

SHAE SANDERS

STUDIO
79

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Contents

[Dedication](#)

[1. Danger](#)

[2. Castra](#)

[3. Danger](#)

[4. Castra](#)

[5. Danger](#)

[6. Danger](#)

[7. Castra](#)

[8. Danger](#)

[9. Danger](#)

[10. Castra](#)

[11. Danger](#)

[12. Castra](#)

[13. Danger](#)

[14. Castra](#)

[15. Danger](#)

[16. Castra](#)

[17. Castra](#)

[18. Castra](#)

[19. Castra](#)

[Castra's Wiki](#)

[Thank You](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by Shae Sanders](#)

*To the artists, producers, writers, and creators who ushered in
the golden age of R&B. Thank you for providing the
soundtrack to my adolescence.*

DANGER

I REALLY, REALLY DIDN'T wanna do this.

And by *this*, I was referring to the very lucrative but extremely inconvenient album reworking for a certain temperamental R&B singer I knew who shall remain nameless. Because just thinking her name put me in a bad place. Even after all this time.

Three-time Grammy award winning, two-time American Music Award winning, two-time Soul Train Award winning, triple platinum debut artist Castra DeAvalon.

The one and only.

But I just knew her as Cass.

I remember the first time I heard her name. Spring of 1990. Lanelle Pearce, Prospect Records' A&R rep, told me she had a young singer with a big voice who needed a producer with fresh ears. Somebody who knew what young black kids were listening to, and who could capture the sound and mood of the times. She didn't *say* New Jack Swing, but we both knew

that's what she meant. Basically, she wanted something close to the Teddy Riley sound without the Teddy Riley price tag.

For the most part, that was me.

When Lanelle said her name—Castra DeAvalon—it glided smoothly off her tongue like she'd said it in a romance language. I joked that it sounded like the name of a soap opera character.

Ironic, because that's exactly what my life became when that girl walked into it. A soap opera. The Young and the fucking Restless.

“Yo, where's the Clearly Canadian?” I barked.

Marlo, my assistant, frowned at that. “You wanted some? You didn't tell me that.”

“Yeah, I did. I specifically told you she likes the strawberry ones. Grab six of 'em from the store. Get me some plain Lays and a couple of kiwis, too.”

I ignored Marlo's eye roll in favor of finding somebody a little lower on the employee rung to properly clean and sanitize whatever Castra had to touch, look at, sit on, or breathe near.

Like I said, I did not wanna do this.

It had all started out pretty ordinary, as these things go. I met Castra a few months after her eighteenth birthday. I had just turned twenty years old, and was fresh off my internship at LaFace. I'd been producing independently here and there for the experience, but my star was rising a little thanks to a

track I produced for Johnny Gill. It never got sent to radio, and I was discouraged as hell about that, thinking my career was over before it started, but when Lanelle walked into my studio with that girl, everything changed.

She was cute as hell. Brown-skinned, a short black bob haircut, bright red lipstick, and a little bit of attitude. Not unlike millions of other round-the-way girls on any MLK in America, so she didn't make much of an impression. But when she opened her mouth to sing, and that angelic, honey-coated mezzo soprano came pouring out, it was on. I said yes to working with her right there on the spot.

I had no idea what I was in for.

“Tasha! I was looking for you.”

Tasha, my second receptionist, turned at the sound of my voice, that ever-present scowl sitting firmly on her face.

“What you need, Danger?” she asked with an eye roll, like she didn't get paid extremely well to take care of my needs.

“Castra's coming in today,” I said. “I need the headphones, mic—”

“I know the drill.” She rolled her eyes again, adopting a mocking tone to say, “Only the best for princess Castra.”

I chuckled at that. “Yeah, it's bullshit, but I'm trying to make it go as smooth as possible.”

“They sent over a rider, Danger. Who the fuck does that for *studio* time?”

I shrugged. “It is what it is.

Tasha crossed her arms in front of her and raised a suspicious eyebrow. “What’s the deal with all this, anyway? I thought her album was finished.”

“It is. Her label’s scared to death.”

She nodded knowingly. “Yeah, well, after that last one... what was it called?”

“Hell if I know.”

“It was bad, Danger. What were they thinking?”

I shrugged and pretended not to know, and Tasha took her leave to find some cleaning products.

The truth was, I knew *exactly* what Castra’s sophomore album was called—*Just Castra*—along with the names of every track and every person who wrote, arranged, mixed, produced, or approved them. I also knew what her label heads were thinking when they released it. She was their golden goose, so they trusted her to know what was best, and then they ended up in the hole when the album came out.

Now, it was time for round three, and they’d brought me in at the one-yard line to clean up their mess.

I got the call two weeks ago while I was at the barbershop. Lanelle paged me 911. Thinking it was one of my standbys looking for a good night, I jumped on my barber’s phone and called right back. As soon as I heard Lanelle’s voice, I knew the deal. I followed the trades, so Castra’s upcoming release date for album number three was fresh in my mind.

Prospect was terrified. Album two, *Just Castra*, came out in 1993. Janet, Mariah, Toni, and Xscape all released that year, so the field was crowded as hell for female acts. None of the singles from *JC* charted, and the critics panned that shit like their jobs depended on it.

