Although she didn't get raped, like Derek Luke, I felt like I abandoned her. I haven't seen her since that semester, and I often wonder about her and how she's doing. So make sure that you do what you can to get that paternity test done. If it's your baby, you can't fault her for being trifling. She had to have somebody to be trifling with."

He didn't say it in a condemning way, but matter-of-factly. He was right. I was trifling right along with her. "Thank you, Zay. I appreciate your words of wisdom and for telling me about your experience. Maybe you should try to find her on social media."

"Yeah. I may try."

"And for what it's worth, I would still look up to you... baby or not. Nor would I have been disappointed."

"I think I was more disappointed with myself. I was always hard on myself, and I didn't learn to fix that until much later. I still feel guilty, but I'm not depressed. I know that if I can find her and apologize, I'll be much better. Now come on back here and entertain Skyler. I can tell she's feeling you. You don't have to hop into a relationship, but y'all can get to know one another."

I nodded at him then stood from the swing and made my way down the stairs. He threw his arm around my shoulders and kissed my head how he used to do when I was little. Suddenly, I felt like the little boy that fell off his bike. Because

Alexz and I were so close in age, Zay often helped Dad with us. Most times, it was Zay that took care of me. He was my second dad. Although I looked up to Shy and wanted to be like him, it was Zay and Dad that nurtured me and taught me all the valuable lessons.

When we got to the backyard, Alexz and Skyler were in mid step, throwing up their AKA signs and making those high-pitched noises. While I wanted to roll my eyes, I was grateful for the show. Watching Skyler roll her body had me mesmerized. She was extremely comfortable around us if she was doing all that. When she looked up and saw me watching, she smiled.

I smiled back and took a seat to continue enjoying the show. It didn't last long after that though, because Skyler started laughing and left Alexz to finish alone. And of course, the attention seeker finished the routine. Chad gave her the smoke she was craving, as usual, and there they went... arguing back and forth like two big kids. Chad had started stepping and neck-rolling before she could sit down, and she was in full go-awf mode until her man calmed her down.

Glancing at Skyler, I could see her watching me. She was analyzing me and would probably have all sorts of questions about me for Shy tomorrow. We usually rode for one another though and didn't spill each other's business. Hopefully, he would keep the unspoken Berotte code. "Are you frat?"

"Yeah. Shy and I are the only two Nupes in the bunch."

Her eyebrows lifted and her lips twisted slightly. I supposed she liked to see the shimmy like most women did. I gave Shy the head nod, and he went to the stereo and put on "Wipe Me Down" so we could cut up a lil bit. I only wanted to perform for her. Had it not been for her, there was no way I would have done that just to do it. We were outnumbered anyway. Chad, DJ, and Axton would be sure to get cranked up after this.

As I stepped to the grass slowly and rolled my shoulders, I could hear Alexz yelling at us to *do that shit*. She loved to see me and Shy kill it. We were always sure to never disappoint.

When I turned back around, my eyes met Skyler's, and I was sure to maintain her gaze as I rolled my shoulders. She slowly allowed her eyes to drift, following every move my body made. We could flirt all day. Eventually, when the time came, she would be screaming my name to the high heavens, letting everybody know who was fucking her right.

Once we were done, Chad changed the music, and just as I expected, it was "Atomic Dog." I reached across the table for Skyler's hand as she said, "That was hot."

"We aim to please. You umm... care to go for a ride?"

"In the old school? I thought you would never ask."

I chuckled as she hopped up from her seat and walked toward my car. I gave Shy a head nod then followed her and opened the passenger door so she could get in. Isaiah, Jamel, and Alexz began moving their cars so I could get out. When I got in the driver's seat and cranked the engine, she was in awe. I could only smile. Usually, no one drove my car but me, but I wanted her behind the wheel of this Caddy for some reason.

The minute we got on the street, I got out of the car and went to her side, pulling her out. When I began leading her to the driver's side, she started halfway hyperventilating. "Dylan! Noooo. I can't drive your car!"

"Why not? As much as you admire it, I know you'll be careful."

She smiled then got excited all over again as she slid in the driver's seat. I closed the door then made my way to the passenger side and got in. As I buckled up, I watched her wiggle in the seat excitedly, then put the car in gear. I opened the sunroof and cranked up the music, playing the song she was singing earlier. Her smile was so big, and I couldn't help but smile in return. As she slowly pulled away from the curb, I could see her nervous energy.

"Calm down, Skyler. As long as you're here, you can drive it whenever. This isn't a once in a lifetime opportunity."

She looked over at me, her eyes wide in surprise, then she seemed to relax immediately. She didn't know it, but for me to

say those things to her and let her drive my car, she had to be special.

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S kyler

I SUPPOSED my previous thoughts of staying away from him had gone completely out of the window when he asked if I wanted to take a ride in his car. I couldn't resist a classic. For a long time, my dad thought I was going to end up selling classic cars or working with cars in some way or another. Whenever I saw an old school, I was amazed, even as a little girl. So when Dylan asked me if I wanted to take a ride, I knew I wouldn't be able to decline even if I wanted to.

As he directed me on which way to go, I had become comfortable, only driving with one hand until it was time to turn. He completely took advantage of that by sliding his hand over mine and holding it as he reclined slightly. The chills that went over my body were overwhelming for a moment, so I slid my hand away from his.

“Sorry, Skyler.”

He cleared his throat and sat up in his seat, like he was breaking himself out of a trance. I glanced over at him in his white tee and sweats, then said, “It's okay.”

He wouldn't look back at me, and I didn't know what to make of that. My mind was on a fast track to hell as we drove through the city, drawing attention everywhere we went. He needed something from me, but I couldn't figure out what. It felt like it was more than physical... like it was something deeper he craved that he thought I could give to him. Despite

my mind screaming at me, I slid my hand over to his and grabbed it. “You okay, Dylan? It seems something is bothering you.”

He cleared his throat, then turned to me and smiled slightly. “Naw, I’m good. I just feel drawn to you. That’s never happened before, and I’m not quite sure how to handle that.”

I smiled back at him and continued holding his hand, feeling the heat between us. *Jesus*. This was going to be a lot harder than I thought. I was drawn to him too. Jaxton came to mind and how quickly I gave in to him. That slowed my euphoric thoughts, but I didn’t let his hand go. He seemed to need that contact, although it felt like my palm would start sweating at any moment. Choosing to steer the conversation to something less serious, I asked, “How old are you? Shy said we were close in age.”

“I’m twenty-six. What about you?”

“Okay. I’m twenty-seven. When is your birthday?”

“July twenty-sixth.”

“So you’re a... Leo?”

“Yeah. You into all that astrology stuff?”

“Not deep, but I consider it for compatibility reasons. I’m a Gemini. My birthday is May thirtieth.”

“So, you have a birthday coming up in about three months. We gon’ have to plan a turnup. You part of the family now.”

I chuckled. “So I’m an honorary Berotte?”

He stared at me seriously for a moment, and I knew his thoughts were way ahead of where we currently were. After licking his lips, he said, “Hell yeah. You fit right in. Alexz looks grateful to have you around.”

So do you. That was my immediate thought, but I kept it to myself. I smiled and paid attention to the road as he directed me once again, having me make an illegal U-turn. “I’m glad to have her too—a soror sister who seems extremely fun to be around. My sister is tripping since I’m moving to Beaumont.”

“She older or younger than you?”

“Younger. We’re only a year apart. She’s your age, but she just turned twenty-six a couple of months ago... end of December.”

He nodded then watched the road as he, again, grabbed my hand, softly caressing the top of it with his thumb. This felt extremely nice. “Skyler?”

“Yeah?”

I glanced over at him to find him staring at me. “I’m grateful that you’re here too.”

My face heated up tremendously, and I wanted to kiss those tinted lips. They looked so soft and juicy. Instead, when we got to the stop light, I pulled my hand from his and placed it on his cheek. *Dear Jesus. His beard was so damn soft.* He pulled it from his cheek and kissed it, practically sending me into orbit. I couldn’t move. He was so damn sexy, and his eyes were pulling me in toward him. I could feel my body leaning his way, and I couldn’t make it stop until our faces were mere centimeters away from one another.

He caressed my cheek with his thumb, then softly kissed my glossed lips. There had to be a huge ass puddle beneath me because my shit had gushed. I glanced at the light to see it had turned green, so I accelerated, not knowing what to say. He was a fast mover, and he was making me move fast as hell too. I needed to put brakes on this situation, but I didn’t know how. He remained quiet as we drove, and so did I. I didn’t know what to say.

Apparently, he did. “Can I take you out tonight, Skyler? Maybe to have drinks?”

I licked my lips then bit my bottom one, and that seemed to do something to him. He fidgeted slightly, and I could see his growing erection in those gray sweats. *Lawd have mercy!* The Lord needed to help me. I was ready to give all my goodies to this man, and he was practically a fucking stranger! If I went out with him tonight, I knew I would probably get fucked. Did I want that? I didn’t. Not yet. *Yes the fuck I did.*

“Sure. I’m leaving tomorrow, so why not? You gonna invite anyone else, or will it be just me and you?”

And that was when the group Tony! Toni! Toné! entered my mind, singing the popular song from the *Boyz in the Hood* soundtrack. Before answering my question, he directed me to turn, and I realized we were back at the house. “You can just park behind Shy’s car.”

Once I did, he grabbed my hand again. It was like he needed that contact. When I stared into his eyes, I swore I was gonna cry. He seemed so damn tormented. That brought me back to how he was seated in his car earlier when Alexz and I had brought out his food. Something was definitely up with him.

After he gently caressed my hand between his, he said, “I would like for it to be just me and you, but if it makes you more comfortable, I’ll invite everyone else.”

I stared into his hopeful eyes and felt completely at ease. Glancing at our hands, I brought my other hand to his and said, “It can be just me and you. I’m cool with that.”

He took a deep breath and said, “I’m not usually a forthcoming person, but for some reason, I just want to tell you everything about me... even my deepest secrets.”

“Well, Geminis and Leos are pretty compatible. Maybe that’s why.”

“I’on know about all that, but your spirit seems light but heavy at the same time. Light as in joyful, but heavy enough to suck me in and not let go.”

That was some heavy shit he’d just dropped on me. I didn’t know what to say in response, so I didn’t say a word. As I stared into his eyes, he killed the engine, then brushed my hair away from my face. He lifted my hand and kissed it again, then got out of the car. My feelings were swirling inside of me uncontrollably. We were forming a connection, and I didn’t know what to think of it. Maybe the problem was that I was trying to figure it out instead of just going with the flow. He

was sweet, and I could tell that he had a big heart... at least for those he loved or had a connection to.

When he opened my door and I stood out of the way, he closed it. We were close. I was barely to his shoulder, but it seemed as if we were level with the way our eyes had locked in. His gaze was penetrating my lady parts. I just wanted to slide off my top and jeans and let him have his way right here against this car. He grabbed my hand and said, "Come on."

Letting him lead me, I tried to get my breathing under control. The voodoo that he put on me was strong as hell... made me wanna shoop. Salt N Pepa had that shit right, because it was definitely a spell he had me under. After Jaxton, I swore I would never allow this shit to happen like this again, but here I was, tripping over myself over a nigga I had just met about three hours ago. *Was I thirsty?* Hell yeah, I was parched. I hadn't had sex since before Jaxton and I broke up, and my kitty was saying so. She was feeling the effects of the famine, and this five-course meal was in front of her, begging to be eaten.

Before we could enter the backyard, I stopped walking. Dylan turned to me, and I went up on my toes and kissed his lips. "Dylan, I'm feeling everything you're feeling, and like you, I don't have a clue why. I think you're extremely handsome, but the pull I feel is undeniable. Maybe because I haven't entertained anyone in a while, but I don't want this feeling to leave. I want to explore it. This shit is crazy," I said, mumbling the last part.

He pulled my face to his and kissed me, sucking my bottom lip like it dripped in love and satisfaction, taking my damn breath away. I couldn't help but to grab ahold of his beard and pull him in deeper. When he pulled away, he took a deep breath as I mumbled, "Shit."

"My sentiments exactly. Damn."

Grabbing my hand again, he continued to the backyard. Everyone turned to us, and Alexz's eyebrows rose. *Shit*. Shy smiled as Chad frowned and asked, "Dylan, you wearing lip gloss, nigga?"

He quickly wiped his lips as he glanced at me. I'd never noticed it was on his lips. My face heated up tremendously as Isaiah said, "Shut the hell up, Chad."

"I mean, I'm just curious about what happened on that joyride. Maybe I need to take more joyrides." He laughed loudly then said, "I apologize, Skyler. I can tell I'm embarrassing you. I'll give you more time to get used to me."

I rolled my eyes and chuckled while waving my hand dismissively. "Ain't nobody worried about you, Chad."

Dylan seemed to relax instantly as a smile played on his lips. He pulled out my chair, and I sat next to Alexz. She gave me a half smile and a shoulder bump. It was like they could all see what I was somewhat struggling to accept. Maybe after we talked more on our pending outing tonight, I would be able to accept our attraction better. As if I had a premonition earlier, "Me and You" started to play. My eyes widened slightly. Was that a sign?

Mr. Berotte pulled Ms. Anissa from her chair and began dancing with her. Alexz's boyfriend followed suit. They looked so cute enjoying themselves. I glanced over at Dylan, playing on his phone. Standing from my seat, I took a risk and went to him. I grabbed his hand and pulled him away from the tent as he slid his phone in his pocket. I wrapped my arms around his waist and began swaying to the beat.

He smiled then grabbed my wrist and spun me around where my back was against him. He wrapped his arms around me as his beard tickled my neck. I felt so damn comfortable with this man. *How sway?* This shit was puzzling. He kissed my cheek as we swayed, and as directed by the song, I wasn't worried about a damn thang. I closed my eyes and got lost in his cologne and how good his beard smelled.

Spewing my thoughts about him like he was reading my mind, he said, "You smell good, Skyler."

"Mm... so do you."

We stayed that way for the entire song, and when it ended, he refused to let me go. "Damn, girl," he said in my ear.

I knew I had goosebumps all over my skin. His voice in my ear was driving me insane. I spun around in his arms and wrapped my arms around his neck then quickly pecked him on the lips. Just that fast, I was addicted to his lips. I was behaving this way with an audience. I didn't know how I would be able to contain myself tonight when we were alone. I was sure to hop his damn bones. He pecked my lips again and said, "Come on. We have an audience."

I lowered my arms as he continued. "I could kiss your pretty lips all day, and believe it or not, I'm not really a kisser."

I frowned slightly. How could you love someone and not be a kisser? Was he telling me what I thought he was telling me? Instead of letting those questions swirl around in my head, I decided to ask. "So... you've never been in love or had a girlfriend?"

He twisted his lips to the side as he shook his head. "Nope. I was somewhat of the ugly duckling growing up. When women started paying attention to me, I was done with trying to be in a relationship."

I frowned harder. "Ugly duckling? I don't believe that."

"Believe it. I was super skinny, ashy looking, and wore braces. Girls gave me the cold shoulder until I got to college, put some weight on, and pledged Kappa. After the beard, that was all she wrote."

"So, what happened after that?"

We sat at the table, and he glanced at me. "Let's save that conversation for tonight."

I didn't have a good feeling about that. He was probably a player. He was way too smooth. *Smooth Operator*. He was more like Big Daddy Kane than I thought. As much as I was feeling him, if he was trying to hit it and quit it, I'd leave him in my dust so fast, he wouldn't know which way I went.

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Dylan

SWITCHING IT UP, I drove my 1964 convertible top Mustang. I was nervous as hell going to pick Skyler up from her hotel room. Being around women never made me nervous, but I was experiencing a lot of firsts with her, and it was just the first day. Despite my reservations, I wanted to get to know her. That way when my shit was handled, I would be ready to dive all the way in with her. The whole get-to-know-you stage would be over and done with.

We'd talked quite a bit at the barbeque, establishing a few likes and dislikes. She liked vanilla... anything vanilla, roses, and was a new fan of boudin. I had unlimited access to boudin since one of my boys sold it. He made the boudin himself, and it was fire. He was from Southwest Louisiana, so it wasn't filled with mostly rice like that bullshit in the stores.

As I headed to the Hampton Inn, my phone rang. When I saw Shyrón's number, I already knew what he would be on. "Yeah?"

"Yeah nothing, nigga. Skyler is my employee. Don't let your bullshit run her off. The only reason I haven't told her about yo' ass is because I can see that you really feeling her. I know the games you play, and that wasn't game that I witnessed today. I just wish you would have gotten to know her privately first before taking her out in public. You treated that shit like it was your playground."

“I really like her, Shy. I ain’t on no bullshit. She don’t deserve that. I just wanna show her a good time while I’m getting to know her.”

“Where y’all going? Pour 09?”

“Yep. You know that’s our spot.”

“That I do. Let me know how it goes. Talk to you later.”

“Okay.”

I ended the call as I turned in the hotel’s parking lot. I’d been to this hotel plenty of times. Actually, I’d been to most of the hotels in Beaumont plenty of times. I slowly shook my head at my former ways then called Skyler to let her know I had arrived. She said she would meet me in the lobby, so I went inside and had a seat as I waited for her. Glancing down at my attire, I hoped I wasn’t overdressed. I didn’t believe in half stepping. These plaid pants were probably a bad idea though. If I got the least bit turned on, these tight pants would put all my business in the street. Normally, I didn’t care about that, but tonight, I was trying to be mindful of certain things that might embarrass Skyler. That was one of them.

As I looked over my fit of choice, the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen stepped off the elevator. Skyler was so got damn gorgeous. She wore a hot pink dress with spaghetti straps that clung to her body and nude heels, showing off those pretty ass toes. Everything about her was attractive. I quickly stood from my seat, adjusting my pants and my blazer. We were almost too dressed up for Pour 09. Had we not eaten earlier, I would have taken her to dinner.

When she got closer, I bit my bottom lip as I scanned her body. “Damn. You look amazing,” I said as my eyes met her.

“Thank you. You clean up nice as well.”

I bit my bottom lip then held my hand out for hers. She slid it in mine, and I lifted it to my lips and kissed it. Seeing her blush was a wonderful thing. I’d seen many women blush, but it was something about her when she did it that had me all sensitive and shit. I held on to her hand and proceeded to my car. When she saw it, her eyes widened. “Oh my God! Dylan!”

I chuckled as she ogled it, looking like she was dying to get inside. She was practically hopping like she'd been holding her pee all day. When I opened the door, I thought she was going to cum on herself. I was more than sure that she had at least gushed a bit. When she looked up at me, she smiled so big. I wish I could always put smiles on her face that big. I didn't know how I was feeling this way about her so soon, but I supposed it ran in my family.

My dad had told me that when he met our mother, they moved just as quickly, and I saw for myself how quickly he moved with Mama Nissa. Alexz had fallen right in line with Axton. They'd only been a couple for a couple of months or so, and they were already in love and living together. Breaking me from my thoughts, Skyler said, "This car is amazing! I didn't think you could come close to what you'd done to the Caddy, but man, I was so wrong."

I smiled as I slowly shook my head, then closed her door and walked around to get inside. My nerves were starting to settle, and I was grateful for our common interest in cars. They were a great conversation piece. Once I got inside and cranked the engine, Skyler's eyes lit up as she looked at all the lights inside. I turned to her and said, "If we were just cruising, I'd put the top down, but I know how women feel about their hair."

"Had it not been flat ironed, I wouldn't have an issue with that. Too much exposure to this humidity will have my hair frizzing up like someone sprayed water on it."

"I feel you. Maybe next time," I said as I grabbed her hand, seeking her calmness.

She smiled slightly then said, "Yeah, maybe next time."

When we got to Pour 09, I could see that the party was in full swing. The music was loud, and I could see people dancing. Getting out of the car, I quickly made my way to her side to help her out. Before I could close the door good, I heard someone yell my name. My insides felt like they curdled at the sound of her voice. I slowly turned to look to confirm

my suspicion, and my worst nightmare had come true.
Chanell.

Chanell was walking toward us with an evil smirk on her face. “So you have time to go out but not time to go see your baby?”

My eyes shut tightly, and I bit my bottom lip. Everything in me wanted to choke this bitch. I opened them to see Skyler staring at me, waiting to see what I would say. Giving my attention back to Chanell, I said, “Have you ordered the DNA test through the hospital yet? When did you get out anyway? You shouldn’t even be out and about like this.”

“You don’t worry about what the fuck I do. Your friend looks surprised that you have a baby. I take it you hadn’t told her.”

“Man, Chanell, get out my face with this bullshit and go on about your night. You still didn’t answer the question about the DNA test.”

“You are the only man I slept with besides Luke. If he’s not for Luke, then he’s yours! How could you turn your back on your son?”

“I don’t know why you think I trust yo’ ass when you was trying to holla at Arrow right in front of me.”

“I don’t want him! I was trying to make you jealous. Apparently, it backfired. Nixon looks just like you, and I know you saw that when you went to see him.” She smiled slightly. “Yeah, the nurses told me that you stood there for nearly thirty minutes that day you came to the hospital.”

I huffed and rubbed my hand down the back of my head. When I heard a door slam, I realized Skyler had gotten back in the car. *Shit!* When I turned back to Chanell, she was smiling. “I guess your lady friend is upset.” She walked to the car and said, “He’s a ho, girl. That nigga body count is longer than Wilt Chamberlain’s.”

I grabbed Chanell by her arm and pulled her away from the car. “Order the fucking DNA test before I file harassment on your ass. My brother is an attorney. I can make it happen.”

“Well, make that shit happen! I’m gon’ keep harassing you about claiming your son!”

I released her arm and went to the car amidst her taunts and got in with Skyler before I fucked Chanell up. I cranked the engine then turned to Skyler. When I went to grab her hand, she snatched it away from me. “Skyler, I’m sorry. I mean, what you want me to say?”

She frowned as she turned to look at me. “How about I might have a newborn baby? Paternity test or not, you knew that shit was possible. That’s pertinent information, Dylan! I hate fucking drama! Take me back to my room.”

She turned and looked out the window, avoiding my gaze. This situation was fucked up. I supposed I should have told her, but how in the hell was I supposed to? It was only our first day getting acquainted. “Had I told you, would we be here tonight?”

“Hell no, but at least that would have been my choice. I would have taken things a lot slower.”

“So I was just supposed to blurt out that this ho was accusing me of being her baby daddy on the first day?”

“Nigga, yes! You can put your tongue in my mouth, but you couldn’t say that shit? And now she’s a ho? Was she a ho when you were fucking her?”

“Hell yeah. She was a ho when I met her,” I mumbled.

I glanced at Skyler, and her eyes were wide. “So I suppose it takes one to know one. She was probably right about you. So all that shit you spit to me earlier was game. I sure know how to pick ’em.”

I slid my hand down the back of my head again, then left the parking lot. That was a nervous habit I couldn’t seem to get rid of. “I’m sorry, Skyler. I wasn’t spitting game earlier. It was the most open I have ever been with a woman. I’ve never been affectionate like that. That’s why everyone was looking shocked. I’ve never been so forthcoming with my feelings. I really feel something for you, and I’m not going to rest until I

prove to you just how for real I am. I really don't think the baby is mine because she's refusing to order the DNA test."

"That's not the point, Dylan! You got me in the middle of your bullshit tonight. I don't appreciate that at all."

I decided to just shut up while I was ahead. Resisting the urge to rub my hand down the back of my head again, I grabbed the steering wheel, holding it tightly. My palms were starting to sweat, and my nerves were for a totally different reason. I didn't want her to turn her back on me. Since she was moving to Beaumont next weekend, maybe I could make up with her then. She would have had time to cool off and calm down, because she was pissed. No explanation would be good enough, and everything I said was probably only pissing her off more.

When we got to the hotel and I was about to get out to open her door and help her out, she turned to me and cut her eyes, stopping me dead in my tracks. "You can drop the gentleman act. You've been exposed."

She got out of my car and headed to the hotel entrance without looking back. Once she was inside, I pulled off slowly as I let the top down. As expensive as gas was right now, I found myself just driving without a destination in sight. I knew I should have waited, but I couldn't help myself. She was so beautiful... inside and out. I just wanted to be close to her. I supposed it was a good thing this happened now rather than later. But then again, I would have had time to tell her and avoid the shit that happened tonight altogether.

Instead of avoiding the inevitable, I called Shy. I knew if I didn't call him, he was going to ask her how our date went when he talked to her tomorrow. He answered the phone with an attitude. "Aww fuck. What happened?"

"Chanell happened. We never made it inside. She caught me in the parking lot."

"That's the bullshit I was talking about, Dylan. You have to be smart, man. Taking Skyler out wasn't a good decision. You fresh off the streets. Nigga, you used to have community dick."

“It’s been five months.”

“Five months ain’t shit, especially when you got a crazy ass broad pinning a baby on you! For your sake, I hope it ain’t yours. If it is, you might as well prepare to be single for the rest of your life. Ain’t no woman with substance gon’ wanna deal with the baby mama drama. Now I have to convince Skyler that despite the bullshit you just put her through, it would still be in her best interest to move here. Shit! Did that ho address Skyler negatively?”

“No. Just to tell her that I was for the streets.”

“Well, she ain’t lie about that shit.”

“It’s been five fucking months!”

“Yo, you need to pipe that shit down. Again, five months ain’t shit. That ain’t enough time to prove that you’ve changed, man.” He huffed loudly. “When did Chanell get out of the hospital?”

“I don’t know. It couldn’t have been that long ago. She was still there earlier this week.”

“A’ight. I’ma pay her a visit, either tomorrow or Monday if I can catch up with her ass. In the meantime, don’t try to contact Skyler and fuck shit up more than you already have.”

“Yeah,” I said then ended the call, not waiting for his response.

I swore I wanted to go back to that hotel and beg my heart out, but that wasn’t me. I hadn’t been myself since I saw her at my dad’s house, sitting on the couch. Dylan ‘the pussy slayer’ Berotte was long gone. This nigga that replaced him was already losing. As I sat at the traffic light, I put the top up and headed home. Although I knew I probably wouldn’t get a wink of sleep, it was worth a try. Thoughts of Skyler Fontenot was gon’ have my mind on the fast track, trying to figure out what I could do to be in her world again.

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S kyler

I DIDN'T KNOW why I was surprised. Niggas weren't shit. Dylan had made me believe he was everything I ever wanted, all within a matter of hours, and I fell for it like a gullible schoolgirl. I didn't know how I let him damn near finesse me like that. He was going to get what he wanted had that woman not shown up. I'd already giftwrapped the panties. My pussy was purring and damn near screaming like the hungry and thirsty cat it was. And for some reason, I believed he could hear every cry it made.

Despite that disaster, Shyrón and I worked well together. His assistant found me an amazing apartment on Major Drive, and I was beyond excited to move. We'd had a Zoom meeting with Mr. Campbell, and he was just as excited about the change as I was. I almost didn't want to leave to come home and pack. When Shyrón reminded me that he would be paying for my relocation, I almost danced in excitement.

He paid my deposit and first month's rent in my new place, he hired the movers to get my things, and he made a deposit to my account for traveling expenses, fuel, and food. The man was on it, and I would have been a fool to turn down his help. However, I knew a time would come where he would do something that I would have to look the other way about. When we talked this morning about my defunct date with Dylan, he expressed the relentless urge to choke that chick.

He tried convincing me that Dylan had been lowkey for the past few months and trying to get his life together after this mishap... that he was really trying to do what was right. Skyler didn't seem like the type to bullshit anybody, although I knew he probably did in our line of profession. He didn't seem to be bullshitting me though. He said once Dylan found out that Chanell was pregnant, it scared his ass straight, even before he knew that it could possibly be his.

I wanted to believe him, and I partly did, but Dylan would have to show and prove. While I wanted to be completely done with him, my heart wouldn't allow me to be. I was angry, embarrassed, and I felt stupid. My fresh start had started with drama. I didn't like that at all. However, it was a lesson learned. *Take your time, Skyler. Good things come to those who wait.* The situation was too rushed, but as hard as I tried, I couldn't forget how I felt. Whether it was real or game, he made me feel like I deserved to be loved and cherished.

While I knew I deserved those things from a man, it was a totally different thing to feel it. After a couple of hours, Dylan had made me feel that and more. All of that couldn't have been a game. *Could it?* How did he make it feel so real to me? I'd gotten to town with a business mindset, promising myself that I wouldn't let this type of foolery get in the way or cloud my path. He made me forget all about that within a matter of minutes. *Jesus 2.0 my ass. More like Satan 3000.*

When I pulled into my apartment complex, my mama was already there waiting for me. She was excited to hear every detail about my trip. After I told her that I would go to her house tomorrow, she insisted on coming to my place today. I needed time to get my feelings together. Although I had last night to do that, it seemed my mind wouldn't stop analyzing the shit. I took a deep breath then got out of my car to pretend that all was well in my world. It would have been if I wouldn't have lost my damn mind over Dylan Berotte.

“Hey, Skyler! How did it go, baby? I want every detail.”

Shiiiiid. She thought she wanted every detail. I was more than sure she wouldn't want to know how my pussy drooled when Dylan entered the room or how euphoria inhabited his

kisses. I put on my brightest smile when I turned to her and said, “It was great! It’s going to be amazing working for Shyrón Berotte. The man is paying for my move, and I signed a working contract for a year. That came with a five grand signing bonus. I don’t know what he sees in me, but I’m grateful for it.”

“He sees everything I’ve always seen. You’re amazing, smart, and you crave justice for black people. That’s enough to deserve everything he’s given you plus some. Now, is he responsible for the sadness in your eyes too?”

My lips parted. I should have known I couldn’t hide a thing from her. I shook my head and walked over to her and kissed her cheek. She followed me to my apartment quietly, and when we got to the door, she gently rubbed my back as I unlocked it. She was going to pull all the emotions from me if she kept that up. It didn’t take much with my mama or Lexi. The two of them were my besties who I talked to about everything.

Once we walked inside, she sat on the couch and watched me get settled. After I brought my bag to my room, I came back to the front room and sat across from her. “Mr. Berotte, or Shyrón as he told me to call him, took me to his family barbeque yesterday. He has quite a few brothers. One of them caught my attention, and I caught his. He’s the most gorgeous man I have ever seen.”

I brought my hands to my face out of embarrassment, then lowered them. “I kissed him. I was feeling things for him that I shouldn’t have been feeling so quickly. It’s hard to describe, but it was like, in that moment, no one else mattered. Whenever he was near, he was all I saw. It seemed it was the same way for him... like an instant connection and attraction. His name is Dylan Berotte. Although I’d told myself on my way to Beaumont that this could be a fresh start for me, getting away from Jaxton, that all went out the window the moment I laid eyes on him.”

I could see the emotion in my mother’s eyes as she asked, “So what happened, baby?”

“We talked, danced, and enjoyed one another. He took me for a ride in his old school Cadillac. I was in heaven. He even let me drive it. Dylan constantly held my hand. It was like he had to touch me in some way whenever we were close. And his touch... Lord have mercy, Mama. I’ve never felt anything like it. So, he asked me out for drinks. I agreed. While I’m not naïve, it felt like he was perfect for me, and he confessed to feeling a strong attraction between us. That dream shattered as soon as some chick approached his car asking why he hadn’t been to the hospital to see his baby.”

My mom’s eyes widened, and her mouth opened. That was the exact expression I’d made when that woman approached us in the parking lot last night. It was the last thing I expected. I knew better though. I didn’t know Dylan, but I’d gotten way too comfortable with him. She lifted her hand to her chest, but she didn’t say anything. I supposed she was waiting for me to finish telling her what happened before she offered any words.

“The woman was yelling at him, and he looked like he was just over it. This was something that had been going on that he chose to keep me in the dark on. She said he was a ho pretty much. He apologized and promised that what I felt between us wasn’t a game... that his feelings were real. He said he’d never expressed feelings like he had to me because he’d never had them for another woman. I lit into his ass, and he just let me be. He took me back to my hotel, and that was it.”

“Did you talk to Mr. Berotte about it, since that’s his brother?”

“He said Dylan had called him that night and told him what had happened. He admitted that Dylan was a fuckboy pretty much. Sorry for my language, Mama. He also said that Dylan had been trying to get his life together after learning that he could possibly be a father. He’s been begging for a DNA test that the woman seems to be dragging her feet about. She insists that he’s the father. Apparently, the person she thought was the father wasn’t, and Dylan is the only other option. The whole thing just makes me exhausted.”

She took a deep breath and slowly shook her head. “Maybe y’all should have taken more time to get to know one another

before going out.”

“That’s what Shyrón said.”

“Baby, if you feel like your feelings were valid, then take things slow and see how this plays out.”

“If he’s the father of that baby, that would be the nail in the coffin. I wouldn’t be able to deal with that woman. She was ghetto as hell, and from what Shy said, she’s a teacher and is married. She thought her husband was the father because Dylan always used protection. When she said that he went to the hospital to see the baby and he didn’t deny it, that was it for me. Why would he go see a baby that he didn’t think was his?”

“Curiosity, baby. Maybe he wanted to see if the baby even resembled him.”

“Whatever. I refuse to be a fool again. If things develop over time and he proves that I can trust him, then we’ll revisit.”

My mama nodded in agreement, but I could tell that her wheels were turning. We sat there quietly for a moment, then she said, “How long has he been trying to get his life together?”

“Shyrón said five months. He has been celibate for five months.”

“And how often did he have sex before?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t care to know all of that. I assume he didn’t go long without it though for five months to be a big deal. I haven’t had sex since before Jaxton and I broke up.”

She stood from her seat and said, “Just keep your heart receptive to him. I don’t feel like he’s a bad person just by what you’re telling me. It was the first day. Maybe he didn’t know how to tell you.”

“Same excuse he came up with. If he could put his tongue down my throat, he could’ve told me that it was possible that he could have a baby on the way.”

“But why even complicate things from the beginning if he isn’t sure?”

“So I wouldn’t have been blindsided by what happened! Mama, please don’t make it seem like I’m overreacting. This shit is bad,” I said as I stood from my seat as well.

“I just don’t want you to miss out on something special by a technicality. He’s not Jaxton, baby. Don’t be ignorant, but don’t project someone else’s mistakes onto him either.”

I remained quiet, trying to figure out why she was taking Dylan’s side, and she didn’t even know him. Maybe I portrayed him to be so perfect until that default. He was *everything* before the parking lot incident. He was so affectionate and sensitive with me... almost vulnerable to a certain extent. Maybe the torment I saw in his eyes earlier that day had been this very thing. Knowing that he could have possibly fathered a baby with that woman was eating him alive. After taking a deep breath, I asked her, “Would you help me pack?”

“Of course.”

She let the conversation of Dylan go, and we talked strictly about the law firm and how excited I was to be amongst like-minded professionals. They were so down to earth too. That made the atmosphere extremely relaxed, and I loved that. I was sure that there were days that were intense around the office, and I couldn’t wait for it. If everyone was passionate about what they did, no one would be able to prevent it from getting that way. That intensity could also serve as motivation to stay on my shit.

As we talked, we filled two suitcases with clothes. My apartment would be ready as early as Wednesday. Patricia Fontenot was always my saving grace. She knew me almost as well as I knew myself. My mother offered the best advice, but I wasn’t sure if I would be able to take it this time. Entertaining Dylan could be a huge risk. I wasn’t the type to lay down and just accept things the way they were, which was one of the reasons why I became a lawyer.

I was a fighter, and had that woman come at me wrong, they would have seen a side of me that I didn't even like at times.

AS I PICKED UP BOXES, it felt like someone was watching me. However, I pushed forward. I wanted to come in this store, get what I needed, and get gone. I only had my kitchen left to pack. Once I was done with it, I would be leaving the very next day. Since it was still early, I was hoping to be done packing today. The moving company was on reserve for tomorrow, Friday, and Saturday. Lexi had come over yesterday and helped me finish packing up my wall art, and we'd had drinks and enjoyed one another's company. She would be joining me in Beaumont over the weekend to help me get settled.

I'd also talked to her about Dylan. Surprisingly, she agreed with mama, but she said she understood my point as well. After my history with Jaxton, she could understand why I was being cautious. Plus, the drama sounded too ghetto for my tastes. I'd rolled my eyes at that last remark, but she was right. I didn't deal with stupidity. That shit was beneath me. I didn't think Dylan was stupid, but he definitely made a stupid decision to fuck around with that woman.

Once I got to the register, I knew exactly why I felt like I was being watched. Jaxton was right in front of me with some woman. My heartrate picked up a bit as he spoke. "Hello, Skyler. How are you?"

"Hello. I'm great. How about you?"

"Same. I see you're purchasing boxes. Are you moving?"

Instead of telling him that it was none of his god damn business, I obliged him with an answer. "Yes. I got a new job in Beaumont, making more money with more benefits."

"That's good. I always thought you could do better than where you were. Good luck."

“Thank you.”

His woman kept stealing glances at me as they walked out. I was pleasantly surprised about our encounter. The weirdest part about it was I felt nothing. There was no connection, no exposed feelings, or anything like that. I even smiled at him. *Damn.* Maybe he *was* out of my system. Here I was... moving all the way to Beaumont for a fresh start, and I could get that here. Then my brain started working overtime. *Thoughts of Dylan have taken his place.*

That was some crazy shit for me to think. I was with Jaxton for a while. There was no way Dylan had somehow erased everything I once felt for the man. Was my connection with Jaxton that weak, or was my connection with Dylan just that strong? Unfortunately, I knew it was a combination of both. Toward the end of my relationship with Jaxton, I knew that something wasn't right, and as I'd heard many people say, a woman left emotionally before she left physically. That was definitely the case with me.

However, if I was already feeling this way for Dylan, he was worth the risk. I'd been hanging on to thoughts of Jaxton and our past for an entire year, only for Dylan to erase that bullshit after only being around him for one day. The possibility of him putting on was unfathomable. What I felt couldn't be fake. If it was, then he really had to be Satan in the flesh. I believed he was sincere in what he told me he was feeling, and if he was, I knew I had better prepare myself for his advancements when I got back to town.

After paying for my things and walking to my car, I noticed him loading their boxes in an SUV. Thankfully, I didn't need a whole lot of them... only small cube boxes and bubble wrap. I loaded my stuff in the trunk of my car, then headed home, ready to start my new journey... my job and even possibly getting to know Dylan as well.

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Dylan

I'D JUST GOTTEN to my dad's house, and I noticed Shy, Chad, and Isaiah were already here. I'd stayed after school to plan for the school's basketball team. DJ turned in right behind me. I wasn't sure what was going on. My dad had sent a text, asking all of us to meet at his house this evening. I didn't see Alexz's car, so I wondered what was going on. That fuck nigga, Knowledge, had gotten sentenced already and was having to do ten years for attempted murder and conspiracy to commit murder. I didn't think this meeting had anything to do with that.

When I got out, I noticed Jamel was with DJ. "What's up, bruh? I didn't know you were in town," I said.

"Yeah. I got in earlier. After I found out we were coming here, I figured I would holla at you when I got here."

"A'ight. We gotta hit up Pour before you leave," I said as my thoughts went to Skyler.

I didn't know how it was possible to miss something you never had, but I was missing the hell out of her already. It had been hard not reaching out. Sunday, I was completely quiet and moping all day. No one picked on me... not even Chad. The past couple days had gone by in a blur, and I'd kept myself busy by staying at work late. Thankfully, Chanell hadn't returned yet. I should have told them that she was able

to go out and have a good time, so she should have been able to return to work, but that wasn't my style.

When we got inside, I noticed the tray of wings and cheese dip on the bar. I greeted everyone after walking in, then found my dad. "What's up, Dad?"

"Hey, son. How was your day?"

"It was okay. What about yours?"

"It was good."

I went back to the bar and fixed myself a plate as Axton and Arrow walked in. Everybody was here. *What in the hell is going on?* We all slapped hands, greeting them, then they fixed plates as well. Although Arrow was Axton's brother, he was practically family as well. He and Jamel were the tightest since they both lived in Houston. I hung out with them when I could, but lately, I'd been keeping to myself for the most part. They represented the life I had let go of. I was no longer on the hunt. I was searching for something different now, and I knew that Skyler was who I'd been searching for.

Once everyone had gotten something to eat, Shy came and sat next to me and asked, "You good?"

"Yeah, I'm straight."

"Skyler will be here tomorrow. She got everything packed early."

My eyes widened, and I seemed to perk up almost immediately. There was nothing I could do while she was in Dallas, but I could do plenty to show her how serious I was if she was close. "Is it cool if I send flowers to the office next week? I know she probably won't be going in until Monday."

"She's actually planning to come in Friday. So send them then. That should brighten her day. Listen... I know what I said before. But now, you need to go after what you want. She knows your biggest secret. Speaking of which, I haven't been able to catch up with Chanell's ass, but I got something for her. She's only at the hospital early in the morning. I'm gon' fix her ass though. I'm gonna call her ass from the hospital."

I slowly shook my head. She wanted to draw this out, thinking that I would give in because I wanted to be in the baby's life. I knew her gold digging ass. She couldn't file child support on me because I hadn't signed the birth certificate. There was no proof of paternity. I was more than sure Luke hadn't signed it either. I just wanted to be done with all her bullshit.

Before I could respond to him, Dad took the floor. "Hey, y'all. Thanks for coming over on short notice. I wanted to talk to y'all about me and Anissa's wedding. As you know, all of you won't be able to be in it. Anissa doesn't have many friends. So besides Alexz and Anissa's friend Yolanda, that's about it. If I could have all of y'all in it, I would. DJ and Jamel will be walking their mother down the aisle. So Isaiah, I would like you to be my best man. Had it not been for your help when your siblings were young, I don't know how I would have made it."

We all nodded in agreement. Isaiah definitely deserved that spot. He was like a second dad to us. I pretty much knew that Chad would be the other groomsman. If he wasn't, I would be surprised. None of us would feel slighted if we weren't in the wedding. We all knew that Dad loved us. "As much as it pains me to do so, Chad, I would like you to be in the wedding as well. No damn barking or acting an ass."

We all laughed as Chad hopped around like he was the champ of something. The nigga was just childish as hell, but he made for good entertainment sometimes. After he settled down, Dad continued. "You're making me regret this decision already. But no, seriously, you were a huge help to me as well. Plus, it was because of you and DJ that Anissa and I even met. If Anissa adds anyone else, I'll let you all know. Shy you would be next, then of course, you, baby boy."

I nodded and gave him a smile. Seeing my dad get to this point was surreal. All the time he'd gone without so that we could have, was something that would always be with me. It wasn't for financial reasons that he needed to do that, but emotionally. I never realized I was missing a mother until I got to school. My dad's love was enough. When Axton stood from

his seat, I frowned slightly. He walked over to Dad and shook his hand then hugged him.

After clearing his throat, he said, "I would like to ask Alexz to marry me."

"Nigga, for real? You love her mean ass that much?" Chad asked.

He chuckled, and I could see his nerves dissipate some. I knew that was why Chad said that. I could damn near see him trembling from where I was seated. He had to know that we wouldn't say no. "I know it's soon, but I mean, I've known for a while that she was it for me. When I asked Mr. Sheldon, he told me that I needed to consult y'all too."

I smiled slightly at my dad then stood and shook Axton's hand. "She couldn't have done any better. I'm wit' it."

He smiled at me as my brothers followed suit. One day, this could be me, asking for someone's permission to marry their daughter. My time wishing for love was cut short when my phone started vibrating. Pulling it from my pocket, I saw it was Chanell. I slightly rolled my eyes and opened her message to see a picture of her and the baby doing skin to skin. Had she not been giving me hell, I would be able to admit how beautiful the picture was. Although I hated to sound insensitive, I had to ask. *When do I need to come up there for the DNA test?*

I refused to even respond to the picture. Zooming in, I tried to get a good look at Nixon, but with the way she had him positioned, it was hard to. The only thing I could tell was that he was dark complexioned like me. That didn't determine paternity though. There were a million and one niggas with dark skin. Her text came through. *That's all you ever have to say, nigga?*

Her response infuriated me. I began swiping my keyboard quick as hell. *Hell fucking yeah. I'm not getting invested emotionally or otherwise without knowing for certain. The reason yo' ass refusing to do it is because you know there's a possibility he's for someone else. So quit playing games with me. If he's my son, I'm missing out on valuable time with him.*

I'm trying to give you time to do this the right way before I get the courts involved. Quit fucking with me and schedule the damn test.

I wanted to throw my fucking phone. When it vibrated again, I just knew it was her, but it was a message from Luke. I looked up at the ceiling and huffed. “Yo, what’s up?” Shy asked.

“Luke just messaged me. Chanell’s husband, soon-to-be ex-husband.”

“What the fuck he want?”

“I don’t know. I’m about to find out.”

When I opened the message, I rolled my damn eyes. This nigga was really about to waste his time. *I’m filing a grievance against you with Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity to have your membership stripped. You broke the bruh code, and there’s no excuse for that.*

I couldn’t even repeat the shit, so I handed the phone to Shyrón. When he cursed aloud, everyone turned to us. He waved them off, but they didn’t buy that it was nothing as he was trying to make it seem. “He can’t have you kicked out. If that were the case, there wouldn’t be any more frats in existence. He’s wasting his time. Plus, I sit on the fucking council. He didn’t need to bring shit to everybody’s attention though.”

“I figured as much.”

Just that fast, I was in a fucked-up mood. Instead of trying to socialize my way out of it, I decided to eat my way out of it. Standing from the couch, I made my way to the food trays and loaded my plate with wings as Isaiah joined me. “This is only a season, bruh. Don’t give up. Stay the course, and all this bullshit will pass. I promise you.”

Looking up at him, I gave him a tight smile. “Thanks, Zay. I appreciate you.”

My dad was watching me as I moved around the kitchen, but I refused to share anything with him right now. Seeing him

so happy touched my soul. As I ate my food, Chad asked Ax, "So when do you plan to ask the demon to be your wife?"

Axton chuckled. He knew that Alexz could be the devil incarnate at times. Their first acquaintance was quite salty. "I was thinking about doing it Sunday while everyone's here."

"Just make sure you let me be the one to distract her ass," Chad added.

"I couldn't think of a better person, bruh," Axton replied, still chuckling between his words.

Neither could I. Chad got on Alexz's last nerve most days. As everyone began talking amongst themselves, Arrow came and sat next to me. I was sure he was just here to support Axton. He was normally working during the week. I knew he didn't take the hour and a half trip after work and then plan to go back tonight also. Arrow hated driving. "What's up, bruh? Can you believe they're wanting to get married already?"

"Hell yeah," I responded. After chuckling, I continued. "They've been living together for a month now. If they haven't killed each other, then they must love each other."

Arrow laughed. "You right about that, bruh. So what's up with you? You looked a lil heated earlier."

"Just some shit I'm going through with Chanell's ass."

"Man, that bitch still fucking wit'chu?"

"Hell yeah."

After I ran the story down to him, he could only shake his head. Honestly, I was tired of talking about the shit. "Well, we ought to go out tonight. I know it's a weeknight, but you look like you could use a drink. I'm not leaving until morning to head back."

"A'ight. Sounds like a plan."

"I'll be damned. I'm surprised you wanna go anywhere. You done kicked me and Mel to the curb. Let me go tell him before you change your mind."

I chuckled, but that shit had been intentional. Hopefully, tonight wouldn't prove to be a mistake, because the last thing I needed to do was fall off in random pussy.

I WATCHED them have a good time, approaching women like it was nothing. Jamel and Arrow were in rare form. It was like they were going overboard to make me slip back into the seventh circle of hell or something. I hadn't seen an unattractive woman yet, which was tempting as hell. The only thing I could think about was making things right with Skyler and getting Chanell's ass to schedule that fucking DNA test though. As I sipped my Hennessy, a beautiful woman sat at the bar next to me. I couldn't help myself. I had to scan her body because that shit was banging. However, the minute I did, I felt guilty as hell, like I was cheating on Skyler. *What the fuck?*

After she ordered her drink, she glanced over at me. I was the world's best at appearing nonchalant and unbothered, even if I was about to explode on the inside. I didn't look at her again until she said, "Hello."