Now, here we were four years later, and this new album seemed destined for the same path. Prospect wanted me to rework the album and recapture the magic from *Night Never Ends*, her debut. *Our* debut.

And they were paying me quite well to do it.

So I said yes, of course. Not because I needed the money. I was doing it out of the kindness of my heart, because if there was one thing I knew about Castra Lashae DeAvalon, it was that she needed to sing like she needed to breathe, and flopping two times in a row would be the nail in the coffin of her career.

But now that I'd had a chance to really process it, I realized it was probably a mistake. A well-meaning one, but a mistake all the same.

As I walked into the control room, I thought about the last time I saw Cass. Five years ago. In person, at least. I watched her on *Video Soul* when she was on her press run for *Just Castra*, but beyond that, nothing. Despite us both being in the industry, it was surprisingly easy to avoid each other.

If I had to sum it up in just a few words, I'd have to say she hated me. And to be honest, I wasn't all that rah rah about her, either. Yet we were about to squeeze ourselves and all our

baggage into my studio for three days in the name of recapturing the magic.

It had disaster written all over it.

I had no idea what to expect. Would she be pissed? Polite? With all her media training, she certainly knew how to fake it, but *would* she? I wasn't sure. Nothing was ever certain with her.

“Danger.”

My sound engineer, Andrew, had just appeared in the doorway, tall and gangly with freckles and shaggy red hair. He looked dorky, because he was, but that's what made him good at his job. He was my very first hire when I opened my own studio, and we were kinda like the dream team at this point.

“What's up?” I said, already knowing the answer. I felt it in my soul, because that's how it is when you're as connected to someone as I was to Cass. Still. Even after all this time. And when he opened his mouth, he confirmed it for me.

“Get ready, man. She's here.”

CASTRA

“WHY ARE WE JUST sitting here?”

I looked over at my assistant and shrugged. “I really don’t know.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Okay, fine. I do. I don’t wanna do this.”

Shaneka stared out the window of our town car—excuse me, the *label’s* town car, her eyes rising slowly as she took in the measure of the Midtown Atlanta building that loomed large above us. It was a far cry from the last studio Rome worked out of. He had his own place, now, and by the looks of it, he’d upgraded.

Good for him.

I still didn’t wanna do this.

“You have to do this,” Shaneka said, stating the obvious. “I mean, if you still wanna be a singer, that is. If not, we can keep

on driving. Have a few drinks and wait for the clubs to open. I'm flexible."

Despite my bad mood, I laughed at that. Shaneka always managed to unearth little pieces of the joy I'd buried a few years ago.

"Castra. Do you still wanna be a singer?"

I knew what she was doing, but I played along anyway. "Yes, Shaneka. I still wanna be a singer."

"Cool." She pushed her glasses up on her nose. "Do you wanna be financed by a label, or do you wanna go it alone and distribute CDs out the back of your mama's Honda Civic?"

"It's an Accord. And you know it's the first one."

"Okay, okay." She scratched her chin and pretended to think. "Well, it seems to me that if you wanna keep all that good money they're spending on you, and not have to pay it *back*, I might add, then you need to get your pretty self out this car and into Studio 79. What you think?"

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Seventy-nine," I repeated, letting it wash over me. Seven. Nine.

The day my life changed forever.

Reluctantly, I gathered my purse and overnight bag in my hands. "Alright. Let's go."

Studio 79 was located on the fourth floor of the sleek building we'd sat in front of while I was pretending I had a choice in any of this. The truth of the matter was that if I

didn't get my shit together, my third album could very well be my last.

And that would be soul-crushing.

Because at this point, singing was all I had.

I'd started in the children's choir at the tender age of nine, but it was staring at the cover of Janet Jackson's *Control* album while I listened to it over and over that made me decide I wanted to be a star. It was the one and only thing in life I wanted to do.

I couldn't lose this.

The faint smell of incense greeted us as we exited the elevator. I almost smiled at the fact that he remembered, but I refused to allow my mouth to form the expression. There was too much anger in me. Anxiety, too, because I had no idea what I was walking into. Would he be smug? Cold? Vengeful?

If I were him, I'd probably be feeling a combination all three.

Night Never Ends, my debut album—our debut album—was lightning in a bottle. That's what *Jet Magazine* said, anyway, and they would know. It was my first cover, and I remember my parents being upset that I had to share it with my producer. But it was 1991, and that's just how it was at the time. The producers were as famous as the artists. Riley, Jam and Lewis, LA and Babyface...and Romell "Danger" Brooks. He was the youngest, the newest on the scene, and the work he did for me put him on the map and shot *Night Never Ends*

straight to number one on the R&B charts. And in a year of releases by the likes of Michael Jackson, Jodeci, Shanice, Mariah, Boyz II Men, Keith Sweat, and Stevie Wonder himself, that put me in excellent company.

Romell “Danger” Brooks was a musical genius.

I remember the first time I saw him. Lanelle, my A&R rep, took me to meet him in Philly at the studio he was working out of at the time. It was small, dark, and smelled like weed, but she assured me his talent was much grander than the building he was renting.

Cute didn’t describe him properly.