I turned to her, and she smiled. I nodded my head and said, "How you doing?"

"Good. Umm... I'm Felina. And you are?"

She held out her hand, so I shook it gently. "Dylan."

The bartender gave her the drink she ordered, and after taking a sip, she asked, "You come here often?"

"Naw. I've actually become quite the homebody. My boys wanted to go out tonight while they were in town, so here I am."

She giggled. *A weird sounding ass giggle.* "I'm here for the same reason. My girls wanted to go out knowing that I have to go to work tomorrow. I used to be down with the scene, but I've grown, and they haven't. I just feel like a third

wheel tonight. I only came so I didn't have to hear their mouths about me not being any fun anymore."

This woman had to be the female version of me. That was the exact same reason I was here. Maybe she was sent to sit next to me for a reason deeper than I originally thought. She continued talking. "I came tonight, but I refuse to let them drag me back to where I came from. I rose from it, and I refuse to go back. The games they play with people's hearts... the games *I* used to play aren't what interest me anymore, and it makes me sick to my stomach knowing what a horrible person I used to be."

I nodded then sipped my drink, letting her words permeate my soul. Jamel and Arrow were doing their thing as if I wasn't here. Why did they even want me to come along? Turning to Felina, I said, "I think you're the female version of me. I would much rather be at home getting ready for work tomorrow. I'm not who I used to be either. Although it hasn't been long since I used to enjoy this foolery, I'm feeling so out of place."

"Hmm. Don't let them halt your progress. Let's make a pack." She angled her body toward me, and I did the same. "We will no longer feel pressured to do something we don't want to do. If they can't understand our growth, then that's on them, not us. Maybe it isn't their time yet, but they will *not* stifle our growth into becoming better human beings. We will continue the path God has us on, and we won't regret a moment of our glow up."

I smiled slightly then shook her outstretched hand. "Thank you for the confirmation. I know I'm on the right path to bettering myself, but hearing a stranger confirm it makes all the difference."

"Now beware... there will be opposition. I don't mean just with your friends and family. Whenever you are trying to do what's right, the enemy attacks harder. He doesn't want to lose you, and you've slipped from his grasp. He's desperate and will do whatever he can to destroy you and the future you that you're trying to build. Don't give up no matter what, even

when you can't see a good outcome. Remain positive, and I promise things will work out the way they are supposed to."

When I realized I was still holding her hand, hanging on her every word, I allowed it to slip from my hand. She smiled then turned to gulp her drink. I swallowed hard and did the same. "Well, it was nice meeting you, Dylan. I think you may have been the whole reason I was here tonight, so now it's time for me to go home. Maybe you should do the same."

I downed my drink and stood with her. "Yeah. Well at least let me walk you out."

She smiled again. "You don't want to tell your boys that you're leaving?"

"You don't want to tell your girls?"

She shrugged. "They won't miss me."

"Same."

I followed her out, making sure she got to her car safely, then opened her door for her. "Thank you for your words of wisdom. I'm glad I came here tonight. I needed the encouragement."

"You're welcome. Have a good night, Dylan."

"You too."

I closed her door once she got in and watched her drive away. I'd never seen that woman in my life, and I was almost certain that I would never see her again. She seemed angelic. We often entertained angels unaware, and I couldn't help but wonder if she was one. She never asked for my contact information nor did she even mention keeping in touch. She gave me words of wisdom that I'd only gotten from my dad and Isaiah... like she cared for me just that much, even though she didn't know me.

It was like her message came straight from God, and I planned to take heed to every word.

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S kyler

“WELCOME BACK!” the receptionist said excitedly.

I couldn’t remember her name, but I smiled politely and said, “Thank you! It’s good to be back.”

I seemed to be early because no one else was here. I’d gotten in town yesterday as planned, and the movers arrived yesterday evening. While I waited for them, I’d cleaned the apartment from top to bottom, sanitizing everything and making sure it smelled good. Once they arrived, I was able to unpack the bathroom and the kitchen. I was so tired when I finished, I slept on my bed without sheets. I’d grabbed a blanket and a pillow and passed out.

As I made my way to my office, I caught a glimpse of the most beautiful bouquet of flowers positioned in the middle of my desk. When I entered the room, I slowly made my way to it as I admired the roses, tulips, lilies, daisies, and baby’s breath. After sniffing them, I pulled the card from the stem to see my name scribbled on the outside of it but spelled wrong. *Skylar.*

I still smiled slightly at the gesture. My name was often misspelled this way, and I’d almost accepted it as an alternate spelling, since I couldn’t correct everybody that spelled it wrong. My hand was trembling as I opened the card, because I had a feeling of who they were from. The note was simple. It

read: *Welcome to Beaumont. I hope you will find satisfaction in your new job and pleasure in your new location. Dylan*

I took a deep breath and held the card to my chest. There were no pleas for me to hear him out or call him... not even a lunch invite. Every woman liked the chase, especially from a man she wanted anyway. I supposed him sending flowers was just that. It was his way of letting me know that he hadn't given up. I couldn't help but smile.

"Those are beautiful."

"I turned around to see Shyrón standing in the doorway with a slight smile. "Good morning, Skyler. How did the move go?"

"It's going. I still have a lot to do, but I'm happy to be here."

I turned my attention back to the flowers, then mumbled, "He did good."

"Well, I have a bag here from him. He told me to get you breakfast and told me what to get."

My eyes widened. I'd seen the bag and the coffee, but I thought it was for him. "Wow," I almost whispered.

"A vanilla latte and a boudin kolache. He said you expressed interest in tasting one. He also included two glazed donuts in case you didn't like it."

"Thank you."

I took the bag and coffee from him. Dylan had remembered our brief talk about some of our likes and dislikes. I told him that I loved all things vanilla. When he'd said that he loved boudin, I asked him if he'd ever had a boudin kolache. He expressed how much he loved them, and he promised to get me one to try. It was only my first real day here, and he was proving that he was a great listener. I'd kind of gotten that vibe from him when I was here over the weekend.

While everyone talked, he was quiet. Although he was playing on his phone, I knew he was soaking it all in. He was

the type you had to be careful around. It looked like he wasn't paying attention, but he was paying closer attention than the person in the actual conversation. I slowly walked to my chair and sat at my desk. After taking a sip of the latte, I was impressed. It tasted great. I'd have to find out where he'd gotten it from. It had just the right amount of vanilla.

As I took the boudin kolache from the bag, my stomach growled. I'd skipped breakfast because I was so excited to get here. When I heard a chuckle, I realized Shy was still standing there. My face heated up. After I'd taken the food from him, I'd forgotten he was even standing there. He grabbed my flowers and moved them to the side table by the window. "I'll be back in about thirty minutes so we can start going over some research."

"Okay. Thanks."

When he left, I immediately bit into that kolache, and my eyes rolled to the back of my head as I sat back in my chair. It was so good. In Dallas, I didn't get homemade boudin, only DJ's and some other knock-off brand. This boudin was amazing. I didn't know how I would eat all of it, but I surely would give it my best shot. Grabbing my phone, I pulled up Dylan's name and sent a simple text. *Thank you.*

He responded as if he had the phone in his hand, waiting for me to reach out. *You're welcome.*

I smiled slightly then put the phone down and went back to my breakfast. I wouldn't be good for a damn thing after this. It was so good. There was no way I would stop eating until it was all gone. Dylan had really come through this morning. He found the way to my damn heart without me even saying so. *Good food.* That was probably one of the ways to every woman's heart, especially from a man as sexy and sweet as Dylan. His drama still gave me pause. I needed to wait out the outcome of this paternity test.

In the meantime, I would—

I looked up to see Shy in my doorway. It couldn't have been thirty minutes yet. He confirmed that when he said, "I'm

sorry to bother you, but we're taking orders for lunch. The place we're eating at today serves a lil bit of everything."

"As if I can think about eating anything else right now," I said then took a sip of my coffee. "I'm not real picky, but give me a little bit to decide. Do you have a menu?"

"No, but you can go to their website."

Once he gave me the information for K-Asian and I pulled up the menu, the first thing I saw was lemon pepper wings. *Yes, lawd.* I stood from my desk after shoving the last bit of my kolache in my mouth, and when I saw Dylan standing there in wind pants and a t-shirt, my mouth went dry. I swallowed my food and smiled slightly. He walked away from Shy and approached me. "Hello, Ms. Fontenot. I hope your day has started well. I was just about to leave."

I nodded. "Hello, Mr. Berotte. It has. I hope you have a wonderful day."

He nodded back then went back to Shy and said, "Text me."

I watched him until he left the building before turning my attention to Shy. "I uhh... I wanted to tell you what I wanted."

He had a playful smirk on his face, and I felt like I was being set up. "Okay. What you got?"

"Lemon pepper wings. All flats if possible."

He frowned slightly. "I guess. Y'all women are weird. French fries or fried rice?"

I rolled my eyes and allowed them to close right after before responding. "God, my stomach is tight just thinking about it, but rice."

He chuckled as I thanked him and headed back to my office to think about how fine Dylan looked. Even dressed down with his whistle around his neck was sexy. His beard was shining, giving me all the damn feels, and his lips were hydrated and soft looking. My phone vibrated on my desk, and I saw it was a text from him. I opened it quickly, not wasting a moment.

I apologize for being at your place of employment. I had to drop off some info for Shy on my way to work. It won't happen again. I don't want to make you uncomfortable. You looked so beautiful.

I could never be uncomfortable in his presence... not in the way he was thinking. I was uncomfortable because my body was reacting to him like I didn't endure that bullshit Saturday night... like he didn't have a whole-ass crazy bitch after him. I responded, choosing my words carefully. *I wasn't uncomfortable. This is your brother's office. It's okay. Thank you.*

My mind was saying something totally different. *You looked good as hell, even in wind pants and a t-shirt. I believe you would look sexy as hell in whatever you wore. Come see me... uh-huh come to your brother's place of business any time you want.*

I sipped my coffee and took a bite of the donut as if I weren't already full. This man had me in another world. What I wouldn't give to slide my fingers through his beard. The sad part was that I knew he would let me do it. It almost seemed as if he would let me do whatever I wanted to. I waited a second longer to see if he would reply, and when he didn't, I grabbed Mr. Campbell's file and prepared to go to work.

"I'LL BE RIGHT BACK," Shy said in the doorway.

His face was completely red, and I wasn't sure what was going on. We'd finished our amazing lunch about an hour ago. I could barely function. All I could think about was sleep. However, we'd made significant progress on Mr. Campbell's case. We'd uncovered that this wasn't the first time his wife's family had accused someone of color of child abuse in their family.

His wife's sister was married to a black man. He was biracial... black and Latino. He was still in jail. He'd been there for seven years, long before Mr. Campbell married his

wife. It was like they were encouraged to marry outside of their race to get their spouses in trouble. It was crazy as hell. One thing that proved our theory was that none of their kids were biracial. They'd had kids from white men.

We had more research to do, but we had time. Our court date wasn't for another couple of weeks. I was ready to tackle the system, and we were even going to look into the other man's case pro bono. So, the day had been going well, which was why I didn't understand the look of frustration on Shyrón's face.

"What's going on? You need me to go with you?"

"It's Dylan. I gotta go to the school before he loses his job."

"I'm going too."

I quickly grabbed my purse and followed behind him. I didn't have a clue of what was going on, but when he said Dylan's name, I felt compelled to help. I was willing to bet it had something to do with that woman that was claiming she had a baby from him. My intelligent mind was starting to tell me that it wasn't his baby. She could schedule the test and prove herself right at any time. Why would she drag all this out unless she wasn't sure?

Shy didn't open the door for me, and I wasn't the least bit offended. I invited myself, and I could clearly see that he didn't play about his family. He hadn't said a word other than what he said in the office, so I asked, "Shy, what's going on?"

He glanced at me. "You can't look at him any differently. He's striving to become a different man. He's not who he was five months ago."

I nodded. I thought I'd seen the worst of it. *I guess not.* He continued. "Chanell, the woman that had the baby, is married. Her husband has been trying to get back at Dylan because he's frat. He's called the school district and exposed Dylan and Chanell's affair. Claimed that they'd been having sex at the school and all kinds of bullshit. Chanell, believe it or not, is a

teacher at the same school with Dylan. They've suspended him until they can investigate, and he's coming unglued."

"They can just do that based on what someone that wasn't involved says?"

"I don't know. I have to go over their ethics clause. I'm pretty sure they have one. My main agenda today is getting him away from that school before they fire him."

I nodded my understanding. My brain was trying to sift through the information I was given before we could get to the school. Dylan was fucking a married woman. She got pregnant, thought the baby was from her husband... or at least said it was, then had said baby only to figure out that it wasn't her husband's baby and was now giving Dylan hell. All he wanted was a DNA test. I could only shake my head at the drama this chick was putting him through. He was definitely at fault for sleeping with a married woman, but this was just some ho shit.

Her husband was literally trying to destroy him. It had to be more than them being frat on why he was so determined to make Dylan suffer. Something wasn't adding up, or I could have been overthinking it. Being an attorney always had me diving deep into reasoning, and some things just weren't that serious or that deep. Hopefully, this was one of those times.

When we got to the school and had gotten to the front office, I could see Dylan going back and forth with a lady. I was assuming she was the principal. We didn't wait for anyone to lead us to her office, although they called security. Shy was on something totally different, and I just followed his lead. He walked in that principal's office and hooked Dylan around his waist and pulled him right out of there.

By the time security got to where we were, we were coming out with Dylan. When he saw that I had come along with Shyrón, he shut his mouth. It was like he was embarrassed that I was seeing him this way. He had no reason to be, because he was fighting for his job and his good name. The principal held her hand up at the officers and allowed Shy to walk out with Dylan. I hung around for a second to see if

there was something she wanted to say. Sure enough, there was.

“Coach Berotte is one of my favorites in this school. The kids love him. My hands were tied. Had Chanell’s husband called the school, that would have been one thing, but he called administration. I had to do what they told me to do. I hate this as much as he does.”

I nodded then headed out to get to the car before I got left. Before I could get in the back seat good, Shy yelled at Dylan. “Get yo’ ass in the back seat. Maybe you’ll calm yo’ ass down.”

I swallowed hard. I hadn’t been this close to Dylan for an extended amount of time since the day we met. However, I knew he needed someone to lean on, not the tough love he was getting from Shy. He got out and slammed the door then sat in the back next to me. “You can be mad all you want. Accept responsibility for this shit! Had you not put your dick where it didn’t belong, you wouldn’t be going through this. So kill that fucking attitude,” Shy spat.

I couldn’t say a word. Shy was right, but it didn’t mean that Dylan couldn’t be angry about what was going on. He refused to look at me as Shy drove out of the parking lot. I kept my eyes on him though and noticed just how angry he was. He was flexing his jaw, so I knew he was clenching or grinding his teeth. After taking in a nervous, deep breath, I slid my hand on top of his and held it. For a moment, I thought he was going to jerk it away from me. He was just that bothered by today’s events. After a few seconds, he held my hand tightly then finally turned to look at me.

The intensity in his eyes nearly pulled my heart from my chest. While I wanted to pull away from him, I couldn’t. It was like his gaze was holding me captive. The shit was powerful. When he looked away, I could finally breathe. *Jesus*. He still had a grip on my hand, and I could feel his hand trembling. Bringing my other hand to our joined hands, I rubbed it soothingly, doing my best to ease his worry and his anger.

It was at this moment that I knew I would be here for him throughout this ordeal. Although he held some guilt in the matter, I felt he was truly the underdog and had been played real good by Chanell. I wanted to believe she even knew they were frat brothers. She was a dirty skank, but he was going to get through this with me by his side. Whether I would be just a friend or more had yet to be determined.

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Dylan

“THAT BITCH CAUSED ALL this shit! She knew I was coming to the hospital that day when Luke was there! She wanted him to know that it was me!”

“Sit the fuck down, Dylan! When will you accept responsibility for this shit?” Shyrón asked as my dad looked on.

I sat on the couch and rubbed my hands down my face. My nerves were on edge. Not to mention, I was completely embarrassed when I saw Skyler. She was the last person I was expecting to see. Although she worked for Shy, I just knew that she would want to be as far away from this situation as possible. When she held my hand all the way back to the office, she calmed me completely, only for Shy to get me all riled up again.

I didn't want to leave her presence, but Shy insisted on us coming to Dad's house instead of us discussing this at his office. As I thought about the fate of my job, Dad said, “Listen, son. You know I'm gonna always be here for you. We all are. But like Shy said, you have to accept responsibility for the part you played in all of this. You can't blow up about how he reacts to something you did. You fucked his wife. I mean, that shit he doing petty as hell, but again, you started it, and like Alexz always says... he's matching energies.”

I didn't respond to him, but his words reminded me of what Felina said at the bar last night. She told me that the enemy would attack. Well, she was right about that shit. He came at me, firing from all cylinders, threatening my livelihood. I couldn't keep losing my cool like this. I took deep breaths as I tried my best to calm down. "Y'all right. Where do we go from here?"

Shy stopped pacing and sat across from me as Dad squeezed my shoulder. "We get that paternity test done ASAP. I'm about to get a court order, because that bitch playing games, and I ain't got time to be playing wit' her ass or Luke for that matter. The council members of Kappa Alpha Psi called a meeting about this shit. Luke must have some serious pull, because we ain't never met about no shit like this. I gotta get on that Zoom call tomorrow afternoon."

I could only nod. This one bad decision was ruining me, and like Shy had said repeatedly, I had no one to blame but myself. It was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. I finally lifted my head and said, "I'm sorry, y'all. Can you take me to get my car, Shy?"

"Naw. You don't need to be on the premises. Me and Dad will go get it."

He held his hand out for my keys, so I reached in my pocket and got them. While I was doing my best to stay calm, I wanted to wild the fuck out. I wanted to go find Luke and fuck him up. It wasn't my fault he married a ho that didn't know how to keep her legs closed. She approached me... threw the pussy at me. As fine as Chanell was, any man would have taken advantage of that. I knew that didn't make it right, but man to man, he had to know the position I was in and that I didn't do this shit maliciously.

Once Shy and Dad left, I grabbed my phone and sent Skyler a text. *Thank you for being there for me today.*

I threw my phone to the table, went to Dad's liquor cabinet, got out his bottle of Crown, and took it to the head. Afterward, I put it back then went to my old bedroom. I lay across the bed, trying to forget that any of the bullshit was

going on. I'd never had sex with Chanell at the school. That claim was ridiculous, and once the district went through the footage, they would see that it was a lie. The sooner I could find out if the baby was mine, the sooner I could move on with my life.

“Yo, wake up. We got your car.”

I sat up from the bed. That Crown had put me to sleep nicely. I stretched then grabbed my keys from Shy's hand and left the room. When I got to the front, Mama Nissa was here. She came to me and hugged me tightly. “Your phone has been going off, baby.”

I kissed her cheek then went to the coffee table to get it. Had she not said anything, I would have forgotten it there. Once I scooped it up, I headed to the back door to leave. Before I could open the door, my dad put his hand on my shoulder. “It's gon' get better, Dylan. You know I'm here if you need to talk.”

“I know. Thanks, Dad.” I turned my attention back to the family room to see my brother, and said, “Thanks, Shy.”

I left the house and headed to my apartment feeling lower than I'd ever felt. The district had suspended me for three days, not counting today, since it was practically over. So I would be off Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of next week. I was sick about it. I took my career seriously. However, my personal life had spilled over into my professional life and fucked shit all the way up.

When I got home, I dropped my keys on the countertop and went straight to my bedroom. Before I could fall in bed, my phone was vibrating. When I pulled it from my pocket, I saw that it was Skyler calling. I really didn't feel like talking, so I allowed her call to go to voicemail. Afterward, I checked my text messages to see she'd responded to me earlier.

I wanted to be there. If you need anything, please reach out.

I flopped on the bed and lay there, staring at the ceiling, trying to figure out what I could possibly do to make things right. After careful thought, I came to the realization that at this point, all I could do was pray and hope for the best. My phone vibrated, indicating I had a text message. When I saw Skyler's name again, I quickly opened it.

I know you're at home. Answer the phone.

I closed my eyes and took deep breaths. I supposed it was too late to be embarrassed. Within a few seconds, she was calling again. After letting it ring twice, still warring with myself on whether I wanted to talk or not, I answered. "Hello?"

"What's your address?"

I frowned. *What she need my address for?* "Why?"

"Dylan, please give me your address," she said a little more sweetly... softly.

I gave it to her, and she ended the call without saying bye. Whatever she was up to had her totally distracted. She called right back, and that caused me to smile slightly. "Yeah?" I answered.

"I'm sorry I just hung up on you. It was an accident. I'm coming over."

That caused me to sit straight up in the bed. "Why?"

"Because... in the back seat of Shy's car... I just feel like you need me. I'm not coming to beat you up. I promise. Shy has done enough of that."

I swallowed hard, trying to process what she was saying. Did I even want her in my space right now with the way I was feeling? I was vulnerable as shit. As I remained silent for a moment, thinking about the little bit of time we shared at the barbeque that day and the feelings I had for her already, I said, "Okay."

"Okay. See you in a few minutes."

I quickly hopped up and went to the front, making sure it was presentable. After spraying air freshener, I took a quick

shower to make sure I didn't still smell like my day. I moisturized and oiled my beard and wrapped my head with my wave cap. By the time I was done, she was ringing my doorbell. I was nervous about her being here, because I didn't want to offend her in any way. Restraining myself was difficult around her, and with me feeling so vulnerable, I knew I could go too far.

After taking a deep breath, trying to calm myself down, I opened the door. She looked beautiful in her leggings, flip flops, and oversized shirt. She had her hair wrapped with a scarf and a tote on her shoulder. She smiled as I invited her inside. Once I closed the door, I turned to her and said, "Hey."

I shoved my hands in the pockets of my sweats, trying to resist the urge to touch her. "Hey."

"Come on in."

I led her to the couch where she immediately made herself at home. She kicked off her flip flops and pulled some fuzzy socks from her tote. I smiled slightly as she put them on. She turned to me and asked, "You good?"

"As good as can be expected."

"I know it's hard, but try not to let this shit change your frame of mind. That confident Dylan that I met last weekend needs to be confident in this moment as well."

I nodded repeatedly as she grabbed my hand and leaned against me. My body heated up slightly as I pulled my hand away from her then put my arm around her. I couldn't help but kiss her forehead. She smelled so damn good. "What made you want to be here for me? I'm sure I'm not the man you thought I was."

"You need someone to lean on without all the words. While your past actions caught me totally off guard, I believe that you are the man I met last weekend. For that woman to be so adamant about *not* getting the DNA test, she knows that most likely it isn't your baby. I understand why you didn't tell me."

I wanted to tongue the fuck out of her. Instead, I pulled her closer and inhaled her scent. She turned to me and put her hand to my face, sliding her fingers through my beard. I closed my eyes and licked my lips. I wasn't wrong about her... She was who I needed, and maybe my timing wasn't off. She was the one who would help me through this bullshit. I opened my eyes and kissed her forehead again. "Thank you, Skyler."

"Mm hmm. Now, I need you to pop us some popcorn. I know you have Netflix, right?"

"Yeah. You tryna Netflix and chill?"

"Yeah, without the hidden agenda. I really wanna watch a movie, eat popcorn, drink whatever you have in your fridge, and cuddle. Is that cool?"

I bit my bottom lip as I stared at her. When I saw her do the same, I knew I could go for it. I leaned in and kissed her pretty lips, allowing it to linger a bit. I closed my eyes as I rested my forehead against hers. Her kiss was everything I ever wanted to feel from a woman, and I knew I would never get enough of her lips. "That's cool as hell," I said when I pulled away from her.

She smiled then pulled a bag of popcorn from her tote. I chuckled as I gave her the remote to find something she wanted to watch. Before walking away, I turned back to her and said, "Nothing romantic. Stick with comedy. That's safe."

She gave me a slight smirk. I knew that she understood exactly where I was coming from. Being next to her, holding her in my arms, was hard enough without getting carried away. I didn't need inspiration. Making my way to the kitchen, I adjusted my dick. He was wanting to show out. Somehow, I had to subdue his ass so he didn't have me looking like a fool and have Skyler feeling uncomfortable. I loved how comfortable she felt here.

As the popcorn popped, she asked, "Well, this isn't a comedy, but it's a classic action film. *Air Force One*."

I looked up at the TV and said, "That's cool."

After getting two bottles of water from the fridge, I grabbed the popcorn from the microwave and went back to her. She smiled slightly. “I forgot you’re a personal trainer. You wouldn’t have fruity drinks.”

I chuckled softly. “Naw. Water and beer. You don’t look like a beer type of woman. Maybe wine or a hard drink every now and then. If you want liquor, I got that.”

“If I drink the hard stuff, then we might as well watch a romantic film.”

I held her gaze as I licked my lips. Watching her chest rise and fall wasn’t helping. *Calm down, Dylan. Don’t fuck this up.* I cleared my throat and looked away from her as she started the movie. I set the popcorn between us as the silence drowned us. Suddenly, Skyler paused the movie. “Dylan, I know you’re vulnerable right now, but I really want to be close to you. If you try to go too far, I know how to stop you.”

“I’m sorry, but listen. I’m going to go too far because I’m feeling the fuck out of you. So why would I even put myself in that position? You feel me?”

She picked up the popcorn and moved it to the other side of her and scooted closer to me. If that wasn’t a greenlight, then I didn’t know what the fuck it was. As I stared at her, I slid my hand up her arm to her neck. She tilted her head back as she maintained my gaze, and my dick felt like it nearly doubled in size. I didn’t just want to fuck her though. If my dick slid within her walls, she would belong to me.

I squeezed slightly and said, “You playin’ with fire. I will fuck the shit out of you in here. I’m trying to show you the respect you deserve, but I don’t have a problem slutting you the fuck out.” I kissed the tip of her nose then her soft lips. “Tell me that’s what you want, Skyler, and I’ll give you some shit you’ll never forget.”

Her body trembled as she stared at me. It was like her tongue was frozen because she hadn’t said a word, but I could see the goosebumps on her exposed shoulder. Leaning in, I softly kissed her lips, and as soon as she parted them, I slid my tongue inside. She had better say something to stop me soon if

this wasn't what she wanted. My dick was reaching the point of painful, and it wouldn't be long before I had her bouncing on my shit.

I released her neck, and just as I was trying to pull away, she grabbed ahold of my beard and wouldn't let go. The way we began kissing sloppily, exchanging saliva without a care in the world, had me leaking in my damn sweats. When she pulled away, separating our kiss, she was panting heavily like she'd run a marathon. I bit my bottom lip, remaining quiet to see what she would say. "I've wanted you since I laid eyes on you, even though I told myself I was here to get a fresh start. Until seeing you, I said that I would never dive all the way in with a man. That I would take things slow."

She put both her hands to my face again and continued. "But everything about your sexy ass calls out to me. It's like I can feel the longing of your soul. I know that shit sounds crazy, but even with the bullshit that's going on, I can't fight it. I've been thinking about you all week. My soul craves you too, Dylan."

So I guess there *was* a hidden agenda in Netflix and chill. I pulled her to my lap by her leg, causing her to straddle me. As I caressed her thighs, I watched her take a nervous breath in. "Skyler, tell me what you want me to do. I'll do whatever you wanna do."

She closed her eyes for a moment, then she said, "Slut me the fuck out, Dylan."

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S kyler

DYLAN GRIPPED my ass as he kissed my neck slowly, and I just knew I was going to detonate in my panties. The way he was taking his time with me was bringing me to heights unseen. When I said for him to slut me out, I thought he would immediately pick me up and take me to his room to fuck my life up. He was showing me something different right now, but I knew my moment of reckoning would come, and something told me that I wouldn't be able to handle it. He was way more experienced than I was, and I was anticipating the lessons he would teach.

His hands traveled under my shirt and slid up my back as he pulled away to just stare at me. *Those eyes.* Dylan's eyes were so fucking expressive, and his dark lips were begging for me to suck them. However, the most attention-grabbing thing about him was the pipe I was feeling beneath me. I couldn't believe I was going here with him, but then again, I could. When I decided to call him, I knew I would end up giving in to what my body craved. So I supposed I did have a hidden agenda.

Dylan's aura was powerful, and I could see why women went crazy over him. What made this moment special to me though was that Jesus 2.0 felt the same way about me. There was something about me that he couldn't stay away from... that he couldn't get enough of. I watched him lick his lips as

my hips instinctively began to grind against him. “Mm. You’re so beautiful, Skyler.”

I didn’t respond verbally. I only lifted my arms as he lifted my shirt over my head. After tracing the tops of my breasts with his fingertips, his hands traveled behind me and unfastened my bra. The second it loosened, he slid the straps from my shoulders, then gently grazed my nipples with the palms of his hands. I closed my eyes as I enjoyed his exploration of my body. When he sat up, I opened my eyes to watch him pull off his shirt.

His chains landed on his chest, and so did my hands. He had a thin layer of soft, straight hair on it that only increased his masculinity in my eyes. Normally, I wasn’t a fan of chest hair, but with as soft as his was, it didn’t bother me in the least. While staring up at me, he gripped my hips and roughly grinded me on his dick, causing me to nearly cum on myself. Breaking his gaze away from mine, he lowered his mouth to my nipple and teased it with his tongue before pulling it into his mouth.

A soft moan fell from my lips as I ran my hand down the back of his head, pulling his do-rag off. He switched to the other nipple, giving it an equal amount of attention then suddenly stood up with me. I wrapped my legs and arms around him as he kissed my neck and shoulder, making his way to his room. Once we got there and he’d closed the door, he practically slammed me against it. My body trembled, but it wasn’t out of fear. I literally came on myself. My eyes closed as his stiffness rubbed against my clit through our clothes.

“Skyler, did you cum for me?”

“Yeeeessss, I’m cumming!”

“Shit. That’s so fucking sexy.”

He lowered his head to my nipple again and sucked it, intensifying my orgasm. When my tremors slowed, he brought me to the bed, laying me on it, and pulled off my leggings and panties. After throwing them to the floor, he spread my legs wide and stared at my pussy in wonderment. When his eyes lifted to meet mine, he said, “Skyler, I’m not letting this shit

go after this. Whatever problems arise, we just gon' have to work through the shit, or you gon' have to call the police on me for harassment."

Before I could utter a word, he yanked me to the end of the bed by my ankles and went to his knees, slowly devouring my pussy like it was a five-course meal from an upscale restaurant. When he moaned against my pussy lips, I thought I'd ascended into heaven. The man ate pussy like he loved it... like there was nothing else he would rather be doing. He never penetrated me with his fingers. He was all about satisfying me with his tongue first. That shit was beyond satisfying.

My body had begun trembling once again, and just as my floodgates were about to open, Dylan stopped, stared at my pussy, then lightly blew on it. It felt like my clit grew in size, but I didn't cum. I didn't know what the fuck he was doing, but it felt like I was about to explode. When he started patting my kitty with his fingertips, I could feel my orgasm surfacing. The moment he applied more force and slapped it, before I could ask what the fuck was wrong with him, my pussy squirted all over his chest.

"That's what I want to see. Next time just give it to me. Quit trying to hold that shit in."

He lowered his head back to my pussy, and I wanted to cry. I wanted to feel him inside of me so bad. As if reading my thoughts, he stood and pulled off his sweats then basketball shorts. When I saw that shit, I almost lost my damn mind. It looked like two king-sized Snicker bars molded into one. The smooth but veiny chocolate looked delectable. "You said you wanted to be slutted out, right?"

I didn't respond as he lay next to me and pulled me on top of him. He spun me around like I weighed nothing and put his dick right in my face. He popped my ass and said, "Open wide, lil mama."

Throwing caution to the wind, I did as I was told, and he lifted his hips, guiding his dick right into my mouth. When I felt his tongue in my ass, I shivered. The man was talented. The way he slow stroked my mouth had me enjoying it as

much as he was. I lowered my hands and massaged his balls with one and stroked the bottom of his dick with the other as he moaned into me and alternated from my ass to my pussy. I felt like I was about to lose it.

He began stroking my mouth faster, and I thought I was going to throw up on his ass. He smacked my ass hard and said, "What I told you about holding shit in? Drown me with that shit."

I didn't know how he knew I was holding it in, but that had become a habit. I self-pleasured a lot, and I found myself doing that to make it last longer. He dove back in as he gripped my ass and halfway killed me with his dick. I was starting to wish I didn't ask to be slutted out, because just as I thought, I couldn't handle the shit. Just when I thought I couldn't take anymore, I came hard.

I had to remove my mouth from his dick before I bit that shit. However, the second I did, he shot nut all over my breasts and face. I couldn't even be mad. I was pretty sure I had drowned him just like he asked me to. He practically threw me off him, and I heard his drawer open and close. Within a minute or so, he rolled me to my stomach and picked my hips up and entered me slowly. "Oh fuck!"

That was the loudest he'd gotten. I screamed as well as his dick stretched me open. "Dylan! Oh shit!"

He was only fucking me with the head of his dick, but that shit felt so damn good. "You creaming all over my shit. That's what I like to see."

I wiped my face on his bed then tried to lift my head. The moment I did, he pushed more of his dick inside of me and pushed my head back to the bed as I screamed. My eyes rolled to the back of my head as he gave me more. I no longer had control of my body, and I believed this was exactly how he wanted me. When he pulled out of me, I wanted to collapse. He lay in the bed and said, "Come on, Skyler. Come ride this dick, baby."

I slowly straddled him then lifted to slide down his dick. There was no way I would be able to take it all. The shit was

deadly... like an anaconda searching for its prey. When I got halfway down it, I was going back up. Dylan's eyes were penetrating my soul, but I refused to give up. I rolled my hips and took as much of him as I could. After a few strokes, I was able to take more. He sat up in the bed and held me around my hips as he kissed my chest and sucked my nipples.

He flipped us over, bringing me to my back and stared at me. I was so damn tired already. I'd cum at least three or four times, and I was just ready to sleep now, but Dylan had only cum once. I couldn't tap out on him that way. He reentered me slowly and took his time with me. I swore it felt like he loved me. He lifted my leg and slowly worked himself inside of me as I moaned and held him close by the back of his neck. He felt so good inside of me. "You taking all of me, baby. I knew you could do it," he said near my ear. He lifted his head to look at me, then his eyes rolled back, and he closed them. "Yeah... fuck!"

Somehow, he'd worked his entire dick inside of me. I didn't know how he did that without it being painful. I'd winced a couple of times when I was on top of him. I was more than sure he'd seen me. The last thing I wanted to do was disappoint him. "Dylan... I'm about to cum again. Shiiiiit!"

He began stroking me faster, and it felt like I was spraying the Nile River. The control he had over my body was amazing, and now that he had it, I knew hell would freeze over before he relinquished it. The way my body spit for him was just unnatural. I'd squirted before, but three times in one night? That was unheard of. "I'm about to cum, Skyler."

He leaned over me again, slowly kissing my lips and stroking my mouth with his tongue. When his body tensed up, I knew he was cumming. He pulled away from me and voiced his satisfaction. "Fuuuuuck!"

He stroked right through that shit, leading me into another orgasmic release. I arched my back and pulled him closer to me, scratching his back in the process. "Oh my God!" I cried out.

When the tears fell down my cheeks, I was in shock. I didn't know how he brought these types of emotions out of me, but I knew I wouldn't be able to get enough of him after this. I could only pray that this wasn't a game to him. I didn't feel like it was, but I couldn't be totally sure. He told me he didn't sell falsehoods to anybody, so when he said I belonged to him, my heart wanted to believe that. After this, he could have me whenever he wanted me. *Anytime, anyplace.*

When he stilled and his body relaxed on top of me, I continued to hold him close. I didn't want the night to end. I didn't want to be separated from him just yet. Dylan opened his eyes and stared into mine, not saying a word. He lowered his face to me and allowed his nose to rest against mine. I closed my eyes and relaxed in the intimacy. Feeling his warm breath against my face was giving me chills.

He lifted his body slightly and allowed his dick to slide out of me. He wasn't completely soft, and that pleased me. It meant he hadn't had enough. It was like that last part of our session gave me the energy to receive him yet again. After staring in my eyes again, Dylan said, "Give me permission to take you higher."

Higher? I felt like Soulja Boy when he was at The Breakfast Club. What was higher than where he'd just taken me? *Shit!* When I didn't respond, he said, "There's so many ways I can please you. You ain't quite ready to be slutted out. Let me get you there though, baby. Let me take you above the clouds," he said as he nuzzled my neck.

"I thought I was already there," I said softly.

"Naw. I wanna please you so much until you pass out from the intense pleasure. I want your body to literally tap out. You were holding back at first. Once you completely relax, the possibilities are endless, Skyler."

He lifted his head to stare at me. His gaze alone could have me cumming a river. My clit was on edge now. It was tingling more than it ever had. He stood and went to the bathroom then came back with a wet towel. After gently cleaning my face, he wiped his. His beard was soaked in my juices, and the hairs on

his chin were white with my secretions. That was so damn sexy.

As he stared at me, I broke my silence. “Just promise me that this is real. No games, right?”

He threw the towel to the floor then gave me a gaze so intense, I shivered. “I don’t say shit I don’t mean, Skyler. I want you more than anything. I’ve never felt for another woman what I already feel for you. Flowers? Breakfast? Lunch?”

I didn’t even realize he’d bought lunch too. I smiled slightly as he continued. “I ain’t ever bought shit for a woman. No lie. Condoms and hotel rooms. That was what I spent my money on. Maybe even alcohol or ganja at times. There weren’t ever gifts with sentiments behind it. I’m feeling the fuck out of you, girl. I’d never lie about no shit like that. So you can relax in this. I told you that you were mine. I mean the fuck outta that, so I hope you can handle it.”

I swallowed hard as I digested his words. After nodding, I sat up in the bed and grabbed his dick, pulling him to me, admiring the beauty of it. “When was the last time you were tested?”

“Five months ago. I haven’t had sex since Chanell. The papers are in my nightstand. I’ve always been careful, and the test proves that. Do you want to see them?”

For some reason, I trusted him. Until he gave me more of a reason not to, I would trust his words. He had no reason to lie to me... not about that, especially being that I knew of his past. I shook my head. “I don’t need to see them.”

“So what’chu gon’ do with this shit in your hand?”

I looked down at his dick and licked my lips. “I’m going to take my time with him and show you just how much I love sucking dick.”

“Mm. Well I need to be able to grab your hair. Can I take this wrap off?”

I chuckled. “I’m surprised it lasted this long. You can do whatever you want to do, Dylan. I trust you with me, so don’t

let me down.”

After gently pulling my wrap off and my straightened hair fell to my shoulders and in my face, he said, “I could never intentionally let you down, gorgeous.” He brushed the hair from my face as his dick hardened even more. “Now clear your mind and show me these fire skills. You gon’ mess around and have me shooting all over your face again.”

“Naw. That shit going down my throat this time. Get ready, baby.”

I teased the tip of his dick and sucked the head for a moment, then I took him as deeply as I could. I massaged his balls and started a slow rhythm as he stared down at me. Pleasing him was serious for me. He’d been with so many women. I wanted to please him so much until he forgot about all the others. I wanted to stand out like a seven-foot basketball player at a children’s ballet recital.

Once my mouth was good and juicy, I began hitting him with the technique, making sure my tongue massaged and circled his dick like a snake slithering on a tree branch. I released it briefly, rubbing it over my face then sucked his balls. That was when he threaded his fingers through my hair. His balls were sensitive. I paid more attention to them while stroking his dick. Using my fingertips, I applied pressure right beneath them, and he shot cum without warning. “Fuck!”

That shit landed everywhere... in my face and hair. Surprisingly though, I didn’t even give a damn. The fact that I made him cum that way only propelled me to suck the residuals from the head of his dick. He gripped my hair tighter as he said, “Skyleeeerrr... fuuuuck yes.”

His moans turned me on so much. The fact that his dick didn’t lose any steam surprised me, but I refused to stop until it did. I brought my fingers to my clit as I bobbed on his dick, gagging myself and making the noises associated with that and came all over my fingers. Somehow, I was able to keep going without biting the shit out of him. “I’m about to nut again, girl. You wanna swallow this shit?”

I kept going, indicating that he could turn loose his kids and let them run free. Every nerve in my body was wide open, and Dylan could get away with nearly anything now. Sucking dick always gave me that satisfaction, especially when I knew my partner was enjoying himself to the utmost. However, I had to be in control at first so I could get a good groove going. I liked to start slow. I couldn't just dive all the way in like earlier unless I was good and lathered up already.

Dylan's body tensed up, and I knew his load was about to grace me with its presence. My mouth watered even more as I anticipated it. His grunts got louder, and he placed his hands on either side of my face as I stared up at him. He bit his bottom lip and began fucking my mouth like he was in a pussy. I knew if he went any longer, I was gonna die with his dick in my mouth. When he growled loudly and released in my mouth, I came again... unassisted. This shit was insane. I couldn't hold his seed in my mouth, because my orgasm caught me completely off guard.

I swallowed some of his seed as the rest made its way down my chin and neck. The pleasure I felt was insurmountable, and I realized that I'd never felt anything like this in my entire life. Our sexual chemistry was through the roof, and now that we'd gotten even more comfortable in it, that shit was going to have me selfish and clingy as hell. After only an hour, I was sprung... a fiend of his dick... an addict of everything about Dylan Berotte.

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Dylan

“So, y’all made it official, huh? When did that shit happen?” Shy asked.

“She came to my house Friday night.”

His eyebrows lifted, causing me to chuckle. Skyler caught me way off guard. We fucked and sucked on each other well into Saturday morning. She wasn’t totally comfortable at first, but once she relaxed, that freak within her emerged and gave me everything I knew she had within her. Before it was all said and done, I was able to slut the fuck out of her ass. I was hitting that pussy so hard and deep, Saturday morning, she should have been gagging on my shit.

Being with her felt unlike any other. I’d been with a lot of women, but Skyler... something about her pulled at my soul, and I knew it upon first sight. Now that we had unexpectedly crossed into uncharted territory, there wouldn’t be any going back. After showering and washing her hair Saturday afternoon, she went home, but we were on the phone almost that entire night, with me begging her to come back.

She met me at my house this morning, and we came to Dad’s house for Sunday dinner. The moment we walked through the door together, everyone’s mouths hung open. For me to openly be with a woman was new for me, but I wanted to be around her constantly. Even now while I was talking to Shy, I was looking around the house to see where she’d gone.

“I like her for you, Dylan. Just be sure she’s who you want. Don’t play with her. She’s smart as hell, and I would hate to see what her petty, vengeful side looks like.”

“Whose petty side?”

We turned around to see Chad walking up on us. He put his arm around my shoulder. “We’re talking about Skyler. I was just telling him not to play with her, because I would hate to see what her petty side looks like,” Shy responded.

“I must say, Dylan, you are the last one I expected to settle down. It looks good on you though. Skyler is an attorney, so don’t mess up. I’m sure she knows ways to fuck yo’ ass up legally.”

He and Shy laughed as I rolled my eyes and continued looking around for her. “Quit looking for her. She’s in the back room with Mama and Alexz,” Jamel said as he joined us.

He slapped my hand, and I immediately thought about what Angel Felina said to me in the club about friends. Although I looked at him as my brother now, we hadn’t talked as much because we were going in different directions. “Dylan, you’re changing, bruh.” He lowered his head, and I felt like the bullshit was coming... the shit I would have to shield myself from in order to keep growing. “I’m proud of you though. Maybe one day I’ll get there too.”

I smiled slightly, grateful that he was respecting the new journey I was on. My family had always been supportive, but Jamel, DJ, and Mama Nissa were new additions. I was happy they were on the same vibe we were on. “Thanks, bruh. I appreciate that, especially from you.”

Once Isaiah, DJ, and Axton joined us, everyone’s attention went to Axton. He was supposed to be proposing to baby girl today. When he realized we were all staring at him, he asked, “Y’all wanna see the ring?”

“Hell yeah,” Chad and DJ said at the same time.

When I noticed people walking in the driveway, I realized they were Axton’s parents, his sister and her family, and Arrow. That was why he’d been waiting. Everyone wanted to

witness this moment. They also had some older people with them. I assumed they were probably his grandparents. If I ever got to the point that I wanted to propose to Skyler, it would be private. I didn't think I could take all those people staring at me. She was close to her family like Axton was to his, so she probably wouldn't be cool with eliminating them from that moment.

We all looked around to make sure Alexz wasn't sneaking up on us, as he took the ring from his pocket. When I saw the huge yellow diamond, I knew that Alexz was going to lose her damn mind. Isaiah whistled, indicating his amazement. We all chuckled at him because he'd expressed all our sentiments exactly. That fool, Chad, had pulled his sunshades from his shirt pocket and put them on while we all laughed.

Axton greeted his folks then had us all go to the front room. Dad was at the stove, checking the food. When he saw us come back to the front, he nodded at Axton. I assumed that was their silent communication of what was about to go down. I couldn't wait to see my sister's excitement. She could be so damn overdramatic at times.

Everyone was pretty quiet, trying not to alert Alexz that more people were in the house. Her nosy ass would have come out just to see who else was here. They'd obviously gone with another plan of distraction since she wasn't arguing or fighting with Chad by now. Dad yelled for them to come to the front so we could eat, as Axton took a deep breath and went to his knee. Mama Nissa and Skyler were back there to keep Alexz occupied. I didn't realize what was going on until now. I just wanted my woman close to me. *Selfish as hell already.*

Axton's mama was already crying, and both his grandfathers and his dad had a smile on their faces. The woman I assumed to be his maternal grandmother wore a soft smile as well. I could imagine that all of them were proud of the man he'd become. From what Arrow had told me, Axton was the world's worst at playing the field. He'd even told me how they did a woman at the same time. I didn't know if I would have wanted one of my brothers fucking the same

woman with me, no matter how I viewed her. That would just be weird for me.

Alexz came down the hallway, talking noise. “If the food is ready, why all y’all niggas just sitting there? I ain’t fixing but two plates, mine and my man’s. The rest of y’all niggas can fend for y’all fucking se—”

She stopped midsentence when she came around the wall to see Axton on his knee. She screamed at the top of her fucking lungs and ran back down the hallway, nearly knocking Skyler and Mama Nissa down. Axton lowered his head, probably hoping that wasn’t a bad sign. This was the second time she’d been proposed to in less than a year, but this one... this shit was real. I watched her fall to her knees in the hallway, and the tears fell from her eyes.

I hurriedly stood and went to her. Isaiah and Dad were right behind me. “Come on, sis. Your man is waiting on an answer,” I said softly.

She quickly pulled herself together as we helped her to her feet. When we walked her back down the hallway, Axton was still on his knee, but his head was hanging as if he thought she would say no. I didn’t know why he would think that when they were already living together. Then again, I supposed her not so distant past played a role in his thought process. He had nothing to worry about though. Alexz loved the shit out of him. He stared up at her then grabbed her hand when she got close. It was so quiet... like everybody was holding their breath, nervous about what her response would be.

“Baby, I hope that wasn’t a bad sign. I just know how I feel for you. I’ve never felt so strongly for anyone. You’re the one for me. You’re the woman I want to wake up to, start a family with, and grow old with. I love you, Alexzandria Marie Berotte. As much as I love your identity, I would love it even more if I could add Vaughn to your last name. Please tell me that you will do me the honor of being my wife.”