Dark brown skin, perfect high-top fade with a blond streak—he was hanging tough with Kwamé back then—and the kind of relaxed, lazy smile that both puts you at ease and turns you on. Full lips, square jaw, tall, muscular frame...he was all man, but a young one. Young and playful enough that I wasn’t intimidated. I liked him immediately.

And then, three years later, after our meteoric rise to success and superstardom, I begged my label to get rid of him and let me work with someone else.

“This is it,” Shaneka announced. “You ready?”

“I guess. Do I look okay?”

She didn’t so much as glance in my direction as she pulled the glass door open for me. “You look amazing.”

That was good, because casually amazing was exactly what I was going for. I’d gotten a fill-in and had my braids redone,

and I'd taken my time putting on my makeup.

Why?

Not entirely sure.

Okay, that's a lie.

I did it because I still cared what he thought. Even after all this time.

I stepped through the glass door toward the receptionist, who was already wearing a giddy smile on her cute face. Sometimes I was tempted to forget I was famous—it's so surreal and ridiculous as a concept, generally speaking—but the looks on people's faces always brought me back to reality and reminded me who I was.

She stood and walked around the desk. "Miss DeAvalon, welcome to Studio 79. It's so nice to see you."

"You too, ma'am."

"Daphne."

I nodded as we shook hands.

"I'll show you to the back. Can I get you anything? Drink? Snack?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Perfect."

I looked all around me as Daphne led us down a long hallway. The textured gray walls were lined with photos and plaques, undoubtedly designed to remind us that we were in the presence of a legend. I spotted our *Jet* cover. His *Source*

cover. The *Vibe* article. His *Word Up* article. And the infamous *Right On* piece. I couldn't believe he wanted to display that one.

It all seemed like a lifetime ago.

Daphne opened the door to the studio and stepped aside for us to pass through. "Let me know if you need anything," she said, letting the door shut behind her.

Well.

This was a long way from that dank little studio he'd started in. This place was state-of-the art. Sleek. Spacious. Professional. It was Rome, but with all the trimmings.

And spotlessly clean. Of course.

"Castra."

I whirled around, coming face-to-face with the man who had changed my life in so many ways. I'd expected this moment to feel monumental, but when I saw his face, I just felt...sad. I kept my expression as neutral as possible, even going so far as to use his professional moniker to greet him back.

"Danger."

It was a moment five years in the making. He stared at me, and I stared right back. Into those brown eyes, dark, warm, magnetic. Goosebumps erupted on my arms, and every inch of me seemed to tingle as we held each other's gaze. My heart beat faster. My legs felt weak.

I was almost grateful when he looked away.

“Who’s this?” he said, his eyes on Shaneka.

“My assistant.”

“Oh, okay,” he said. “Nice to meet you. She treating you right?”

Shaneka chuckled. “Of course. She keeps me humming, though.”

Rome nodded and brought his eyes back to mine. “Yeah, she has that effect on people.”

He glanced down at my bag. “Why don’t you set your stuff down and make yourself comfortable. We’re all set up in there. There’s a couple of new folks you need to meet, then we’ll run through some shit and get started. That work for you?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool. Come in when you’re ready.”

Well, that was...painless.

I watched him walk away. His gait hadn’t changed; perfect posture, cocky, mannish, but relaxed. He wore a black t-shirt and red track pants. He’d put on a little weight, but I could tell by the way his clothes fit that it was mostly muscle. Barring that, and his hair, which was now cut low, he looked exactly the same.

I handed my bags to Shaneka and toed my shoes off.

“Did they get my requests?” I called to Rome.

“Yeah. We got your rider. It wasn’t necessary, though. I remembered the Clearly Canadians and the fact that you’re a germaphobe.”

“I’m not a—whatever.”

Shaneka snickered.

She’d only been with me for two years. My last assistant, April, was chosen by my label and was therefore *loyal* to my label. I’m ashamed to say it, but I was twenty-three years old when I realized I needed to have people around me who were there for me and me only.

My parents didn’t count, because at twenty-three, I also realized something about *them*; they cared as much about the money as they did about me. That was the only explanation for the stuff that happened at the beginning of my career. They *talked* a good game about being strict, but they let so much slide...

At any rate, I was grown now, and I was trying to make my own choices. Late in the game, yeah, but I was here now.

“Nice studio you have here,” I said to Rome. “Congrats. You must be doing well for yourself.”

“I am *now*, yeah.”

I ignored that.

I had no choice, really. I knew he still blamed me for his career going off the rails, and...well, he might not have been entirely wrong about that. So I let him get his job in.

Rome commenced to showing me around, which was completely unnecessary, but which was his usual routine. Every producer had their own style, and most of them had a strange, superstitious need to run through their routine before they got started.

It was fine.

But I stayed as far from Rome as I could without being obvious about it. Being near him was...affecting me, his cologne conjuring up memories that I didn't want or need to be picturing right now. The outline of his muscles in that fitted t-shirt was taking me back to those nights in the studio when I would daydream about what it might be like to kiss him. To hug him. To feel his lips on my neck.

So I willed myself to focus on the task at hand. We had an album to fix and only three days to do it. And this time, it was *my* career on the line.

DANGER

STILL FINE AS HELL.

That was my first thought when I laid eyes on her. She was 25 now, and still had a hint of that cute baby face, only there was a maturity to her now, one that comes with both age and experience. It's like dog years for us; a 25-year-old in the industry is mentally and emotionally 45 in regular people years.