I glanced around the room to see the women all dropping tears. When my eyes met Skyler’s, she held my gaze like she was thinking of the day when that would be me on my knee,

asking her to be a Berotte. She stared at me until Alexz started speaking. “Axton, I knew from day one that you would be my forever if we could get past our petty phase. I love you too, and nothing would give me more pleasure, satisfaction, and gratitude than to be able to carry your last name and assume your identity. Yes, I will gladly be your wife, Axton Nirvana Vaughn.”

He slid the ring on her finger and stood and kissed her passionately like none of us were there. Everyone applauded and whistled while cameras flashed, capturing their beautiful moment. However, my eyes soon found Skyler’s again. This woman was so fucking addictive. I didn’t know how I would function tomorrow when she had to go to work. She made her way to me, and before she could say a word, Chad said, “Thank God. Please don’t leave that nigga side no more. He’s been looking for you since he realized you weren’t in the room anymore.”

Everyone laughed, and when I met eyes with my dad, he nodded in approval. I pulled her close to me and kissed her forehead. “What were you thinking about when you were staring at me?” I asked her.

Her face reddened slightly as she looked up at me and said, “Just how much I’m feeling you. I was thinking about your touch and how it catapults me into ecstasy. What about you?”

“I was thinking that if things progress between us what it would be like proposing to you.”

She reddened even more so as she stared up at me. “Me too.”

“You don’t ever have to be afraid of expressing yourself to me,” I said as I rubbed her cheek with my fingertips. “It’s never too soon. You won’t know unless we talk about it. Let me have your heart and your deepest desires. I’m going to do my damndest to make sure your every desire is fulfilled. You feel me?”

“Mm. Absolutely. I almost wanna skip dinner.”

“Say the word, and we’ll take this shit to go.”

She chuckled. “I can’t do Alexz like that. I gotta see this ring.”

I bit my lip and nodded then released her from my grasp, just as there was a loud noise outside. It sounded like breaking glass. I frowned and made my way to the door along with Shy, DJ, and Chad. Seeing that it wasn’t any of the cars at the front of the driveway, we all quickly rounded the corner to see Chanell beating the shit out of my Mustang. “You stupid ass bitch!” I yelled as I ran to her.

She hurriedly took off and hopped in a car with someone. They peeled off as we all got to the end of the driveway. “That bitch must’ve gotten served. I got a judge to do me a favor. You get to take your paternity test Tuesday. I forgot to tell you that shit when you stunned me by walking in with Skyler.”

I turned to him and nodded. Shy wasn’t one to easily forget things unless he had a lot on his mind. Something was going on with him. That probe would be for another day though. I couldn’t wait to see what the fuck was up about this baby. Like Skyler said Friday, I didn’t believe that Nixon was mine. That was why she was acting a fool. She wanted me to just take her fucking word for it. I refused to take the word of a woman that was willingly cheating on her husband. It wasn’t because he wasn’t good to her. It was because she was just a no-good skank and definitely not wifey material. She should have never married him. Chanell made the cliché true as hell: *Can’t turn a ho into a housewife.*

“Call the police and file a report on that ignorant ho,” Chad added.

I angrily made my way back to my car to see she’d smashed the windshield and dented up the hood and the driver side. I was biting my lip so hard I tasted blood. It was like it wasn’t bad enough that I could possibly lose my job and be the father of a child, tying me to her ho ass for years, but she had to destroy my property too.

Grabbing my phone from my pocket, I called the police as Shy handed me his phone. He’d typed the license plate number in his notes. After giving them the details of what went down,

they assured me a squad car was on the way. I brought my attention back to my fucking car and yelled, “Shit!”

“I wanna go find that bitch,” Chad said.

“You and me both,” Shy added. “But I got something for her ass. She done fucked up now,” he said as he snatched his phone from me.

I didn’t know who he was calling, and I didn’t give a fuck at this point. When I looked up, I saw Alexz and Skyler coming outside, then my dad, Isaiah, and Jamel right behind them. “What happened?” Alexz asked. When she saw my car, she brought her hand to her mouth. “Shy! When you find that bitch, let me know. I got something for her raggedy ass!”

Skyler made her way to me, anger flashing through her gaze. My lip was still twitching, because I literally wanted to choke that bitch. When she got close, she put her hands to my face. “We gon’ find her ass. In the meantime, calm down. Breathe. This is material shit that can be fixed. Call your insurance and see if you have vandalism coverage. That way you won’t have to come out of pocket for no bullshit like this. You’ll probably need a police report though.”

I pulled her hands from my face and said, “They’re on their way.”

She kissed my lips as I tried to stay angry, but staring at her had softened me some. As I was trying to calm down, that stupid ho passed by the house again, hanging out the window like she was stupid. “What’chu gon’ do about that shit, nigga!” she yelled.

Shy jumped in his car and peeled off. “Aww shit!” Isaiah yelled as he got in his car and tried to catch up with him.

I wondered if her ass had gotten suspended too. Even though she hadn’t come back to work yet, she had to have suffered some type of punishment. Had I known she was this fucking off, I wouldn’t have touched her ass with a twenty-foot pole. How did a muthafucka like that get a teaching job for the school district? That was who they wanted teaching kids? No wonder those kids’ asses were out of control.

“I hope Shy caught that bitch. If I didn’t need to get back inside to my man, I would’ve hopped in that fucking car with him. She gives the sorority a bad fucking name. She didn’t used to be *this* damn bad,” Alexz said as she headed to the house. She patted my shoulder on her way in. “Keep your head up, brother. This shit will be over soon.”

I wanted to trust that she was right. There wasn’t much more that I could take. I grabbed Skyler’s hand and said, “Why don’t you go inside and eat? I’m gonna wait out here for the police and for Shy and Zay to get back. Shy might try to fuck that ho up.”

“I’m with you, Dylan. I’m waiting with you.”

She gently rubbed my arm as I nodded and led her to the front porch to have a seat. Everybody else made their way back inside to eat, but my dad came to the porch with me and Skyler. He nodded at her then said to me, “Hold on, son. The worst storms can produce the most beautiful rainbows.”

I gave him a slight frown, trying to figure out what type of beauty would come from this bullshit. He chuckled slightly, then said, “You may be trying to figure out what the rainbow could be in this situation, but it’s already peeking from behind the clouds. Look at the man you’ve become because of all this. Your rainbow is sitting next to you. Had she met you six months ago, she wouldn’t be here.”

I glanced at Skyler as she smiled softly at me. Reaching out to my dad, I shook his hand. “You’re right. Thank you, Dad. I know this shit irritates you.”

“What did I tell you when you first told me about it and just the other day? I have your back. You’re my son. As long as you learned from the situation was all that mattered, and I believe you learned a valuable lesson that you’re adhering to. That fuck up made you better. Life has a way of doing that. I’m beyond proud of you.”

I stood from my seat and gave my dad a hug as Shy and Zay, along with the police, pulled up. I quickly let him go to see what had happened and if Shy had caught her ass. I was about to approach, and my dad halted me. “Let them approach

you. You're angry, and they may take that as you being hostile. I don't trust these cops, and if they shoot my son, they gon' have to shoot me too."

I did as I was told and remained still as Skyler nodded in agreement. She gently rubbed my back, soothing the hell out of me. I turned and kissed her forehead then noticed that the cops had someone in the back of the car. "I'll be damn! Shy must've caught her ass."

My dad squinted as he looked in the back seat of the car and said, "You shol' in the hell right, son. Shy caught her ass!"

He said that last part in amazement and with a slight chuckle. I almost didn't want to know what Shy did to restrain her for the police. I wondered what happened to the driver. They were just as guilty for driving her ass.

When the police officers approached with Zay and Shy, one of them said, "Good evening, y'all. I'm Officer Jackson, and this is Officer Shepherd. We met up with Shyrón and Isaiah a couple of blocks away, so we have the perp in the back of the squad car. The driver has already been taken to the station. We just need to file a report of exactly what happened a little while ago."

I nodded and proceeded to tell them what happened and also gave them background information of how it all started. The crazy part about all of this was that she was the one who had cut *me* off. I probably would have been still dicking her stupid ass down while she was pregnant. That was the level of 'don't give a fuck' I was at in my life. She insisted that the baby was from her husband and that we had to stop. So why in the fuck was she torturing me like I was the one who kicked her to the curb?

The shit didn't make sense. Had she approached me like she had common sense instead of trying to fuck around with Arrow, things probably wouldn't have gotten this far. Honestly, I would probably be taking care of a baby that wasn't even mine. I didn't believe for one minute that he was mine, but time would tell. I hoped they processed the results rapidly. For the small chance of possibility, I didn't want to

waste any more time. Enough time had already passed without this baby having a father.

Once the officers left and took Chanell into custody, I couldn't help but wonder about what would happen to her and how that baby would fair out without a mother if she got locked up. He was a preemie, and I knew they progressed better with their mother's breast milk and being able to do skin to skin. I'd done a little research in my down time, trying to occupy my mind. After seeing him that day, I couldn't get him out of my head. I could still see his little body lying in that incubator with all the tubes attached to him.

Skyler grabbed my hand to get my attention and asked, "You okay, baby?"

"Yeah. I'm good. I'm glad your sister didn't come this weekend. My first impression would have been fucked."

"Well... she already knows about the possibility of a baby. She thinks I'm crazy for being with you, but she understands what a strong connection to someone feels like. She said she can't wait to meet the man that has my insides turned out," she responded as she rolled her eyes.

I chuckled and pulled her into my arms. "Yeah, but this shit would have given her pause."

"No doubt about it. But I trust you, Dylan. I don't believe that everyone around you would be vouching for you if you weren't shit, especially not Shy."

"Right. Let me find out how he caught her. Go on in the house and eat, baby. I'll be inside in a lil bit."

"Okay. Don't forget to call your insurance."

"I won't."

She headed inside as I walked over to Shy and Zay. "Man, I can't thank you enough, Shy. How did you catch her?"

"I blocked her and all passing traffic in the intersection of Phelan and Kennedy. It was Zay who snatched her ass out of that car though and yelled at the friend to pull over out of the

street. I called the police for them to meet us there at that Exxon station.”

My eyebrows lifted as I turned to Zay. “What? Nigga, you did what?”

He chuckled. “I know that sounds like some shit Shy would do, but he would have gone too far. I wanted to get to her first, because I have more restraint than him. Surprisingly, she didn’t fight too hard.”

“Well, have you looked in the mirror lately?” Shy asked sarcastically. “You damn near six-five, and when you frown, it looks like hell is about to break loose. Shiiiiid, nigga, I wouldn’t fight either.”

Shy patted Zay on the shoulder and headed inside. I was about to walk behind him, but something made me ask Isaiah again, “Why did you really do it? I’m grateful you did, but for real... Why?”

“I can tell that she’s acting out because she’s hurting. I see this shit all the time at the city clinic. She’s projecting that hurt and anger on you. If I would have told Shy that shit, he would have been calling me soft for the rest of the day. I told her she needed to quit running from herself and face whatever it was that she needed to face so she could be done with it.”

“What did she say?”

“That she would never be done with it, because she has a baby. So I told her that she needed to focus on positive ways to adapt because this shit ain’t it.”

I held my hand out and shook his then hugged him with my other arm. “Thanks, Zay. I appreciate you so much. You ever try to find the woman from college?”

“Yeah, I found her. I’m just nervous about reaching out. I don’t know what she’ll say.”

“Only one way to find out, right?”

“Yeah.”

“As much as you’ve been there for me over the years, you know I got’chu, bruh. Whenever you need to talk, I’m a good

listener.”

“I know. Thanks. Let’s go eat.”

I smiled at him as we headed back inside to join everyone else. While this shit felt like it was over, I knew it was far from that. Depending on how the DNA test turned out, it could be just the beginning.

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S kyler

AS I WATCHED Dylan talk to his brothers, I couldn't help but admire him. His car was outside, torn the hell up, but he was able to enjoy himself like nothing had happened. When I walked outside and saw his car, I wanted to find that bitch and handle her myself. Had Alexz gotten ahold of her, I didn't know what would have happened. Just from her temperament, she seemed like she could do damage.

Despite all that, Alexz's engagement to Axton was beautiful. Ms. Anissa had kept us occupied, talking about her and Mr. Sheldon's future nuptials and picking colors and making plans. We were able to get a lot accomplished, and she even mentioned finding two more women to be in the wedding so Shy and Dylan could be groomsmen. I told her I would be honored to be in the wedding, and Alexz mentioned her asking someone named Brittany that worked with her.

Ms. Anissa was so happy and said she couldn't wait to tell Mr. Sheldon. She said it was extremely hard for him to choose between his sons, so he'd just settled for the two oldest. I would be more than happy to be in the wedding, even if Dylan and I weren't together by the time it came along. She was such a beautiful spirit, and had I not known, I wouldn't have been able to tell that she wasn't their biological mother. The way Alexz was with her was beautiful. They had a real bond like they were mother and daughter. I supposed they were now.

After eating, I'd sat on the couch and had been here almost the entire time, engaging with Axton's family. Everyone was so friendly. It made me miss my family. I had only been here a few days, and I was homesick. Being around this family environment was hard for me. I grabbed my phone and texted my mama and daddy, individually, telling them how much I missed them and that I loved them. My dad had responded right away, expressing the same, but I hadn't heard from my mother.

That was unusual, because she was always the one to respond first. I'd asked my dad if she was okay, and he said that she was at home. He'd gone to the store. I'd been waiting for the past ten minutes for her response. Worry was starting to consume me, so I messaged Lexi to see if she had talked to mom. *Lex, Mama isn't answering my text. Have you heard from her? I asked Dad and he said she was at home. Let me know what's going on.*

I took a deep breath, hoping that all was well, because technically, Daddy didn't really answer my question. I didn't ask about Mom's whereabouts. I'd asked if she was okay. So that was strange, but it was also an admission of guilt in my eyes. They'd probably gotten into it about something. Within two minutes, Lex responded. *We're going to call you in a little bit, Sky. She's with me.*

I relaxed slightly, but something was bothering me on the inside. Even if she was with Lexi, she answered my calls and text messages. Whatever had happened was serious. As if sensing my nervous state, Dylan sat next to me and grabbed my hand. He stared at me for a moment then asked, "Everything okay? You look bothered."

"Something is going on with my mom. She isn't answering my texts, but I know she's safe. She's with my sister, but something doesn't feel right. She always answers my text messages, whether she's with Lexi or not."

"What did Lexi say?"

"That they would call me in a little while."

He rubbed my hand as someone knocked on the door. After a few moments, Chad yelled, “Dylan, the wrecker truck is here.”

“I’ll be back, baby.”

He stood and went to the door as I continued to worry about my mama. This wasn’t like her. Just as I was about to text my dad again, my phone rang. When I saw my sister’s phone number, I quickly headed outside to the backyard to answer it privately. “Hello?”

“Hey, Sky,” Lexi said, sounding upset.

“Hey. What’s going on? I can hear it in your voice.”

“Mama wants to go stay with you for a while. Is that feasible?”

I frowned, trying to decipher what she was saying. Reading between the lines without enough details was hard as hell. “Of course, but please tell me why.”

“She found out Daddy was cheating on her, Sky. The woman came to the house and blasted him because she found out about Mom. She said that she didn’t know he was married, but she figured it out and wanted Mama to be aware of what was going on. She’s pregnant.”

I was quiet for a moment, because it felt like she’d knocked the wind out of me. As soon as I caught my breath though, I said, “I know you fucking lying! What the fuck?”

If this shit didn’t almost sound like Dylan’s bullshit in reverse, I didn’t know what did. My daddy was a fucking cheater? This was hard to digest. Lexi exhaled loudly in the phone and said, “I wish it was a lie. Mama is devastated. She’s packing now. I took off work tomorrow. We’re heading your way as soon as she’s ready.”

“God... I hate this,” I said as the tears fell from my eyes. “I can’t believe Dad would do something like this. How long has it been going on?”

“Almost a year, I think. She’s about five months pregnant.”

“I feel so sick inside,” I said through my tears as I felt a hand slide across my back.

I looked up to see Dylan. He had a look of worry on his face as he gently wiped my tears. “Me too, Sky. Me too,” Lexi responded.

“I’m gonna go home and clean up and make sure I have food. Call me when y’all get on the road.”

“I will.”

When I ended the call, I fell against Dylan, hugging him around his waist. I didn’t want to talk just yet, and he didn’t ask any questions. He held me in his arms, sweetly consoling me. His kisses to my head offered me peace in the midst of this turbulent storm. His patience and understanding only made me feel even more for him.

Once I composed myself, I pulled away and stared up at him. “I have to get home. My mother and my sister are coming to town. My father cheated on my mom, and his mistress is pregnant. Crazy, huh?”

He gave me a look of sympathy, and I knew he felt a way because of the situation. Although he didn’t necessarily cheat, he’d willingly slept with a married woman, the same as this woman did with my dad. “I’m sorry, Skyler. Let me get Shy to give us a ride to my place so you can get your car.”

I nodded as we turned around to head inside. I wiped my face and pulled myself together to tell everyone goodbye. When I got to Ms. Anissa and Alexz, they frowned slightly. In just the couple of times I’d been around them, they’d learned my mannerisms, and I knew they could tell something was wrong. Neither of them asked any questions as I hugged them and congratulated Alexz once again. “Skyler, if you need anything, please don’t hesitate to reach out. Alexz and I have your back. I’m retired, so my schedule is extremely flexible.”

My eyes watered as I stared at Ms. Anissa. “Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”

As I squeezed her hand, Dylan appeared next to me to give hugs to them as well. Once he was done, he escorted me out of

the house to Shy's car. He opened the door to the back seat and helped me in then got in behind me. Shy smiled softly at me as he backed out and as Dylan pulled me into his arms. I lay against him, in his arms, all the way to his house.

He helped me from the car, and we thanked Shy for the ride. As I went to my car, he followed behind me. "Is there anything you need me to do? I can go to the store, help you clean up, whatever you need."

"For now, can you just follow me to my place?"

"Whatever you need, babe. Let me go inside to get my keys to the Cadillac, and I'll be right behind you."

I nodded then got into my car. It felt like I was on autopilot, and I needed Dylan to make me feel again. I needed him to hold me and remind me that everything I felt between us was real. How could I be so confident now when the man I'd loved my entire life had betrayed my mother after nearly thirty years of being married? When I saw him heading to his car, I cranked up my engine and headed home.

WHEN I HEARD the doorbell ring, I checked the apartment again, making sure everything was spotless. Dylan had helped me clean then went to the store for me. Surprisingly, he'd gotten everything on my list, plus some. He said we needed plenty of snacks, so he'd bought ice cream, popcorn, and potato chips. He'd planned to leave before they got here, but I wanted him to stay until they arrived. I didn't want to be alone with my thoughts. I was afraid I would call Julius Fontenot and curse his ass out.

Although Dylan had helped me relax when we first got here, by massaging me slowly and kissing me tenderly in various places, I was uptight again as I headed to the door. When I opened it and saw my mother's red, puffy eyes, my heart fell to my feet. I stepped aside, letting her and Lexi inside, then closed the door. The moment I turned around, I pulled my mama in my arms and hugged her tightly.

When the toilet flushed, I remembered Dylan was still here. I'd forgotten just that quickly. My mama and Lex stared at me, their eyes slightly widened. Once he emerged from the bathroom, I saw Lex's lips part. She glanced at me, and I already knew that he would be our conversation piece to get our minds off my mother's husband. When he saw them standing next to me, he smiled slightly.

I extended my arm, and he came closer so I could make introductions. As I wrapped my arm around his waist and he slid his around my shoulders, I said, "Dylan, this is my mother, Patricia, and my sister, Lexi. Y'all, this is my boyfriend, Dylan."

"It's very nice to meet y'all. I won't take up any of your time. I was just about to leave."

They both smiled slightly, and Lexi said, "Nice to meet you also."

My mom only smiled and nodded. I knew it was because she was in her feelings right now. He kissed the side of my head and said, "Call me if you need anything. I'll come right back. Okay?"

"Thank you. I'll call or text you before I go to bed."

I followed him to the door, and before exiting, he turned back to me and kissed my forehead. Once I locked it, Lexi said, "I only have one question. Does he have any single brothers?"

"Quite a few, actually. Three biological and two stepbrothers."

"Damn! You have hit the jackpot. I may not get to meet anybody tomorrow before I leave, but damn it! If they all look like him, I want one."

"You're a mess, girl. Y'all sit down. They don't look like him, but they are all extremely attractive... just not as attractive as Dylan."

"I'll be the judge of that."

I slightly rolled my eyes as I sat next to my mama. I slid my hand in hers, and for a moment, we were all quiet. She broke the silence when she said, “He’s nice looking, baby.”

“Thanks, Mama,” I said softly.

I didn’t want to talk about Daddy if she didn’t want to talk about him. As long as she didn’t mention the drama, I wouldn’t either. I kissed her cheek then said, “Dylan bought ice cream, popcorn, and chips. He said we needed snacks. So, if y’all want to watch a movie or whatever, we can.”

“I just... I wanna know why,” my mama blurted. A huge lump formed in my throat as she continued spilling the contents of her heart. “For thirty years, he was my everything! That shit meant nothing to him? How could he destroy us this way? He’s about to have a newborn baby! That woman he slept with is only thirty-four! What am I supposed to do now?”

She burst into tears, and so did I. Her pain was something I’d never seen. My mama was always happy. There were the occasional arguments that married couples had, but I’d never witnessed her like this... not even when her mother died. I didn’t know what to say, so I simply pulled her in my arms and held her as she cried her heart out. Lexi joined us on the couch, sitting on the other side of Mom and hugged her too.

I didn’t have any answers for her, and I was more than sure she wasn’t expecting any. Her cries hurt me to my soul, but I knew she was hurting much more. Lexi was crying just as much as I was. She and I were so close to our mother. Dad was always at work, but now, that made me wonder if he had been fucking around for their entire marriage. This time, he just fucked with the wrong one.

However, I would be here to help my mama through this gut-wrenching time in her life, and if she wanted to relocate here with me, she would be more than welcomed to. It almost seemed like my restart would be more for her than it was for me. I was just grateful that I was able to provide that for her if she needed it.

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Dylan

“YOU READY TO GET THIS shit over with?”

“Man... fuck yeah. Sorry, Dad. I’m just ready to know one way or the other. Today could be the resolution for a lot of things,” I said as Shy nodded.

We were on our way to the hospital for the paternity test. Chanell was released from jail since it was her first offense, but that shit fucked her all the way up. She got fired from the district and probably wouldn’t be able to get another teaching job in the state. My nerves were on edge though, because I knew her ass was probably going to be here, although it wasn’t necessary since we had a court order.

She wasn’t going to keep holding this shit over my damn head. Whether she did or not, I had a life to live. Skyler was everything I wanted in a woman. I missed her like we’d been apart for months. I hadn’t seen her since Sunday, and I was tripping for real. My dick was pissed that I didn’t make love to her. I didn’t feel like that was what she needed at the time. She needed intimacy and affection without my selfish desires being a part of the equation. It didn’t help that the situation was similar to mine.

My deepest fear was that she would pull away from me because of that. I was hoping she wasn’t thinking too hard about it... thinking that maybe she’d taken it too easy on me and gave in to me too quickly. Like I’d told her on several

occasions, expressing my feelings was so different for me, but with her, it was easy as hell. Being around her pulled it right out of me. If that wasn't real, I didn't know what was.

What her dad had done to her mom was sad. I couldn't imagine building with someone for over half of my life only for them to betray me this way. That was a hurt that I'd never known and one I hoped I never had to experience. Skyler had said that her mom wasn't handling it well at all. They were planning to spend time with Mama Nissa today. Skyler was hoping that her mother could build a friendship with Mama Nissa so she would feel comfortable leaving her mother to go to work. She worked from home yesterday.

She and Shy had a case to fight in Dallas in less than two weeks now, and they had to make sure their shit was straight. I had no doubt in my mind that it was though, because Shy was one of the best to do it. He didn't seem to be stressing, but he did look like he had a lot on his mind. After watching him for a moment and seeing him slide his hand over his goatee, I knew something was bothering him. We all seemed to have a nervous habit. "You a'ight, bruh?" I asked him.

"I'm good."

I knew he was anything but. He'd been way too quiet. Although he didn't joke around as much as Chad, he definitely did his fair share of shit talking. He hadn't said a word since we'd first left. I didn't ask again, because I didn't want to push. Maybe he didn't want to talk in front of Dad. However, Sheldon Berotte wasn't a fool. He knew us well and knew when something was wrong, even if we didn't say so.

He wasn't pushy either. He just assured us that we could talk to him about anything. As grown men, we usually tried to figure things out for ourselves or talk to one of our brothers, because we didn't want to burden him with our shit. With this situation, I found that it was super easy to talk to him, and he was the one I *preferred* to talk to. Besides Isaiah, he gave the best advice. He wasn't gray haired for nothing. He'd lived life and was still living and learning. It benefitted me to tap into his wisdom.

When we got to the hospital, my dad said, “Let’s do this, son.”

I nodded as Dad glanced at Shyrón. He looked to be sending a text message, and I could see that his face had reddened some. He and Alexz were the high yellas of the bunch, like our mom had been. After giving my dad a knowing glance that something was up with Shy, I hopped out of the car, despite my nervousness, and power walked to that damn door. No jokes were cracked, although I could see the smirks on their faces. They could go to hell. I was ready to get my life back.

Once we got to the third floor, I requested that I be in the same room with Chanell and the baby. It might have been stupid, but I didn’t trust nobody these days. For all I knew, she could have a nurse on her side to do some crazy shit. When I walked in the room and saw the baby, my heart softened. *Nixon*. He was practically bald, but I could see the straight black hair on his head. His skin was about the same complexion as mine, but to me, he looked like Chanell.

The baby was still on oxygen, and he had a couple of other machines hooked to him. That was probably why I had to scrub up before I came in the room. I assured them that I wouldn’t be holding him. They still made me put on a gown over my clothes and a mask to cover my nose and mouth. I supposed it was what they felt was safe for the baby. I would hate to bring germs in here that were harmless for me but that could possibly be deadly for him.

After a few minutes of filling out paperwork and watching them get their shit together, Chanell walked in the room. I was prepared to ignore her bullshit, simply because I was finally getting what I needed to get my life out of limbo. She walked over to me with her head hanging low, and what Isaiah talked to me about came to mind. She lifted her head and her eyes met mine as she said softly, “I’m sorry, Dylan... for everything.”

I was stunned into silence. She’d never sounded so soft... humble... defeated. Chanell was the type of woman that announced her presence by whatever means necessary. She

wanted to be seen and flaunted her body like it was God's gift to men and she was the only woman blessed with such. She continued staring at me, so I acknowledged what she said by nodding. After looking away, she said, "I slept around a lot. I used protection. Being that he's not for Luke, I don't know who his father is."

My eyebrows lifted in shock. I didn't expect her to admit shit to me, although I knew she probably was sleeping around with more people than me, judging by the shit she did with Arrow at Alexz's birthday party a couple of months ago. "You're young, and despite the fucking around, you are a good person. You have a good heart. I want my baby to be yours, Dylan. If he's not, I don't know what I'm going to do."

"You're going to move on and be a good mother to him. He deserves that."

"He deserves a good father too."

"He does, but you can't live life thinking about how you could have done things differently. Focus on making the future better... for him *and* for you. You won't be able to take care of him as you should if you don't take care of you... mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. If he's mine, you won't have to worry. I'm gonna handle my responsibilities, but if he's not, you gon' have to woman up and accept shit for the way it is."

"You're right. You've changed a lot over the past few months."

"Yeah. Despite the bullshit you brought to my life, it made me a better man."

She smiled slightly, but before she could say anything, the nurse was in front of me to swab my cheek. I could see another nurse doing the same to Nixon as I lifted my mask. Once she dropped it in a sterilized bag and sealed it, she did the same to Chanell. After everything was done with me, she informed me that I should have results within three hours. Shy had paid for expedited services, thankfully. There was no way I could wait days to hear back. I'd pull all the hair out of my beard.

Before I could leave, I watched them help Chanell get ready to hold the baby. My heart almost wished he was mine to assure he wouldn't turn out as crazy as her ass, but dealing with her ass made me reevaluate that shit real quick. While she was humble now, I knew what she could be... the bitch who fucked up cars and lives. That was why I was thankful for Skyler. Any other *good* woman would have avoided me like the plague.

When I got to the waiting area where Shy and my dad were, they both stood. "In three hours, we should know something. Hopefully, I will hear from BISD before tomorrow is over with. I can't lose my job over this bullshit. Any word on the decision with the frat?"

"Oh, that shit blew over. You still frat. I'd forgotten all about that shit. Everybody was pretty much laughing about the fact that Luke tried to have something done about it. One guy even went as far to say that half the frat done slept with her ho ass at some point."

I almost choked. I was happy as hell though. I squatted and shimmied my ass off right there in the waiting area while Shy and my dad laughed. "Boy, bring yo' ass on," Dad said as he chuckled.

However, once again, Shy had forgotten to tell me something involving my drama. That wasn't like him. "Did you see Chanell?" Shy asked.

"Yeah. Surprisingly, I didn't want to choke the shit out of her, and she apologized for everything. She also told me that she was fucking around a lot, and if this wasn't Luke's baby, she didn't have a clue who it was for. Hopefully, I'll be eliminated from the possibilities in a little while too."

"Damn. That's fucked up, but I already knew that. I was saving that shit in my arsenal in case we had to go to court."

Shy seemed a little looser, so I couldn't help but wonder if he and Dad had talked about whatever was bothering him while I was gone. I didn't have to know what was going on with him, so long as he was good, and right now, he seemed like he was unbothered. Besides meeting with the insurance

adjuster about my car, I didn't have shit else to do. As my mind drifted to Skyler, my phone rang. I was more than sure it was her.

When I looked at the caller ID, I smiled then answered. "Hey, baby. What's up?"

"Hey. How did it go?"

"Everything went well. We're leaving the hospital. I should know something within three hours."

"Are you nervous?"

"A little bit, but it's not overwhelming." Her voice softened me somewhat, because I could hear that she wasn't feeling upbeat. Lowering my voice, I asked, "You okay? How's your mom?"

"We're okay. She's been in the bedroom for most of the morning. We'll be meeting Ms. Anissa in a couple of hours for lunch. I wish I could see you."

"You don't have to wish, baby girl. Tell me what you want from me, and I'm gonna do my best to provide whatever it is you crave. I think I've told you that before. Make me show and prove."

"I need you, Dylan. Come to my place... please. My heart needs to feel you. I need you to mend these broken pieces. My heart is broken, and watching my mama struggle with this is breaking it even more."

"Say no more. As soon as Shy drops me to my car, I'm on my way to you. Okay?"

"Okay."

I ended the call feeling heavy. Hearing her sound the way she did was damn near breaking *my* heart. I was just glad that they were at least getting out of her apartment today. Being cooped up never really worked well with depression. I knew firsthand. By the time they were ready to go meet Mama Nissa, it would be time for to me to meet my insurance adjuster.

When we got in the car, Dad turned around to me. “I never thought I would see the day that my baby boy settled down, and you beat your older brothers to the punch. I’m proud of the man you are... I’ve always been proud, but now, I’m even prouder. You didn’t grow up with me showing you how to love a woman... any of you really. I doubt if Chad and Isaiah remember that. When the woman for you came along, you were receptive, and listening to the way you speak to her makes me feel like I did my job, son.”

I smiled slightly. “Dad, we all grew up admiring what a great man you are. We only wanted you to be happy. When we got older, we knew that you weren’t as happy as you were pretending to be. So, I’m proud of you too... for letting go of your memories of Mom to make new ones with Mama Nissa. You always lead by example. So thank you for being an amazing man that we can look up to... to be the standard. Love you, Dad.”

He smiled at me and nodded. I could see the emotion building in his eyes. I was never the one to express myself to anyone. Had it been Isaiah telling him this, I didn’t think he would have gotten as emotional. Even as a grown man, I aspired to be just like him. In my opinion, I still wasn’t half the man he was.

When we got to my place, I thanked Shy for everything, then ran to my car to head to Skyler. Nothing else mattered but getting to her. I picked up some boudin kolaches and a bouquet of roses from the grocery store and got to her house in record time. After ringing the doorbell, I waited for a moment before I heard the locks being disengaged. Once Skyler opened the door, my heart left my body and quickly attached to hers.

She was wearing a robe and looked to be sipping on a cup of coffee or tea. Her eyes were puffy and red, and her body just looked tired. However, when she saw me, her eyes brightened. I handed her the flowers as she smiled then immediately sniffed them. After closing the door, I held up the bag. Her eyebrows lifted. “Kolaches?” she asked softly.

“Mm hmm.”

“You mind if I get my mama to taste one?”

“Of course not. I brought enough.”

She set her flowers on the countertop, along with her coffee, and threw her arms around me. I lifted her from her feet and kissed her cheek. “Thank you, Dylan.”

“I’m gon’ always come see about you. You’re my woman... my baby.”

When I lowered her to her feet, she puckered her lips. I leaned over and kissed her pretty lips, then she made her way to wake her mom. I made myself comfortable on her plush couch. I couldn’t wait until we were living together, and she could bring life to my place. Hers, although there were lots of grays, it was still vibrant looking. Her accent colors made it pop. My shit looked dead as hell. I supposed it was the typical bachelor pad.

As I took in her décor and checked my phone for notifications, the older-looking version of Skyler emerged. She smiled slightly as I stood. “Hi, Mrs. Fontenot.”

While I wanted to ask how she was doing, I decided against it. I could see how she was doing. She looked worn. Her eyes were puffy, and her shoulders were slumped as she shuffled her feet, making her way to me. She shook my hand and said, “Hello, Dylan. Thank you for breakfast. I’m not as green as Skyler is. I’m very familiar with boudin. I’m from this area.”

“Well, with a last name like Fontenot, I knew somebody was. What part?”

“Port Arthur... well, Alvester. I moved to Dallas after I got married.”

I could see the sadness fill her eyes, but she quickly averted her gaze as Skyler grabbed her hand and led her to the table. I joined them and pulled the kolaches out of the bag. After blessing the food, I prepared to get to know the woman I knew would one day be my mother-in-law.

S kyler

I HAD A HEADACHE FROM HELL. When Dylan's phone vibrated on the nightstand, it woke me up. It was about time for me to wake up anyway. We would be meeting Ms. Anissa in an hour, and I needed to make myself look presentable. Dylan kissed my forehead and said, "I'm sorry my phone woke you up."

"It's okay. I'm glad I got in a good nap."

After getting out of bed, I went to my closet and pulled out some jeans and a graphic tee. I was not trying to get all snazzy today. When I came out, Dylan was engrossed in his phone, so I went to my mother's room to be sure she was getting ready. She'd been so in the dumps until she'd pulled me right down there with her. I thought things would remain cool once Lexi left, but it was like she sank. I noticed she seemed to feel more comfortable around me with showing her true feelings. It was like she tried to be even stronger than she already was just for Lexi.

I knocked then opened the door to find her already dressed and reading a book. "Hey. Sorry. I was knocked out."

"You needed that recharge, baby. I'm sorry for dumping all my sorrow on you."

"Mama, I'm always here for you. Don't ever forget to take advantage of that." I smiled at her then continued. "I'm gonna go get dressed."

“Okay.”

She and Dylan had gotten along well while eating breakfast, but I didn't expect anything different. When I got back to my room, he was still in his phone. “Everything okay?” I asked.

He rarely lost himself in his phone whenever he was around me. Most times he ignored it. At first, that bothered me, because I thought he just didn't want me to see who was hitting him up. However, there was no reason for him to lie after I knew everything about him. He lifted his head and said, “Yeah. Reading this long ass email from Chanell. We talked briefly at the hospital, so I don't know why she felt the need to apologize again and send this damned autobiography.”

I chuckled as I went to the bathroom. While I wanted to ask about what she had to say, I knew if it were important for me to know, he would tell me. Dylan joined me and said, “I thought she would be saying something about the test. I'll read all that later.” He stood behind me and enveloped me in his arms, then kissed my neck. “Where are y'all going for lunch?”

“I think Bruno's, but I'm not sure.”

“Fancy.”

I giggled then turned to him. “I missed you so much yesterday. It's a shame that you have me so spoiled already. I don't know how I will function when we go back to work, especially you. I can talk whenever. You can't.”

“I know, but we'll fall into an easy routine soon enough.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, let me leave you alone so you can get dressed. I don't need to be getting any ideas with your mom across the hall.”

“No, not right now. It's absolutely impossible to remain quiet when you slide between my walls, Dylan. You so damn talented.”

“Talented?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Hell yeah. You are skilled beyond belief.”

“Mm. Then let me show you how skilled I am. I’ll keep you quiet.”

He lowered his head and kissed my neck then gently sucked the skin below my ear. He knew good and got damn well that was my spot. His hands traveled to my ass then the backs of my thighs. He lifted me to the vanity and slid his fingers inside of me. He did that shit so fast. It was like he went through my damn underwear. As he stroked me, he untied my robe, and I shook it from my shoulders then pulled my nightshirt over my head.

Biting my bottom lip, I did my best to hold in my moans. Dylan staring at me the way he was didn’t make things any better. He knew I couldn’t handle his gaze, especially while we were having sex. I gushed on his fingers as my entire body trembled. Just as I was about to make a sound, my lips parting and my eyebrows scrunching together, he covered my mouth with his, muffling my moans.

I brought my feet to the countertop as he continued to stroke me with his fingers. The shit felt so good. I began rolling my hips on them and allowed my head to fall back to the mirror. “I got something you can roll those sexy ass hips on.”

I opened my eyes to see Dylan whip his dick out. He pulled his fingers from me and slowly sucked them. The way he looked to be savoring my taste had me on the verge of cumming, and I believed he knew that. He held my gaze as he withdrew his fingers from his mouth and brought them to the seat of my panties. My breathing was erratic, and my heart was racing as he slid his finger down the middle of them, lightly teasing my clit.

Suddenly, he ripped them with one tug then went to his knees. Before he could even touch me, I squirted all over the damn place. The way he turned me on was crazy as hell. He never even flinched as my juices hit his chest. I was breathing like I was in Lamaze class, preparing for the birth of my baby. Trying to contain my moans was so damn hard.

The moment the fountain ceased, he went straight to my clit and sucked the hell out of it. Just that quickly, I was feeling like I wanted to cum again. He released it, though, and licked my pussy slowly, making love to it with his tongue. He moaned softly as he enjoyed the feast I was providing him with. I slid my hands to his head and pulled him in even deeper as my body quivered, alerting me that my senses were on overload, and it was about to dispel some of that energy. “Dylan!” I whispered harshly.

He moaned, and the vibrations from his voice sent me into overdrive, draining me of my fuel like he was siphoning that shit. Standing to his feet, he grabbed me by the neck as he slowly slid inside of me. He pulled out just as slowly, and I saw the goosebumps appear on his skin. After pulling his shirt off, he pushed inside of me again and pulled out, repeating what he’d just done. It was when my pussy made a popping noise after his exit that his gaze became dark.

He was about to tear me to pieces, and I knew there was no way I was going to be able to control myself any longer. I loved the way he fucked me. It seemed that my pussy more than loved it. She gushed just out of anticipation of the destruction she knew his dick would bring. When he pushed inside of me again, my ass lifted from the countertop. He slid his other hand beneath me, holding me to him, and fucked me.

My nipples were so hard they were throbbing as he plunged into me repeatedly. When I began squirting again, my head fell to the mirror once more, and I couldn’t help but to moan. There was no way I could hold it in. He withdrew from me though, causing me to open my eyes. His hand was still around my neck, and he had a frown on his face. Although he looked angry as hell, he looked sexy at the same time. My pussy was still throbbing, begging him to come back.

“You have to be quiet. If you can’t, I’ll stuff this hard muthafucka back in my pants. What’chu wanna do? You want this pussy stroked right or not?”

“Yes... please... Dylan. Oh God.”

This man had me losing my fucking mind. “A’ight. You gon’ have to shut that sexy shit up then.”

He plunged back inside of me, taking my breath away. We didn’t have to worry about me making noise at this point. I could barely fucking breathe. I clawed the fuck out of him as he removed his hand from my neck and gripped my breast. When his lips pinched my nipple between them, he quickly brought his hand to my mouth and began fucking the shit out of me. The sounds of our bodies slapping only heightened the moment as Dylan sucked my nipple.

He released it and lifted his head, staring into my eyes as he fucked me harder. While he told me to shut up earlier, it seemed like he was trying to break me, make me scream. He wanted to see me unravel... lose control. Not being able to voice what I was feeling only made it more intense and my body even more sensitive to what he was doing to it. “Skyler, your pussy is so fucking good. Shit,” he said in a low voice as I panted.

I could see the goosebumps appear on his skin again as he closed his eyes and bit his bottom lip. “Dylan, look at me, baby. Don’t close your eyes,” I requested of him.

Normally, it was him requesting that of me. He slowed his stroke and opened his eyes, immediately lowering his lips to mine. He kissed me then stared at me. “Fuuuuuck,” he moaned out.

That was so damned sexy. I lowered my gaze to watch him stroke me, and he pushed my knees to the damn mirror behind me. “If you wanna see, I’m finna give you the best angle.”

That it was. The way his dick slid in and out of me, covered in cream and slick as hell... without a condom. That was crazy and careless as hell, especially with the situation he was currently in. Before I could even focus on it, he asked, “Where you want this shit, Skyler? I’m about to bust.”

I didn’t care where he put it. He had me so gone. Just knowing that he was about to explode had me on the verge of doing so again as well. “Wherever you wanna put it, baby. I don’t fucking care.”

“You sure about that?”

“Yeeeesss... fuuuuuuck.”

His stroke became more powerful as he held me close, and I held on for dear life. When he grunted and gripped my ass, his movements stalling, I realized he'd nutted inside of me. *What the fuck was he thinking?* My body trembled as it sucked in his liquid offering, digesting the shit like it was living waters. I slowly pulled away from him, and he allowed his dick to slide out of me. His eyes never left mine.

I didn't know what to say to him right now. He asked, but I never expected him to want to lay his seed to rest at my fucking cervix. When he backed away from me, I got off the countertop and started the shower. I couldn't say anything to him because I was shocked. We'd only known one another for a little over a week. When I turned back to him, he'd put his pants back on and was staring at me.

While I waited for what he would say, I supposed he was doing the same. We were both silent for a while when he finally said, “I don't know what I was thinking, Sky. I'm sorry. I'm gonna go get you a morning after pill. Okay?”

I still couldn't respond. He approached me and kissed my forehead, then picked up his shirt and left me in the bathroom. *What the fuck did we do?*

“THIS PASTA IS REALLY GOOD,” my mama said.

“It really is. I've lived here all my life, and I've never been here,” Ms. Anissa added.

We were at Bruno's Italian Kitchen, and my mind was everywhere but here. I was more than sure that they'd noticed how quiet I'd been. I knew my mama would have asked what the deal was by now had Ms. Anissa not been with us. I could tell Ms. Anissa was wanting to ask as well. We'd gotten along well the last few times we'd seen one another, but we weren't exactly that personal yet. The plus side was that it was forcing

them to talk and get to know one another. That was my main goal.

I wanted Mama to have a friend that she could talk to when I wasn't available. Being that Ms. Anissa was retired, she was definitely more available than I was. I didn't know how long Mama would be staying, but I had the feeling that she was thinking about moving. My dad's infidelity had crushed her. He'd been blowing up her phone since she'd left, but she refused to answer it. I didn't blame her. If I were her, I would block his ass.

I supposed my quietness had gone on long enough, because my mama said, "Sky, what's wrong, baby? Did something happen with Dylan? You were more talkative before and after your nap, but by the time we all left, you were extremely quiet. Plus, you look upset."

I shook my head quickly. "Sorry. It's just... I'm in deep thought about something. Sorry."

They looked at me then at each other as I stuffed my mouth with spinach ravioli. I couldn't sit at this table and say, *Dylan nutted in me, and I'm scared I'm gonna get pregnant, but at the same time, I wouldn't mind being pregnant by him.* That sounded crazy as hell. He'd gone and gotten the morning after pill, but I didn't take it. Since he'd given it to me in the bathroom, he didn't know whether I took it or not. He didn't ask any questions, and I didn't volunteer any information. I didn't know what was wrong with me.

When we'd first gotten to the restaurant, he'd texted me and asked me to call him later. However, I knew that I wouldn't. I needed to really think about what I was doing. It wasn't too late to take the pill. I just... I was scared to use it. Just my luck, I would be the .01 percent that was affected long term and not be able to get pregnant again or something. For him to do something like this told me that he was sensitive to it right now, because of what was going on. He didn't mention anything about what happened until he saw my reaction to what he'd done.

I had so much on my plate right now. I didn't need the possibility of being pregnant by a man I had only begun to know on my plate too. I was missing time preparing for Mr. Campbell's case because of the personal issues with my parents. I hadn't spoken to my dad since early Sunday, and he hadn't tried to call me. I refused to call him. I was hurt that the man I looked up to my entire life was capable of being an unfaithful jackass. Seeing my mom hurt only made it worse.

Then there was this issue with Chanell. If this was indeed Dylan's baby, I would have to deal with her for as long as I was with him. More importantly, I didn't know if I wanted to be a part of raising someone else's kid. Dylan was a great guy, and he could fuck me into paralysis, but was that enough to make me feel like I wasn't settling? We were too new and too fresh in our relationship to even know if he was worth all the drama that could occur if that baby was his.

“Skyler!”

I looked up at my mother, and I could see she had a non-sense look on her face. She looked frustrated. “Ma'am?”

“Ms. Anissa is speaking to you. What's going on?”

I huffed and closed my eyes for a moment, knowing I didn't want to have this conversation at this restaurant. “Can we talk when we leave?”

“Well, sounds like we need to box up our food and go now,” Ms. Anissa said as she lifted her hand to call our waiter over to ask for boxes.

I sat back in my chair and held my hand over my mouth for a moment, then looked at the both of them as they stared at me. Their now worried expressions made me feel bad for how I was dramatizing this shit, but I was legit confused. Did Dylan have me that gone to where I wanted to carry a baby for him already? That was insane! Stupid! Dumb as fuck!

When the waiter returned with our boxes and the check, I handed him my card and quickly boxed my food. When he came back, I signed my ticket, and we left. The moment I

cranked the engine of my car, I lowered my head. “Dylan and I are having sex.”

They both burst into laughter like something was funny. “Chile, is that it? I heard y’all before we left. Your walls are thin, sugar. I hate to break it to you.”

I huffed loudly and brought my hand to my face. Ms. Anissa pulled it away and held it between hers. “What else?” she asked.

“We didn’t use a condom today and he uhh... finished inside of me.”

Ms. Anissa’s eyebrows lifted, and I could see that my mama was stunned in the back seat through my rearview mirror. “He went and got the morning after pill and apologized several times. I haven’t taken the pill yet.”

My mama frowned slightly. “Do you want to get pregnant?”

“I don’t know. I think I’m scared of taking the pill.”

“Skyler, I know we still don’t know one another well, but I’m going to say this. I believe you’re scared, but not of taking the pill. You’re afraid that Chanell’s baby will be for Dylan. Subconsciously, you’re trying to compete for his attention. Whether this baby is his or not, I believe that you have all of Dylan’s attention. It’s like he loves you already. You don’t have to get pregnant to keep his attention, baby.”

A tear fell down my cheek, and I didn’t know how to accept what she was saying. Was I afraid of losing him to Chanell and her baby? The fact that he nudded inside of me was like him saying he *wanted* a baby. So if this baby was his, where would that leave me? Would he focus all his attention on the baby and forget about me? Maybe these were all the questions I needed to ask him. Why did he nut inside of me? He asked me if I was sure if he could nut wherever he wanted to. He knew what he was about to do when he asked me that question.