Her long-sleeved t-shirt stopped an inch above her jeans, revealing a ring of smooth brown skin and a small gold ring adorning her belly button. Her poetic justice breads framed her pretty face just right, and although she looked a little uneasy, I could tell she was a bit more confident and sure of herself than she was when we first met.

So we'd done the awkward first greeting, and she didn't cuss me out. She didn't even seem to have an attitude. She was amenable and ready to work.

Maybe this would go smoothly after all.

“Castra, this is Andrew, my engineer.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said as she settled onto the couch I keep in the control room. She looked right at home, and that threw me a little.

“You met Daphne,” I continued. “If you need something, she’ll handle it.”

Cass nodded.

“My mixers aren’t here yet, but you’ll meet them later. And of course, you know me.”

She *almost* smiled.

“Anyway, I’m not sure if you know this, but I just got the call last week. I prepared as best I could, but I’m playing catch-up ball over here.”

“I understand,” she said, nodding, her eyes moving from me to Andrew, then back to me.

I leaned against the wall. “I heard from your people, but I wanna hear from you.”

“Hear what, exactly?”

“What you think the problem is with your album.”

She sighed and stared at her fingernails, which were long and bright pink with some kind of airbrushing on them.

“I don’t *have* a problem with my album,” she said flatly, like she was bored with this whole conversation.

“Okay...”

“It’s Prospect that has the problem, so I’d rather hear what they told *you*.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You sure you wanna hear that?”

“I asked, didn’t I?” she said.

Shaneka and Andrew shared a look, but I just smiled. All was right in the world again. That was the attitude I remembered. The one that only surfaced when she was completely comfortable. The one that drove me crazy, in more ways than one.

“Alright. Since you asked.” I crossed my arms in front of me. “They say it lacks cohesion and focus, and that your vocals are lazy and uninspired.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Do you agree with that assessment?”

“I do.”

“Of course you do.”

An awkward silence ensued.

“We’ve been talking about it,” Andrew finally chimed in. “Throwing some ideas around. We think we can fix it.”

“*Some* of it,” I corrected. “But that’s not the primary issue. It’s the time frame that bothers me. It’s prohibitive.”

She sighed. “I don’t like it either, but it wasn’t my decision. Anyway, I brought my things. I’m prepared to stay here as long as it takes. They got me a room at the Hilton down the street. I can work as late as we need to and just go there after we’re done.”

“No need. My apartment’s on the fifth floor. Right upstairs. Y’all can sleep there. Or here on the pullout. Either way.”

She glanced at Shaneka, who nodded.

“Fine,” she said flatly. “Glad you’re on board.”

“Really? That’s nice to hear.”

Yeah, it was petty, but my feelings were still hurt.

She ignored my pettiness. “So how do you plan to fix it?”

“Well, first of all, what was the vision?” I said. “I mean, I listened to it, but I couldn’t get a good feel for it. Y’all had a hodge podge of producers on it, and it shows. It feels like nobody was on the same page.”

“The vision was mine,” she said. “I think they just didn’t execute it right.”

“I’m all ears.”

She sighed and put her feet under her on the couch. “Well, it was something about—”

“*Something?*” I cut in. “See, that right there lets me know —”

“Can I finish?”

I gestured for her to continue.

“Anyway, it was something about loss...and heartache. And the promise of healing and moving forward.”

I thought that over for a few moments. “Sounds good. Generic, though. What about that is specific to *you* and not just

some shit five billion other people go through every day?”

If looks could kill, I'd have been a dead man.

Andrew cleared his throat. “What he means is, did any of this draw on your real life?”

“*All* of it did,” she snapped, her eyes boring holes into my face. I served that stare right back, though, because I knew about that life. I'd experienced it, too.

Andrew looked back and forth between us, his mouth slack. “Okay,” he finally said. “So that's a well we can draw from.”

I broke my stare, ending our silent standoff. But this was a long time coming, honestly. To say me and Cass had unfinished business would be an understatement, so this thing between us was gonna have to come to a head at some point. I needed to let her go once and for all so I could get on with my life.

After we finished the album, though.

I wasn't about to let our bullshit mess with my money.

“It would have been easier to do if I'd been involved from the jump,” I said, because I couldn't resist. “But I'll do the best I can.”

“It might help if you didn't make comments like that,” she volleyed back. “True or not, it's not gonna get this album done.”

“You're right. My bad.” I took a deep breath and rubbed my hands together. “We already resequenced the track list to

improve cohesion. I also have some ideas about some of these lyrics. I can't do a whole lot with the arrangements in seventy-two hours, but I'll do what I can when we get to the final mix."

She nodded. "And the vocals?"

"I'm gonna direct you. If you're willing to listen."

Through pretty, straight, white teeth, she gritted, "That's why I'm here."

She was here to keep from getting dropped by her label, but it didn't need to be said. Everybody in this room knew that. So I simply smiled and said, "Good. Then let's get to work."

Once she was safely nestled inside the booth, Andrew and I got to work setting the levels for the first track. That was the easy part. The hard part would be conjuring up the magic. That's some shit you can't force or fake. It was either there, or it wasn't. And right now, all I felt was tension.

Drew sniffed dramatically. "Are you wearing cologne?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Man, just help me get these levels right."

He snickered and got back to work, while I tried not to ogle Cass through the glass. She was staring at her nails again, but when she looked up suddenly, she caught me hawking. I averted my eyes.

"Ready when you are," she said pointedly.

“See?” Andrew whispered. “You were worried for nothing. She seems cool.”

“We haven’t started recording, yet.”

“Oh. Let me shut up, then. Don’t wanna jinx it.”

I chuckled at that as I powered up the DAW, because I knew something Andrew didn’t know.

This whole thing was already jinxed.

CASTRA

I PICKED UP THE headphones with the tips of my nails, turning them over several times to check for imperfections and any sign that they hadn't been disinfected since the last person had been in this spot.

Through the glass, I saw Rome roll his eyes, but he wisely kept silent.

Once I was satisfied, I turned my inspection to the pop filter, then the mic, before giving the thumbs up.

Rome's voice came through the headphones, clear, deep, and strong.

“Whenever you're ready.”

“I'm gonna warm up first.”

He nodded.

I closed my eyes and went into a series of scales, runs, sirens, lip and tongue trills, and breathing exercises. I always did these with my eyes closed because they sounded silly, and

I could never stand to make eye contact with anyone while I did them. When I finally opened my eyes, I was staring directly into Rome's, but I wasn't embarrassed. Just surprised that he was watching me so closely.

Rome's eyes had always been mysterious to me, hiding thoughts and feelings like a diary with a lock on it. Only he'd thrown away the key a long time ago, and no one could get in to understand him.

One of those men they call an enigma.

But there was one notable exception. One look I could always decipher. When Rome was into something, or someone, it was like a flashing neon light. A good beat, a soulful chord, an attractive woman...Rome wore his interest like a piece of jewelry.

That's what I saw when I came out of my warmups.

"I'm done," I said quietly, looking away before I lost my train of thought. "What song are we starting with?"

"'Love Me Right'."

I nodded and took a deep breath. I'd half expected him to say "Remember You," only because it was the sexiest song on the album.

Rome loved sex.

Well, he loved sex with *me*. And once we started having it, it colored every interaction we had. I'm talking constant flirting in the control room. Touching, stealing kisses when we

thought nobody was looking. Maybe *that* was the magic that made my first album so good. I don't know.

But there was none of that today.

And there wouldn't be.

We were both older and wiser, now, and the stakes were higher. We were on the same page, and it seemed to me that this would be a strictly professional experience.

Maybe I'd been worried for nothing.

After two minutes of singing, he proved me wrong.

"Yo, what the fuck?"

I stopped and stared at him. "Excuse me?"

"Why are you singing it like that?"

"Like what?"

He tilted his head. "Come on, Cass. I know you can do better than that."

"Is that what passes for producing these days? Be specific, please."

"I'm trying not to hurt your feelings."

"Just say it!"

"Cass, you're singing like you got a stick up your ass. You need to relax. And quit straining in your upper register." He adjusted something on the DAW. "Again."

The music started and I got back to it, singing the first two lines of the first verse, then singing them again, then a third

time. That's when Marlo walked in carrying bags. We nodded our greetings to each other as he passed, then he set the bags down and pulled out a pack of Clearly Canadian.

Rome remembered.

Still singing, I watched Rome mouth something to Marlo, then wave him in. They started a full-blown conversation, and when I finished the take and saw that they were still talking, I got mad and held up my arms.

"Hello? Are you even listening?"

"Yeah," Rome said. "He forgot my fruit. Sorry. Let's go again."

The kiwi. Ugh. I'd forgotten about that.

"Can you play it back first? At least listen before you make me do it again," I said. "There may be a good take in there."

"There isn't."

I let that pass.

But almost thirty minutes later, when I was still on the first verse, I'd had enough.

"I'm taking a break," I announced.

"Hold on, we're almost there."

"Really? I'd love to know where *there* is, Romell."

He shrugged a shoulder. "I'll know it when I hear it."

I snatched the headphones off. "That's not good enough."

“What you want from me, Cass? You want me to praise everything that comes out your mouth? It doesn’t work like that.”

“Of course not. I want you to do your damn job. Tell me how to sing it!”

He chuckled at that. “Look, you know my process.”

“Yeah, and you know mine. This is irritating. At least give me some direction.”

“I did. I told you exactly what I wanted, and you keep doing it your way. I figured I’d just let you. I’m a get paid either way.”

I looked over at Shaneka. She shook her head slightly as if to warn me not to escalate the situation, but it was too late. I was annoyed and I was hungry. The worst possible combination for me.

“You know what? Fuck this.”

His lips curved into a smile. “You sure about that?”

His devilish smirk annoyed the shit out of me. He knew it, too, which is why he held my gaze for so long.

Romell had an interesting face. In certain lights, he appeared young, and his perpetual babyface was often described as adorable. But then there was the other face. His intense face. When he was in a creative zone, when he was pissed off, or...well, when he was *in me*, that face added a good ten years. Ten handsome, sexy years.

Romell was *fine*.

But his type of fine wasn't extraordinary. He just had good proportions and features, that's all; full lips, a nice broad nose, thick eyebrows, and a body that was more fit than not. All very ordinary.