My mama gently caressed my arm and said, “You need to talk to Dylan, baby. He seems so understanding of you already,

and I can see how much he cares for you. Talk to him.”

I swallowed hard and put the car in reverse to drop Ms. Anissa home. The ride was quiet, and I could only hope that Dylan would understand my confusion.

“HAVE YOU TALKED TO DADDY, MAMA?”

She lowered her head for a moment as she shook it, then asked, “Have you called Dylan?”

I did the same as she had done. We were pitiful. After I’d dropped Ms. Anissa off, we’d come back to my apartment and watched a movie and ate the food we’d boxed up. Dylan had already called once, but I didn’t answer. I couldn’t answer. My mind was in turmoil, and I was allowing it to stay that way for the moment. I would come to a resolution later. As of now, I just wanted to be. However, I knew it was time that my mama and I talk about what had happened with them.

“Mama, did you ever get the feeling that something was wrong in your marriage?”

She took a deep breath and nodded. “This isn’t the first or even the second time your dad has cheated on me. I’ve known about his bouts of infidelity over the years. After gifts and promises of things being better, I’ve always conceded. I feel stupid, weak, and used. I let him manipulate me into doing what he wanted, and now he thinks he can continue to do that. I should have left him a long time ago. However, the fact that he’s creating a whole family right in my face and for the world to see is too much. I can’t bear it.”

I was stunned. I had no words for what she’d said. How could she stay with a man that repeatedly betrayed her trust... broke their vows as if they were nothing? “Mama, why did you stay?”

“He was taking care of me. I’ve never worked, Sky. My mama only encouraged me to stay. Her only words were, *all men cheat. At least he’s taking care of you and the girls. You’d*

be a fool to leave. Even if I wanted to leave, I had no money and nowhere to go since she was team Julius. Your dad handled all the finances and put money into a separate account for me. While it wasn't chump change, it wasn't nearly the amount of money he had access to, nor was it enough money for me to create a new life for me and y'all with. I was stuck."

I sympathized with her and all the bullshit she dealt with, but the way she kept all that shit from us and taught us to be strong and independent was beyond inspiring. "Mama, you aren't weak. Do you realize how much strength you had to have to endure and push through those conditions while raising two girls? You practically raised us alone. Daddy was there to buy things and have fun, but the bulk of the work was done by you. You raised us to be everything I feel that you wanted to be. That's strength. I don't know how you kept this shit from us over the years, but don't ever call yourself weak. Okay?"

She fell against me and cried her eyes out, and I joined her. It didn't take her long to compose herself though. "Take all the time you need to think about you and Dylan's future. It's no one's decision but yours. You are the one that is in a relationship with him. No matter what anyone thinks, do what you feel is best for you. Time doesn't always matter. What do you feel in here?" she asked as she placed her hand on my chest.

I closed my eyes as the tears fell from them. "I'm falling for him, Mama, and no matter what I do, I can't seem to stop it. I can feel his sincerity about everything he says and does... even this situation. He's sensitive, and now I am too. I'm the one he wants a child with, and he jumped the gun. At the same time though, I feel like I wanna jump the gun right along with him. I know I still have time to take the pill, because it hasn't been twenty-four hours yet, but I want to be sure in whatever decision I choose to make."

"That's good, baby. I'll be here for you no matter what you decide."

I leaned into my mama, and we held one another. It was the most emotional conversation we'd ever had. Both our

hearts were in turmoil at the moment. I didn't know if she would decide to go back to my dad or not, once the initial shock of it all wore off, but at least she now had options. I had options as well, but the time was ticking on that.

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Dylan

I DIDN'T KNOW what the fuck was going on, but I was about to lose it! It had been two days, and I still didn't have the DNA results. They didn't put it in as an expedited service. My nerves were on edge, the very thing I was trying to avoid. It didn't help that I'd read Chanell's email after leaving Skyler. The shit had me in my feelings big time. It was bad enough I was sensitive about seeing the baby again and what I'd done to Skyler, but that email... I couldn't stop thinking about it, although I didn't send a response. This was my third time reading it.

Dylan,

Thank you for being more mature than me in this situation. I fucked up, but I need you to try to understand where I'm coming from. Your brother helped me tremendously Sunday with only a few words he'd spoken to me. I lied to you earlier. I was ashamed to tell the truth. In my family, I've always been the prettiest... no shade. Because of that, I was the one that got fucked over. My mama gave me to her best friend to raise when I was ten.

Her best friend's husband decided that I was pretty too. I'm sure you know where this is going. I didn't realize that I needed to talk about that shit until I spoke to your brother. The horrible thing is that I believe that Nixon is his son. You and

Luke are the only other possibilities... I swear. Luke has been ruled out.

He still takes advantage of me. He's the reason I have money to do what I need to do for myself. You of all people know that the school district doesn't pay a whole lot, which is why you're a personal trainer as well. However, I make even less money, because I never passed the certification test. I suppose that doesn't matter now since I've been fired.

I'm sorry for all the trouble I caused you. Although I was married to Luke, I wasn't lying to you about him. That nigga didn't do shit for me. He's always out of town for this and that. I wouldn't be surprised if he has another family somewhere. All my life, I've been the one to take all people's bullshit. Sex is all I know and it's a form of therapy for me, even though it's my abuse as well.

I'm starting counseling soon, and I just wanted to give you some of my background to where you could understand me better and maybe forgive me at some point. I was clinging to you, because although what we had was strictly sex, I knew that you were a good person... one of the best men I've come in contact with. I wish you the best.

I closed out my email and just stared at the wall. I'd met with my insurance adjuster as planned the other day, and they agreed to fix my car, thank God. Later that evening, I got a call saying that I could return to work, but I was no longer being considered to coach the basketball team. I didn't give a shit about that. I was just grateful to still have a job. At least I didn't have to sit at home and still be in my feelings without any distractions.

My biggest problem though was that I hadn't heard from Skyler since I left her Tuesday afternoon. That was probably why I kept reading that fucking email. I had too much time on my hands. I knew she was feeling a way when she left for lunch with her mom Tuesday, but after not hearing from her Tuesday night, I started worrying. I blew her fucking phone up yesterday, only for her to ignore me. *What the fuck?* I called Shy to see if she was at work, and he told me that she was. It

was taking everything in me not to go up there and act a fucking fool. She had me losing my mind.

I could barely fucking function at work today and had the kids exercising nearly the entire period like they had done something wrong. The only reason they even allowed me to go back to work was because they couldn't find anything on those cameras, but I knew they didn't want to give me my job back. My principal was glad to have me back, but the district... not so much. That was okay. I was gonna start taking on more clients at the gym so I could afford to work for another district.

The day was almost over, so I called Shy to see if the flowers had been delivered. "Yeah, Dylan?"

"Is she there?"

"Yeah. She's been really quiet though. What's going on? Why isn't she talking to you?"

"I'd rather tell you in person. I may have fucked up. Have they contacted you about my DNA results?"

"Fucked up how? Tell me now, or I'm gon' fuck *you* up on sight before you have a chance to say anything. And no. I haven't heard anything yet."

"When we had sex Tuesday, I nudded inside of her."

"Nigga, what? I know you fucking lying! Why the *fuck* you didn't have a hat on? You just refuse to learn yo' fucking lesson... you like playing with fire and shit."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I didn't expect Shy to understand. I needed to talk to Dad or Zay. It was like... when I saw Chanell's baby, possibly my baby, lying there, I wanted that same thing with Skyler. It was stupid as hell. Although I wouldn't regret it if she got pregnant, I didn't think about how she would feel about it. I should have never gone in raw, but shit, it was right there in my face, begging for my dick to fill it. "Listen, Shy. I gotta go. Did her flowers get delivered?"

"Yeah. You need to get yo' shit together, man. I don't know how the fu—"

I ended the call while he was talking. My nerves were already on edge. The only woman I had ever felt something for was pushing me away, and that shit hurt like hell. I needed her so I could be whole. I became a new man when she entered my world, and I didn't want to go back to how things were. *I'm a selfish muthafucka*. I closed my eyes again, not knowing what I was supposed to do with my thoughts. I didn't know if I should just let her be or try to force her to talk to me.

I got out of my car and went inside the gym to work out. It wasn't crowded just yet, so I was grateful for that. I hadn't gotten off early in a long time, but since my responsibilities had been reduced, I was done by two o'clock. I had duty in the morning, so afterschool duty was left to the teachers. Maybe after my workout, I would be tired enough to actually sleep, instead of wondering if Skyler would ever talk to me.

“HE SITTING OVER THERE like he done lost his best friend. All depressed and shit over a woman. Ain't had a girlfriend but for two point five seconds and in his feelings,” Chad said with a laugh.

“Man, shut the fuck up!”

I was sick of Chad and his bullshit. He'd been making lil comments like that all day. I'd been trying to ignore him, but he wouldn't let up. We were at Dad's house for Sunday dinner, and I still hadn't heard from Skyler or the fucking DNA testing people. It had been five days. Why in the fuck wasn't Skyler talking to me? I went to her house, only for her not to answer the door. I knew she was there because I saw a light turn off. I'd begged right there at her door, and she ignored me. I'd begged through text, email, and voicemail, only for her to treat me like I meant nothing to her.

I knew I fucked up by nutting in her, but I'd rather her curse me the fuck out than to ghost me like this. When I showed up at the law office, Shy turned my ass right back around. That was my last resort before stalking. I didn't wanna

resort to that, but she wasn't giving me a choice. I needed to talk to her.

I needed her to tell me that what I did was unforgiveable.

I needed her to tell me that I was the only one feeling like I couldn't breathe.

I just needed *her*... period.

Chad frowned at me then took a step in my direction, but Isaiah stopped him. "Leave him alone, bruh. You see he ain't in a playful mood. Quit fucking with him."

I stood from my seat and grabbed my keys to leave. We hadn't even eaten yet, but I was so done with being here. By the time I got to the back door, Alexz was on my heels. She wrapped her arms around me and laid her head on my back. "I'm sorry you're going through this shit, Dylan."

I grabbed her hand and pulled her outside with me. Before I could say a word to her, my phone chimed. I damn near tripped over myself trying to get to it. Once I pulled it out of my pocket, I realized it was an email from the testing center. I quickly opened the email and scrolled down until I saw, *It is 99.9% accurate that you are NOT the father...*

I fell to my knees, thanking God that I wouldn't have to deal with Chanell's ass anymore. Alexz fell to the ground with me with a look of confusion on her face. "Dylan, shit! What's wrong?"

"I'm not the father of Chanell's baby."

She hugged me tightly. "Congratulations!"

I stood and helped her to her feet. My celebration was cut short though, because the main person I wanted to call didn't want to hear from me... wanted nothing more to do with me. I hugged Alexz again and kissed her cheek. "I'll talk to you later, sis."

"Why are you leaving? Chad is a jackass. That's nothing new."

"I'm not in the mood to deal with that shit. We'll talk another time."

I walked away from her as she stared at me. The only person I wanted to talk to was Skyler. I didn't want to let her know through text that the baby wasn't mine. I wanted to tell her in person. Before going home, I decided to go to her apartment once more. I couldn't give up on what I felt. She was the woman that I knew was meant for me. Felina had said in that bar that things would be tough, but not to give up. This was the last thing that needed to be rectified for me.

When I saw her pulling in her garage, I hurriedly got out of my car and made my way to her. Once she got out of the car and saw me, she froze. A few tears fell from her eyes, and I didn't know how to take that. She'd popped her trunk before she got out, so I went to it and got her grocery bags out. My heart was beating fast as hell. One... because I was excited to see her, and two... because I was nervous as hell, not knowing how this would go.

She could tell me she never wanted to see me again. I would literally grovel at her feet and beg her to reconsider if she said that shit. I'd just be a punk ass nigga if it meant I had a chance to make things right with her. She lowered her trunk then turned back to me and said, "Hey."

"Hey."

I followed her inside her apartment and set the grocery bags on the countertop. Her mom came out of the back room, saying something about helping with the groceries, but when she saw me, she stopped midsentence and smiled. "Hi, Dylan. I'll give you two your privacy."

I smiled slightly at her then gave my attention back to the beautiful woman in front of me. "I'm sorry I popped up on you, but I feel like I'm going fucking crazy without you, Skyler. I'm falling for you. You're the only woman I want to be with. Was what I did unforgiveable? Let me know what's up. Talk to me. If you no longer want to see me, then I have no choice but to try to accept that. But man... you got me feeling like a punk ass nigga around here," I said as I rubbed my hand down the back of my head.

"Let me put up the cold stuff, and we'll talk."

“Can I help you?”

She smiled slightly as I began taking her groceries from the bags, not waiting for her response. We were completely quiet as we worked together to put up the meat, vegetables, fruits, and eggs she'd bought, then we made our way to her couch. She sat first and angled her body toward mine. I reached over and held her hand, and surprisingly, she didn't pull it away. She swallowed hard and lowered her head while I stared at her.

“When you came inside of me, I felt so many emotions, and so many thoughts ran wild through my mind. I'm going to go through them with you the same way I had to work through them, one day at a time. I couldn't talk to you while I did so, and I'm sorry that I ghosted you that way. I could have sent a message by way of Shy or something. I can see that you're worried. I'd planned to call you once I got back from the store today.”

I remained quiet. I didn't want to say anything to throw off her thought process. “The day it happened, I chose to just stay in a chaotic state, letting my mind run free, but Wednesday, I chose to focus on one particular thought. That thought was, *Did you want me to get pregnant because you were sensitive to what happened earlier that day with the DNA test.* My answer was yes. We've only been a couple for a week or so... almost two. There's no way you could want to build a family with me so soon.”

Her eyes seemed to sadden as she talked, and I didn't know what to think of that. She was right in her assumption about my sensitivity though. “Day two, I thought about how you were okay with what you did until you saw how it affected me. I reasoned that you definitely cared for me. For you to be that reckless and want a baby with me, there was something in me that you felt like you could love one day. I also evaluated my feelings for you. Day three was *why did I even let you go in raw in the first place?*”

She stopped, and as I stared at her, I asked, “Why did you?”

“I trust you. Yesterday, I was wondering if I made the right decision. I felt like I needed to compete with Chanell and that maybe it was right timing. Maybe I should let whatever was gonna happen just happen. Then I realized that you couldn’t stand Chanell. While she could possibly be the mother of your child, you didn’t have feelings for her... well, I mean you have feelings for her, just not good ones.”

I frowned slightly. I wasn’t sure what she was saying to me. *Did she not take the pill?* She fidgeted a little bit until I squeezed her hand. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying? You didn’t take the pill?”

“No, I didn’t. Are you angry?”

I was feeling a few emotions, but anger wasn’t one of them. “I’m not angry, but you trust me that much?”

She placed her hands on my cheeks. “I do. I just needed time to work through my issues. I wanted to make sure that I was doing what I was doing for the right reasons. That I was doing this because I trusted you and cared for you and not because I felt threatened or less than in some way. I’m falling for you too, Dylan, and the shit is scary as hell. I don’t know how you will handle raising two children if Chanell’s baby is yours and if I get pregnant, but I trust that you will do what you have to do.”

“I’m only going to be raising one baby if you end up pregnant. I’m not the father of Chanell’s baby.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “When did you get the results?”

“Right before I came here.”

“Congratulations! I mean... should I say congratulations?”

“Hell yeah!” She chuckled as I pulled her close to me. “You don’t understand how much I missed you. I really don’t think you would believe me if I told you.”

“Then show me,” she responded.

My dick hardened immediately. I didn’t waste any time scooping her fine ass up from that couch. I kissed her lips hungrily as I made my way down the hallway to her bedroom.

After setting her on the bed, I went to her nightstand to see she had a stash of condoms. I sat next to her. “Although you didn’t take the pill, I feel like you made that decision because of how much you care for me. If you had your choice, you wouldn’t have a baby for me right now. So I’m going to use a condom from now on until we’re ready. No sense in increasing those pregnancy possibilities.”

She smiled and pulled me to her by my beard. I was so hungry for her I knew I wouldn’t be able to take the foreplay. I pulled away from her and stood from the bed, immediately getting undressed. I pulled a condom from her drawer and strapped up while she quickly pulled her clothes off. By the time I strapped up, she was completely naked. I hovered over her body and got the oxygen I needed as I slid into my forever.

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Skyler

“I’M SORRY, Sky. I was a fool.”

“How long has this affair been going on?”

“With Ashanti, almost a year.”

I almost swallowed my fucking tongue at his bluntness. “What the hell do you mean, ‘with Ashanti’? Were there more women?” I asked, specifically to see if he would tell me the truth.

“Yes. I haven’t been faithful since Lexi was born.”

“Lexi is twenty-six years old! Are you fucking kidding me? You’ve been cheating for twenty-six years?”

Now that shit shocked me. “Twenty-five... yeah. I’ve destroyed your mother, and I deeply apologize. I’ve started the paperwork for our divorce. She won’t talk to me, but I know this is what she wants and what is best. I hate she found out the way she did, but I’ve been unfairly holding her hostage. She was married to a fraud, and I’m ashamed.”

“Julius, I’m ashamed to call you Dad. This is betrayal at its finest. You’ve deceived all of us and sold us a fucking dream. Those papers better give my mama everything she deserves. I’m going to go over them with a fine-toothed comb. You damn right you a fraud, and I don’t associate with fraud ass niggas.”

I ended the call, feeling angrier than I'd ever felt. Julius Fontenot had turned all of our worlds upside down. Lexi was on her way here, and Mama had gone on a spa date with Ms. Anissa. I was wrapping up at work, making sure we were ready to present our case next week. I'd finally built up the nerve to call my dad... Julius. My mama had been with me for over a week, and she was finally doing better, getting out and visiting family and hanging with Ms. Anissa. She still hadn't spoken to my father about what happened, and I didn't blame her.

She definitely wanted a divorce, so he had that shit right. However, I didn't know if she would want to know that he'd been cheating for most of their fucking marriage. Out of thirty years, he'd been cheating for twenty-five years. *What the fuck?* While she'd known that he'd cheated, I didn't think she knew that it had been ongoing for practically their entire marriage. There was no way he could be a fucking fuckboy for that long and she not have known more than what she said she knew. She only knew of three instances. She couldn't have been *that* naïve. She was only nineteen when they got married, so maybe she was that naïve.

Before I could gather my things, Shy walked into my office and closed the door. That wasn't a good sign. "You have time to listen to something and give me a bit of advice?"

"Yeah. What's up?" I asked, looking at the time to see I had almost two hours before I had to meet Dylan at the gym.

"There's a woman that's in an abusive relationship. It's not physical, at least not that I know of, but it's abusive in every other way. I uh... I've been feeling her for a while now, but I don't think she really knows that. She thinks we're just cool, because she's friends with my sister. I have somebody watching her back and filling me in on what's going on with her. I wanna tell her how I feel about her."

"In other words, you wanna tell her that her man ain't shit, and you wanna snatch her up and treat her like a queen since you've been invading her privacy and shit already."

His face reddened a bit as he bit his bottom lip, trying to contain his smile. “Man, listen. I will snatch her ass up so fast, that nigga head’ll spin like the fucking exorcist. But do you think that will make things harder for her if I tell her?”

“Does she love him?”

“I mean... I can imagine she does since they’ve been together for like two or three years. I overheard him talking to her crazy outside their job when he’d come to pick her up for lunch. I was there picking up Alexz. She knows that I heard him. He knows too, because I mean mugged his ass, but it’s like the nigga begging me to get at him. Whenever I’m around, he always says something out of pocket. Honestly, he got one more time before I check his ass.”

“Aww shit. You can tell her, but your expectations shouldn’t be high when you do. It should be just to let her know she has options. You can’t get caught up in their bullshit only for her to stay with him. That shit will make you hate her.”

He took a deep breath as he fell back in the chair. “That’s what I was afraid of. Maybe I shouldn’t tell her, but I can do my best to show her... make her come to me,” he said while staring off at nothing in particular.

Whoever this woman was, she had to be special to him, especially for him to talk to me about her. “Have you talked to Alexz about her?”

“Naw. I don’t want Alexz to tell her. They work together, and they’re always cackling in that office. I don’t know how Axton has any patients, especially with Alexz’s mean ass.”

I chuckled. Alexz wasn’t mean. She just didn’t tolerate bullshit, and I was with her on that front. “Just be careful, Shy. I don’t wanna see you get hurt or see you hurt somebody.”

He nodded. “Dylan picked a good one. I’m happy that y’all are happy. I’m hard on him, but I’m proud of how he handled this situation with Chanell. I know I wouldn’t have handled it well. I would have choked that bitch and been sitting in jail for assault. So much could have gone wrong.

What if Luke would have killed him because of her bullshit? The way she had him go up there to the hospital while Luke was there was trifling as hell. Yeah... I would be in jail.”

“More of a reason you need to be careful with this situation with this woman you’re into. And thanks. I believe I picked a good one too. Dylan is so special to me. I knew that after day one. We’ve only been together for three weeks now, and I couldn’t imagine my life without him. How’s that possible?”

“Axton and Alexz fell in love after two weeks. They moved fast. With Dylan, I can see him knowing right away as well. Me, Chad, and Isaiah, not so much. Chad and I are somewhat the same in that area. We like to watch our prey first... study how they move.”

“Prey?” I asked with a laugh.

“Yeah, girl. We be on the hunt. I know when I get ahold of her, she won’t mind me devouring her.”

“TMI.”

He laughed then stood from his seat. “I’ve taken up enough of your time. See you for Sunday dinner.”

“Okay. Have a good weekend.”

I gathered up my things as my mind drifted back to my dad. My mind wondered about just how many women there had been and all the shit he could have brought back to my mom... all the bullshit he could have brought to their doorstep, like the foolery from this woman named Ashanti. I wanted to look into her ass. I knew I needed to let this shit with him go though. No matter how many women he had been with over the years, the fact remained that he’d been with one outside of my mother... his wife.

“GIRL, who in the fuck is that?”

I rolled my eyes at Lexi. She was staring so hard at Chad's loud ass. "That's one of Dylan's older brothers."

"Umm, an introduction would be nice."

I rolled my eyes again. We'd just gotten to Mr. Sheldon and Ms. Anissa's house. It was Sunday, and Lexi would be leaving once we finished eating dinner. She had to work tomorrow. As everyone began arriving, I said, "Why don't you wait until everyone gets here, and I'll make introductions then."

"Okay, okay."

Right afterward, DJ walked through the door, barking and shit. I saw her eyes widen as she stared at them. I knew they were all fine, but I was partial to one. Dylan was in the kitchen with Ms. Anissa, helping her get something out of the oven. Mr. Sheldon had gone to the store for some King's Hawaiian Dinner Rolls. Ms. Anissa had said that her meal wouldn't be complete without them. I hadn't eaten them in a long time, so I was looking forward to them as well.

"I'm still partial to the other brother. I'm not going to be here all day. If we hit it off, we'll have time to talk if you introduce us now."

She was on my last nerve. So I said, "Come on, shit."

She followed me to the kitchen to see Mama at the stove with Ms. Anissa, helping out, and Dylan making his exit. He kissed my cheek and pushed Lexi in the head. They were like brother and sister already, constantly picking on each other. When we'd gone to dinner together Friday night, they'd talked like they'd been knowing each other forever. I'd introduced Ms. Anissa to Lexi already, so there was really no need in going to the kitchen.

However, that was me being slick. If Chad liked what he saw, he would come to us. "Y'all need any help?" I asked.

"No, baby. We got it. I'm almost done. Y'all go have a seat and enjoy yourselves."

As we walked out of the kitchen, Lexi had a confused look on her face. I knew she was about to charge me up about what

I was doing, but before she could, Chad walked inside. He stared at Lexi for a moment then went the other direction. What Shy had said Friday quickly came to mind. He was going somewhere to watch her without her knowing. I could tell he thought she was fine just by the way he stared at her.

“You playing. I’m going to introduce my damn self.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. He likes to be the aggressor.”