It was his talent that put him over the top for me.

As annoying as he could be, there was no denying his brand of creative genius. And it had served him well. He was only twenty-seven years old and already being spoken of in conversation with people like Quincy Jones and Babyface. It was what got him four Grammys and this state-of-the-art studio with an apartment above it.

It's what made me fall in love with him.

"Let's keep going," I groused. "Tell me again what you're looking for. One more time."

He sighed. "This song is supposed to be about a breakup. You're singing it like you're taking a stroll through the park or something. I don't *feel* anything. I don't *believe* you."

There it was. He loved to say that. 'I don't believe you.' Like he was the authority on who or what was authentic or genuine.

Nevertheless, I sang the first few lines again before he cut in and stopped me.

"It's still not working for me, Cass." He sighed. "Look, take yourself back to...back in the day. You've probably been broken up with at some point. I *know* you've broken up with

someone before. Try to call on that experience. I can assist if you need me to.”

I glared at him. He could be so passive-aggressive at times. It was annoying, but I couldn't do anything about that. I was at his mercy and we both knew it. So I simply dug deep and conjured up some old heartbreak. I called on the anguish and emotional malaise that knocked me off my feet all those years ago. There was only that one time, because I vowed to never go through that shit again. I'd been healing since then, but as I stood there in the booth, reliving it, I realized the wound was merely scabbed over, not fully healed.

But I could deal with that. Like Rome always said, ‘Put it in your music.’

I began to sing...

Feels like my life is over

Blindsided by the pain

I didn't see it coming

You loved me yesterday

“YES! Burner's on, Cass! Let's cook. Stir that motherfucking pot, girl.”

The rest of us burst out laughing. Rome was good for that. The first time he ever yelled at me in the booth, I jumped a foot in the air before cussing him out. But I got used to it, and

him, and before long, I was living for those moments. I loved to sing in general, but I found myself singing for his praise.

“Did you get it, or were you too busy yelling?” I teased.

“Oh, I got it all. Let’s go, let’s knock this out.”

And that’s just what we did over the next couple of hours until my stomach wouldn’t allow me to go any further.

“Alright, alright, let’s break. I’m hungry.”

He said something to Drew before turning his attention back to me. “You wanna stop and eat?”

“Yeah. Just a little snack.”

His eyes roamed my body, causing my cheeks to heat. “They still got you on that diet?”

“I’ve been on it since ‘92.”

“But you look good.”

My eyes cast downward, I blushed. Smiled. Forced myself to bring my eyes back to his. “Thank you, but you know how it goes.”

He nodded. “Twenty minutes?”

“That’ll work.”

I took off my headphones and stretched before leaving the booth.

“You sounded so good,” Shaneka reassured. “He definitely knows how to bring out the best in you.”

“Whatever. Pass me a granola bar.”

I fucking *hate* granola bars.

But they're low in calories, slightly sugary—which means energy—and somewhat filling, so I was gonna do what I had to do.

Prospect had been on this whole diet thing since I started. I was maybe a hundred and thirty-five pounds soaking wet, but they liked me toned and svelte. Gotta be able to show off that midriff.

I was never a sex-symbol, at least not in my mind, but image is everything, and when my first album came out, I was marketed a little younger than I actually was. Tracie Spencer came out a year before I did, and her sophisticated styling and vibe was what I was hoping for. My label saw things differently, so it was tomboy style for me, but with my stomach showing occasionally, or a little bit of cleavage. Just a little tease for the boys, I guess.

I even had to go to charm school, as it was nicknamed by those at the label. Once a week, I had to take a class with Miss Ida Monroe, a tiny black woman with a soft voice and the rigid sternness of a Catholic school nun. I learned how to walk, how to talk, how to break my youthful habit of staring down when I sang. I wasn't rough around the edges or anything; after all, I'd started singing at Cuffe Lake AME church, home of senior pastor Elgin Norwood. I knew enough not to embarrass myself.

But Prospect insisted on polishing me until I shined.

Beauty consulting was the worst of all. They didn't shy away from criticizing your makeup, hair, skin, shape. Which was why I was scarfing down a disgusting granola bar like it was my last meal.

But Rome always had a way of making me feel like the prettiest, sexiest girl in the room. Even back then, when he was young and horny and had his pick, he only had eyes for me. And given the way he was looking at me now, it seemed like not much had changed.

His stare made my heart thump. Heat pricked my face, and the warmth radiated downward until I was squirming awkwardly in my seat.

I wasn't supposed to be feeling like this. I was still mad at him, and hurt, and frustrated, and I was supposed to be focusing on my album. But right now, in his studio, with my mouth full of granola, all I could think about were his lips. His back. His hands. His tongue. His dick.

I swallowed quickly, downed half a bottle of Clearly Canadian, then ran back into the booth. I was here to work, and I could only do that if I was focused.

“Break's over!” I announced. “I'm ready.”

DANGER

CASS ALWAYS DID LOOK pretty when she was mad.

And seeing her mad had always made me...not *happy*, but impressed, I suppose. Appreciative. She was so timid and soft-spoken when we met, always following everyone else's lead and submitting to the whims of the people around her. But when she got mad, it was like she was finally being her authentic self and fighting for what she wanted. I encouraged that as much as I could. Even when it was directed at me.

Like now.

I wasn't *trying* to get on her nerves, but I seemed to be doing a good job of it anyway.

That could be useful sometimes for pulling emotion out of an artist.

But not today, apparently.

After our earlier victory, it seemed like we'd regressed.

We'd finally made it to the second track, and just like the first, she was half-assing it and wasting precious time. I'd told her I was gonna get paid either way, and that was true, but I still had a deep-seated need to put everything I had into anything that had my name on it, and she knew that. I was starting to take her slacking personally.

After about the tenth take, I shut it down.

I stared at her, rubbing my hand across my forehead in frustration. She looked at me expectantly, her lips pursed tightly.

“Yo. I’ma need you to get it together, Cass.”

“What does that mean?”

“I know you can do better. *You* know you can do better. It’s really starting to piss me off.”

She sighed. “We were making progress before.”

“Yeah. We were. What happened to that?”

The wide collar of her t-shirt slid to the side when she shrugged, exposing her shoulder. I stared at the smooth brown skin and fought to keep my mind from wandering.

“I think...we’re just not gelling right now,” she said. “I don’t know why, but I feel like the more you try to force it, the worse I’m gonna sing.”

“Okay, so how can we get it gelling again?” I tore my eyes away from her shoulder and focused on her face. “What you need me to do?”

“That’s *your* job, not mine.”

Closing my eyes, I took a deep, cleansing breath and blew it out slowly. I’d dealt with temperamental artists before. When you’re working with creative types who have extraordinary talent, it comes with the territory. A certain male superstar used to come into the studio high as a kite and had a strictly-enforced rule that we had to pretend we didn’t notice. There was a male group that insisted on hearing the playback for every single take, which slows down a recording session to a crawl. And then there was the older female singer who we weren’t allowed to make eye contact with. Ever.

Compared to them, Cass was light work.

“Alright,” I said, “let’s just...talk for a minute. Get back familiar with each other.”

She nodded, and I shut off our mics.

“When’s the last time y’all talked?” Andrew asked over my left shoulder.

“Shit, I don’t even know. Years.”

He watched me back up the takes we’d done. “You know, you never did answer my question.”

“Which one?” I asked, even though I knew full well. He’d asked me last night while we were getting setup for Cass, and I never answered.

“What happened with y’all? Because the magazines were saying—”

“Fuck the magazines, Drew.”

“Okay, but is there any truth to the rumor that—”

“Excuse me!”

Cass was glaring at us.

“What?” I yelled through the glass.

“I don’t appreciate y’all gossiping about me when I can’t hear what you’re saying. That’s rude.”

I turned my mic back on. “Maybe it’s not rude. Maybe it just doesn’t concern you,” I said, even though it did. “Relax.”

I kept the sound on this time to keep from pissing her off. “Drew, give us a minute, man.”

“Sure thing.” He grabbed his water and pager. “I’ll be in the hall.”

I gestured for her to come out of the booth and into the control room. She made her way to the couch and flopped down onto it, her expression quizzical.

I took a seat at the other end. As far from her as humanly possible.

“We probably should have done this first,” I said.

She gave me an exaggerated, sarcastic nod.

“Alright, look. I know we have unfinished business. I’m not trying to ignore that. But we don’t have a lot of time to get this done. So for both of our sake, let’s just put all that other shit aside and work. I can if you can.”

She raised a perfect eyebrow. “Unfinished business?”

“Cass...”

“What might that be, Rome?”

“Stop playing games. You know exactly what I mean.”

She smiled slyly. “Refresh my memory.”

I stared blankly. Even though I shouldn’t have been, I was in complete disbelief that this was the tack she taking.

“You know I’m doing you a favor, right?”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re doing this for the money. Don’t even try it.”

“You think I need money? Look around, sweetheart,” I said, gesturing to the space around us. “I’m doing just fine. But if I *did* need money, trust and believe there’s a lot easier out there than you.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Then why am I here? Why are you doing this?”

“Because you need me.”

“Negro, please.”

I shook my head. “Cass, I’m serious, and you need to take this seriously.” I scooted closer and looked her dead in her eyes. “Your label ain’t fucking around. You’re coasting on the goodwill of your debut, but that’s running out. If you *ever* wanna make another album after this...” I trailed off.

That seemed to penetrate. She sighed and stared down at her hands. “How do we do this without being at each other’s

throats every five minutes?”

“Well you could start by not taking everything personal.”

Her head snapped up. “And where are *you* gonna start?”

I threw my hands in the air. “Here we go with the tit-for-tat.”

“It’s not tit-for-tat!”

“You’re such a fucking brat sometimes.”

I reached over to lightly tug on one of her braids. She swatted my hand, catching me with her nails.

“And you’re such an asshole sometimes.”

We sat in heavy silence. So much wasn’t being said. So many ways we were pretending. We were both still hurt, that was clear, but now wasn’t the time to delve into that. These three days were supposed to be about work.

For now. But sooner or later, we were gonna have to revisit the past.

She stood. “Let’s go. We’re not gonna resolve anything sitting here, so...let’s just work.”

“You sure?”

She was already walking into the booth.