She frowned. “How do you know that?”

“Shyrón and I were talking about it Friday.”

“Ugh!”

I chuckled as we went to the couch and had a seat. When Alexz and Axton walked in, I knew things were about to get interesting. Every Sunday it was something. Chad either started with her, or she started with him. She walked right over to us, and I introduced her to Lexi, and they hugged. Lexi was extremely outgoing, just like Chad... well, like most of the Berottes. Dylan seemed to be the quietest of the bunch.

As they greeted one another and talked a little bit, Chad and DJ joined us in the family room. Chad sat across from us and stared at Lexi. That shit was bold. He wasn’t hiding that he was watching her. Maybe he was changing things up a bit. “Chad, this is my sister, Lexi. Lexi, that’s Chad.”

She smiled and said, “Nice to meet you.”

He bit his bottom lip and gave her a head nod. I introduced her to DJ the same way while Chad’s eyes stayed on her. “Damn, nigga! Why you staring at her like that? You gon’ make her think that our family is as weird as yo’ ass,” Alexz said.

I knew it wouldn’t be long before they got started. “Girl, mind the business that pays you. He sitting right next to you.”

Axton smirked at Chad’s statement. The fact that she did work for him, and he signed her paychecks made that statement have a literal meaning. She shot him the finger as Axton pulled her close to him. They began talking softly

amongst themselves, something they did quite often, as Dylan made his way next to me. He'd gone to the back room to get something for Ms. Anissa. When he sat next to me, he noticed Chad still staring at Lexi. I could tell she was slightly uncomfortable... hell, I was uncomfortable. "Nigga, you got a problem?" Dylan asked.

Chad stood from his seat and walked over to Lexi and held out his hand. When she slid her hand in his, he helped her from her seat and asked, "You mind joining me on the front porch?"

"Not at all."

As he led her to the door, she turned back to me and widened her eyes. *Whatever.* "That nigga weird around women," Dylan said. "Well, women that he finds attractive. I can't believe he tryna holla at yo' sister. Wait until I talk to her after we eat."

"If you get a chance to. If they hit it off, she's going to want to be all up under him. She's been watching him since we got here. Thirsty ass."

Dylan chuckled then pulled me to him and kissed my forehead. We'd been getting along amazingly well. We worked out together when we could, but he'd been picking up clients. Sometimes, I'd go to the gym just to watch him in action. He was really good at what he did. It almost seemed as if he enjoyed training people more than he enjoyed teaching. I could imagine that the bullshit with Chanell had taken the fun out of it. We'd talked about him transferring to a different school, but he said he had to wait until closer to the beginning of the next school year.

We'd even began talking about where we saw our lives in the next five years. I knew there was more that he wanted to say to me, but he'd withheld it for whatever reason. I didn't push for him to tell me, because I knew he would in his time. I couldn't wait until things got back to normal where my mama could enjoy time alone, and I could go to his place and enjoy time alone with him without worrying about her. I was able to do that last night, but only because Lexi was here.

When the front door opened and Lexi came in with a frown on her face, I knew that couldn't be good. "Aww shit. She found out who the real Chad was. That could be the only reason why she frowning like that," Dylan said softly in my ear, causing me to chuckle.

Lexi flopped down next to me as Chad kept walking toward the back door to speak to Shy and Isaiah as they walked in. Dylan stood from his seat and followed suit. I looked over at Lexi and asked softly, "What happened?"

She rolled her eyes. "He said I was too young for him. That I was a beautiful woman, but he preferred his women to be at least thirty to avoid the games women in their twenties typically play. I told him that he was stereotyping me and that it wasn't cool. He just shrugged me off and said that was his preference. Apparently, he's stuck on himself. Oh well. I should have tried talking to DJ first. Now I can't talk to any of them because I tried to talk to his big ass first."

I chuckled slightly, but she was pissed. I could see it all over her. She would be after him just to be petty now. I wouldn't be surprised if whenever she came back to town, she had a nigga with her. "Nigga, move out the damn way!" we heard Alexz yell.

Not long after, she was screaming as usual, and Chad was telling her how she needed to stay in her place and quit fucking with him. I swore, they didn't bite their damn tongues around here. They said whatever they wanted to say, whenever they wanted to say it. Me talking that way to my dad Friday was simply because I was angry. Under normal circumstances, I didn't use vulgarities around my parents, especially not the F bomb.

"I'm waiting for the day that we have a Sunday dinner and the two of you can behave like adults," Mr. Sheldon said.

"Daddy, I match—" Alexz started.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You match energies... In other words, he started it."

I slowly shook my head at their foolery. Lexi and I hadn't really had time to talk without Mom being around, so I asked her, "Have you talked to your father?"

"No, but I talked to Ashanti Robinson. I also have information to send you so you can check her lying ass out. I think she knew Dad was married."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because if she was so pissed and done with him, why were they in the grocery store together the other day?"

Hmm. That was interesting. Lexi had become the devil on my shoulder, because I'd convinced myself that I didn't want to know. After taking a deep breath, I said, "Because she's pregnant, but you know what? I don't even care. This shit is stressful enough. If I find out that she knew he was married, what is that gonna solve? All it's going to do is make me wanna go beat her ass. I don't care."

She slowly nodded repeatedly. I supposed she was thinking over what I said. "You're right. Fuck them."

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Dylan

TO COMMEMORATE the one-month mark since Skyler and I had been together, I planned a night of fun and romance. She loved to play putt-putt golf, so I would be taking her to Colorado Canyon. I would much rather drive some balls at 5 Under Golf Center, but I could get with this too, especially when it was time to wrap my arms around her and help her swing the club.

I'd bought her a bouquet of white roses, and I was currently getting dressed in my white jeans and a white t-shirt with black graphics on it. Skyler's favorite color was white. I couldn't wait to see what she would be wearing tonight. I asked her to wear white and to be sexy casual, because we would be outside for part of our date. I didn't even think she'd noticed that it had been a month since I first dived into her paradise and claimed her as mine, but I was surely going to put her on game.

When I'd gone to the florist to pick up her arrangement, the craziest shit happened. I ended up standing right next to Luke. He was there ordering a bouquet for someone. He sure in the hell moved on quick. Everything in me wanted to fuck him up for trying to ruin my career... then I wanted to shimmy right in his fucking face. When he noticed it was me, his light bright, damn near white ass turned red.

What shocked me about the moment was when he turned to me and apologized for trying to fuck up my career over a

bitch that didn't have the decency to honor her marriage. I didn't respond verbally to that, because Chanell's email came to mind, and I somewhat felt sorry for her. I'd only given him a head nod, because I still wanted to fuck him up on GP, but he went as far as to stick his hand out, wanting a handshake.

That was when I said, *nigga, gone somewhere with yo' petty ass. You acted just like a bitch. Get the fuck out my face before I give you what I been visualizing myself giving you since I realized it was you next to me.*

That killed that shit. He nodded and got the fuck out of dodge. I didn't know who he took me for. Just because I was quiet and laidback, didn't mean I had bitch in my blood. I would have fucked him up in that flower shop. All they'd be able to sell were petals when I would have finished with his ass.

Afterward was when I came home to get ready for our night. Not only were we celebrating a month together, but we needed to also celebrate her first win with Berotte and Associates. She'd gone to Dallas for the court date, and she and Shyrón had just gotten back yesterday. The court date had been pushed back at the request of the DA and the judge had granted a week continuance.

It had lasted for two days, and the jury had taken hours to deliberate. All that mattered was that they came back with a not guilty verdict. She said that she nearly screamed in court. I bet those white people were pissed that he got off. A black man actually beat charges of physical and sexual abuse of a white kid. Unbelievable. Shyrón had told me that Skyler was a force to be reckoned with in the courtroom. She was smart and could be a smart-ass... deadly combination.

I was just happy that she was mine. Because of her, I knew what love was. We'd never said the L word to one another, but I felt it whenever I was with her. My heart was wide open to receive everything she had to offer. She gave of herself so freely, and after knowing my past, she still came around quickly and accepted me just the way that I was. She said it was something about me that drew her to me, and I felt the same way.

I'd seen plenty of beautiful women and had them too, but Skyler Shavon Fontenot stole my heart. The first time I saw her I got nervous as hell. That had never happened around a beautiful woman. While I was already living my lifestyle change, it hadn't been long, and it would have been easy to revert to my old way of thinking, but that didn't happen. For the first time in my life, I wanted a woman to actually know me, love me, and enjoy being around me.

After finishing my look, I glanced at myself in the mirror, knowing that I looked fly as hell in all white. I even wore some high-top, white Nike's to complete the look. The Nike check on them were in a black and white marble pattern. We would turn heads for sure tonight. After an easy game of putt-putt, we would be going to dinner, and the night would really begin after that.

Heading to her apartment, I was beyond happy, feeling the happiest I'd ever felt. Any man that thought they could go through life without a woman's love was delusional. That shit was more powerful than anything I'd ever experienced in life... that shit *was* life. We did everything together. We worked out together, got manicures and pedicures together... there wasn't a single time in my day that I didn't long to be near her.

Chad called me soft, but he could have fucked around and lost out on something just as perfect as what Alexz had with Axton and what I felt like I now had with Skyler. Lexi wanted him bad, but maybe she was meant for someone else... someone that could appreciate her. That nigga was tripping over a six-year difference. I could have sworn he was in his forties or some shit. He was only thirty-two and Lexi was twenty-six. She seemed to have a good head on her shoulders, but now he would never know.

When I got to Skyler's I damn near ran to the door, hoping that I didn't lose control and fuck the shit out of her before we could leave. After smoothing down my eyebrows, I rang her doorbell, then shoved my hands in my pockets. I was anxious like it was our first date. However, when she opened that damn door, and I saw her in her sexy all-in-one outfit, I grabbed my

dick. Her oiled legs were on display since the romper was shorts.

She smiled big as she swiped the curls from her face. Her hair was up, giving me perfect access to her neck. “Hey, baby. Those flowers are beautiful.”

I extended them to her. I’d nearly forgotten I was holding them. When she turned around and I saw that her back was covered in lace, I couldn’t help but wrap my arms around her, pulling her back to me. “Hey, baby. You look beautiful,” I said then kissed her neck.

“Thank you, handsome,” she said as she pulled my beard.

“Skyler, man... I wanna undress you so bad right now. It’s been four days, and you know yo’ man stay hungry.”

“This date isn’t etched in stone, Dylan. We’re grown and can do whatever the hell we want to do. Besides, I can’t turn you down when I want it as badly as you do. My insides are twitching from withdrawals.”

She ain’t said but a fucking word. “Where’s Ms. Patricia?”

“With Ms. Anissa at painting with a twist.”

I slid the fabric of her romper over her shoulders and kissed her toffee-colored skin as she moaned softly. I would do my best not to fuck her up too bad. I just needed a taste. Turning her to me, I said, “I’m sorry you went through all this, preparing your look for me, but I need you so bad. My shit ’bout to destroy my zipper.”

“You don’t have to apologize, baby. I need you too.”

She turned to me and finished taking off her clothes, carefully laying it over the back of the couch. I pulled off my clothes and did the same as she walked toward her bedroom. Had she not, we would have been in her front room fucking without a condom again. The way she felt without one, I knew I couldn’t put the pressure of pulling out on myself. We would most likely have a situation like last time. Her pussy was so fucking wet and tight. It was like trying to get out of a warm bed in the morning in the middle of winter.

As I watched her walk down the hallway in that white thong and her ass jiggling as she did so, I thanked God for his perfection. Skyler's body looked like God said, *Let me take my time with this one*. He carefully sculpted her curves to where they flowed easily and placed the land that flowed with milk and honey between her legs. When He was done with creating her, He said it was good.

When I got to her bedroom, she was already sitting in the middle of her bed with her legs spread wide, her feet flat and her arms draped over her knees. The condom was in the bed right between her legs. I almost chuckled. I still had my phone in my hand, so I started "Permission" by Ye Ali. That was my shit, and it always made me think about Skyler and how perfect she was. I didn't deserve a woman like her, but every day I planned to earn every moment of her time, love, and affection.

She slowly laid back as I stared at her beautiful body with my dick in my hand. He was on go already, but I wanted to savor her. After joining her in the bed, I brought my face between her legs. She was so fucking sexual. I hadn't touched her yet and her legs were trembling. I turned her on so much, and knowing that shit turned me on even more. She came easily with me, and that spoke volumes to me about the intensity of our connection.

I kept my eyes on hers as I glided my hand up her leg. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head as they fell closed, and she let out a soft whimper. "Skyler, I need your eyes on me, baby. Let me see the fire in them. Watch me eat the fuck out of your pussy."

She lifted her head and stared at me, then squirted right at me. I loved this shit. The way I could command her body to obey my every word was crazy as hell. I was only centimeters away from her clit, and I knew she could feel me breathing on it. My beard was probably tickling her skin as I stared at her perfect abyss of love. Glancing back up at her, I decided to tease her a bit. As she watched me, I stuck my tongue out like I was about to lick her, and she squirted a little bit again.

"Dylaaaannn," she whined.

“What’s up, baby? You ready for me to suck this shit up, huh?”

“Pleeeaaaase,” she said as she slid her hand to her pussy and began patting her clit with her fingertips.

She knew I would dive in after that, especially when she started flicking it back and forth and then pushed a couple of her fingers inside. I quickly pulled her hand away and sucked her fingers, not wanting a drop of her goodness to go to waste. When I withdrew her fingers from my mouth, I went straight to her pussy, licking it in its entirety, then began sucking the juices from her like I sucking on a damn malt from Sonic.

I didn’t spare any technique as I swirled my tongue around her clit then sucked it between my lips. When her back arched, I knew she was about to bless me with her anointing, and I was ready to receive the blessings from it. Her screams and pants of pleasure only made me work harder. When she wrapped her legs around my neck, I knew I had gotten to that point. She was going to kill me, and I would die a very happy man.

Pulling away slightly, I slid my fingers down her slit to her ass and began a slow fuck in her asshole, preparing for the backlash. One thing fucking around had taught me was how to please a woman. I knew the female body better than I knew my own shit. If I could keep her in the zone, her body would give me everything I desired. Bringing my mouth back to her clit, I sucked it at the same pace as my stroke as I felt her legs tremble against my ears. “Dylan... I’m about to cum, baby. Shiiiiit!” she screamed as her fountain drenched me.

There was no way we were going anywhere tonight. Our night would be here... fucking each other’s brains out. When her asshole clenched me, I knew she was about to give me more, and that she did. When I sat up, the condom packet was stuck to my chest. Before tearing it open, I licked that shit as she watched. It was covered in her excitement and again, I wasn’t letting any of it go to waste... not if I could help it.

After licking that shit clean, I tore it open. When I got ready to put it on, Skyler sat up and took it from me. “Let me,”

she said softly as she placed it on the head of my dick and put her mouth on me, rolling that shit on with her lips.

My dick jumped in excitement as she laid back on her back and grabbed her ankles. I was about to take a page from her book and bust before I even slid between those walls. She was so fucking sexy, and watching her pussy twitch in excitement and drool at the sight of me was nearly too much for me to handle.

I didn't waste any time sliding into her and releasing a sigh of relief. "Fuck!" I yelled.

The heat that overtook me felt like it was about to set my ass on fire. She wrapped her legs around my waist and her arms around my neck, pulling me closer to her. My strokes were rough but steady at the same time. I was falling so deep into her shit, when she parted her lips to moan, I should have seen the head of my dick.

Her screams and the way she scratched my back only motivated me to give her everything I had. When we were done, my back was going to look like I was in the movie *12 Years a Slave*. I knew she had to be drawing blood at some point. "Skyler, fuck, baby! This pussy is ridiculous. Feel like this shit was made just for me."

She panted and moaned as I grunted, enjoying every stroke into her love. I lowered my head and kissed her neck then lightly sucked her flesh before moving to her earlobe and doing the same. Lifting my head, I stared into her eyes, surprised that she was staring at me without me telling her to do so. I held her gaze as I slowed my assault, summoning her orgasm. Her legs trembled at my waist as I said, "Yeah, baby, cum on this dick. Let your pussy tell me how much she love me."

I could see the emotion in her eyes, and I knew that telling her what I needed to tell her would take her over the top and that was just what I wanted. After gently brushing her cheek with the back of my hand, I said, "I'm in love with you, Skyler. I love you, girl."

The tears rained down her cheeks as her pussy unleashed on my ass. “Dylaaan... fuuuuck! I love you too, baby.”

I bit my bottom lip, trying to contain my emotions. I wasn't a soft ass nigga, but hearing a woman tell me she loved me for the first time in my life was so overwhelming for me. Well... a woman not related to me. Closing my eyes, I allowed a tear to fall as I nudded in the latex. Lowering my head to her pillow, I discreetly wiped my face although I was pretty sure she'd seen it.

When I lifted my head, she brought her hands to my face and said, “I love you, Dylan.”

I kissed her lips and fell to the bed next to her. Pulling her on top of me, I could feel the tremble go through me as she stared at me. “Skyler... that was the first time I remember a woman telling me she loved me. I'm more than sure my mama told me, but she died when I was one. There's no way I could remember that. Your love...” I slowly shook my head, “I felt it before you said it, but now that you've verbalized it, I can barely handle the intensity of it.”

“Dylan, knowing your past, I didn't expect us to move so fast. I didn't expect to hop in a whole ass relationship when I got here. I'd actually promised myself that I wouldn't do that shit... that I would guard my heart. Your sincerity penetrated my defenses. I could see it in your eyes. After my dad let me down, my mind briefly tried to wonder if you would do something like that to me. I dispelled that thought immediately, because I can't go into this expecting you to fail. That was when my heart opened more than I ever thought it would.”

I pulled her close to me, causing her to lay on my chest. There was no other woman in this world for me. Skyler Fontenot was my ride or die... my run and gun. She had my back, and I would always have hers. She was the one, and since I knew that since day one, it only made sense that I would eventually make the shit official. However, I wanted to enjoy dating her and giving her all the attention she needed. The best part was that I knew she felt the same way.

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EPILOGUE

S kyler

Six months later...

“HAD it not been for me and DJ, this moment wouldn’t have happened. So I would appreciate the proper shout out for fulfilling your future, old man.”

Chad was in rare form, and that was nothing new. However, this was a happy occasion, and everyone was feeling joyful about the nuptials between Daddy Sheldon and Mama Nissa. Out of all people, Chad was the one selected to do the toast. We all ended up being in the wedding, so Dylan was able to walk me down the aisle. He’d been extremely protective of me since I was seven months pregnant. It seemed that all it took was that one time for his bionic sperm to get to the intended target. His shit had great aim.

When I found out I was pregnant, we’d only been together for two months. I was scared as hell, but I supposed the Lord knew what He was doing by putting this Leo and Gemini together. Our little girl was scheduled to arrive in a couple of months, but we were still stuck on what we would name her. As much as he longed for the presence of his mom, I thought about incorporating the name Marie in it somewhere. This would be the greatest love he would feel from a woman... a little woman.

Dylan rubbed my stomach as Chad continued. “Despite how you found Mama, you had to be the one to step up and

make her feel loved. I'm happy that you did. I'm happy that you found your forever... again. Mama, you made a beautiful bride, and I'm so happy you chose to be a part of a family that can be a little crazy at times, but one that was ready to offer love to an amazing woman for our father. You filled that void plus some. So, on behalf of the Berottes and the Dents... who are now honorary Berottes, we wish the two of you nothing but happiness... love, peace, and *sooooouuulll!*”

The crowd erupted with laughter as Alexz rolled her eyes. I swore Chad was only funny to the people that didn't know him as well as we did. Glancing over at my sister, I winked at her. She was still hoping that Chad would come around, but it didn't look like he would. He'd barely even spoken to her. We toasted to Mama and Daddy Berotte's love, and I threw back my sparkling cider. There was no point in sipping. Dylan glanced at me and chuckled, then did the same with his cider. Since I couldn't drink, he didn't either.

That man had been my everything. He was loving, attentive, caring, considerate, and kind... all the attributes I thought were smoke screens, hiding the real him. He was just so smooth with it. His nighttime foot rubs were everything. However, what I loved the most about him was that he took our self-care seriously. If I missed an appointment, he was sure to reschedule that shit immediately, whether it was my hair or getting my nails done. We often got manicures together anyway.

There seemed to be a little drama going on between Shyrón and the woman he walked in with during the wedding though. Her name was Brittany, and she was Alexz's coworker. He had to remind me of our conversation a while back about the woman he was feeling. This pregnancy brain had been kicking my ass. She was a beautiful woman and very friendly. I wondered if he'd eventually told her how he felt about her. They seemed to be in a heated discussion for most of the reception thus far.

Once the music kicked back up, everyone made their way back to the dancefloor. Rockin' A had done an amazing job catering the food. I was so full though. I was in desperate need

of a nap. My mama came over and sat next to me as she rubbed my belly. “How’s my grandbaby?”

“She’s fine. Since I’ve eaten, she’s been calm.”

She chuckled then made her way to the dancefloor to cut up with Axton’s mother and Mama Nissa. She’d been doing well, even after I told her that Dad had been cheating for their entire marriage. I still couldn’t believe she would stay with a man that she knew was fucking around on her, despite the circumstances. However, she said she didn’t know it had been going on as long as it had been, nor did she know that it had been so many women. Ashanti’s ass stunned her when she got pregnant, and she knew she could no longer subject herself to his abuse.

My dad had given her everything as promised. She sold the house in Dallas and moved the rest of her things to Beaumont. She was now living in my apartment as the new owner, and I had moved in with Dylan. Lexi was searching for a new job out here too. She said she refused to live up there with Dad by herself.

Neither of us had spoken to him for months after the truth came out, besides that time I cursed him for filth. It was only a month ago that I finally answered his call and tried to forgive him and move on from it. Besides, I now had a little brother that was three months old. My child would need to know her family. I wanted to keep being angry with him, but since I’d been pregnant, my emotions had been everywhere. Despite what he did to my mama, he was still my dad. While I knew our relationship would never be the same, I knew I had to at least put that bullshit behind me.

When the DJ spun a song by Joe, “Don’t Wanna Be a Player,” Dylan looked over at me with a smirk on his lips. “Girl, that shit ought to be my theme song. Come dance with yo’ man.”

I giggled as he grabbed my hand and helped me from my seat. Thankfully, there hadn’t been a peep from Chanell. Even though we knew there shouldn’t have been a word from her, I was still on guard for the bullshit. After Dylan had expressed

to me what the email to him was about, I felt somewhat sorry for her. She had been through a lot, and I could only hope she was getting her life on track for her and the baby's sake.

Honestly, I was pretty much on guard for just bullshit in general. To say Dylan got around, we never seemed to have a problem with anyone being overly friendly or trying to get at him. That made loving him just that much easier, and the love he gave me in return was something I'd never forget.

The End

If you did not read the author's note at the beginning, please go back and do so before leaving a review. 😊

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AFTERWORD

From the Author...

Dylan caught me totally off guard. I expected him to be this extreme jackass that didn't give a damn about anyone but himself. He was just the opposite. I could have hopped in the book and beat Chanell's ass my damn self though. The way Dylan handled that situation was admirable, and the way his family had his back was just as admirable. The talks with everyone, especially Isaiah, touched my heart. I can't wait to get to his story.

Skyler was trying to be hard. That didn't last long after she came in contact with the smooth operator. Dylan Berotte had her ass wide open from jump. After trying to separate herself from him, she ended up crawling right back. Her ho-ass daddy deserved Chanell though. They should have hooked up since he'd been ho-ing for twenty-five years. My heart broke for her mother.

Sheldon and Anissa tied the knot, and Alexz and Axton will be next! Can you guess whose story is going to come next from the crew?

I really hope you enjoyed this story. As always, I gave it my all. Whether you liked it or not, please take the time to leave a review on Amazon and/or Goodreads.

There's also an amazing playlist on Apple Music and Spotify for this book, under the same title that includes some great R&B and rap tracks to tickle your fancy.

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