Steeling myself, I looked over the track list and made a few adjustments to the recording schedule. I’d planned to save “Remember You” until the end—given the subject matter—but I made an executive decision to work on it today. Whenever we finished “Lost,” we’d give it a go.

Turns out, we got through “Lost” pretty quick. I guess Cass just needed to be reminded about how important it was for her to give Prospect what they wanted. She could be a brat, but she wasn’t stupid. She’d sacrificed *way* too much to end her career now.

Nobody on this earth knew that better than me.

“Okay, Ms. Castra. You ready for the next track?”

“‘Always’, right?”

I smiled. “I was thinking ‘Remember You.’ “

Her eyebrows shot up.

“Just wanna close out the day on something uplifting.”

“Yeah, I bet.”

I let out a chuckle. “Don’t read anything into it, Cass. I promise, I’m not trying to—”

“It’s fine,” she cut in, preventing me from telling her I wasn’t trying to fuck, which was definitely for the best, because that would have been the first time I’d ever lied to her.

“It’s a little light in here, though.”

“I got you,” I said. “You ready?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s do this.”

DANGER

“MARLO, GET THE LIGHTS for me. Level two.”

That dimmer switch I had installed last year turned out to be a real good investment. You never know when you need to set a mood.

Knowing Cass as well as I did, I knew to give her semi-darkness. A little candlelight. And space to live in that moment, however long it took for her to get there.

I let the music loop. One minute turned to two, then five, then ten. She just stood there, swaying back and forth with her eyes closed. Vibing. And I was content to wait, because you don't rush perfection.

You can't do shit like this with every artist, because most labels are stingy as hell. They send reps or handlers into the studio to account for every single minute of the time they're paying for, and it can put a serious damper on the creative process. Technically, studio costs come out of the artist's

pocket when all is said and done, but most labels still worry about recouping.

But not Prospect. Not for Cass. With her voice, and her level of talent, she was a fucking goldmine, and we all knew it. That sophomore album might have been a disappointment, but she had it in her to be great. A legend. I think she knew that after her debut, but even the most confident artist can get shook behind a bad review or disappointing chart position.

So this album was make or break. I'd seen her broken before, and I never wanted to see it again. More than the money, it was *that* that was keeping me going.

“How we feelin’?” I finally asked her.

She didn't answer.

I turned to Marlo. “I don't need you for this,” I said. “Grab her a stool on your way out.”

He nodded and headed out, placing a wooden stool behind Cass before exiting out the side door. Once the door clicked shut, I switched on the red light that sat on top of the outer studio door to indicate that we were not to be disturbed.

It was just us two, now. I preferred it that way, and I'm sure she did, too. It took me back to “Night Falls” from her first album. A slow groove about sex, which—I later found out—she'd never had at the time. At eighteen years old, she still had twinkles in her eyes. She blushed when she read the lyrics. Giggled through the scratch recording. I wasn't even a full two

years older than her, but I'd seen and experienced a lot more than she had. I found her innocence intriguing.

Attractive.

Worth preserving.

Some girls who pass through our industry have the dead-eyed, thousand-yard stare of someone who's seen and heard a whole lot of shit they shouldn't have. But not Cass. And I guess I started to feel protective over her. Like a big brother, maybe, only that didn't last very long. Being in close proximity to her made that too difficult. I was still protective, but over time, it morphed into a different form of protection. For a different reason.

I started to feel like she was mine.

The day we recorded "Night Falls," her boldness shocked the hell out of me. As soon as the music came on, she came out of her shell. Even started giving orders. *Make it darker in here. Bring some candles in here and light them. Let me vibe for a minute.*

I did everything she asked. The magic was in full effect, and that song went to number one. Dominated Quiet Storm programs for months.

Watching her now was like *deja vu*.

"Whenever you're ready, Cass. Miss Castra Lashae."

She opened her eyes and stared into mine, sending a chill through me. I thought she was about to fuss at me for using the

middle name she hated with a passion, but she didn't. She just smiled.

“When you talk to me...keep your voice low,” she said softly. “So I can stay in the mood.”

Smiling, I nodded slowly, and when I said, “Yes, ma'am,” to her, it was several octaves quieter and lower than my usual.

She held my gaze.

“I-if you wanna sit, there's a seat behind you.”

Yeah, she had my ass stuttering.

“Okay.”

As I watched her sway back and forth to the music, I felt myself falling into a trance-like state, as if some invisible hand had reached down from somewhere in the ether and was using her body as a pendulum to hypnotize me. My muscles relaxed. My eyes felt heavy. My skin prickled.

My dick got hard.

The first time she made me feel like this was—I wouldn't even say it was our first date. It was more like an impromptu outing. We went to the movies to see *Goodfellas* when it opened. September 1990. It was burned into my brain.

I was minding my business watching Ray Liotta beat the shit out of dude when Cass leaned over and pressed her soft lips against mine. I was so shocked, I didn't even get a chance to react. My body did, of course, but me? I just sat there, my mind reeling.

It's not that I didn't want her like that. It was more so that I'd compartmentalized our relationship. On top of that, I didn't think she was interested. Now, I'm a good-looking dude, so it wasn't insecurity. I just thought we were in two different places, mentally. I was young, dumb, and full of cum. I'd already thought about sex with her. Of *course* I had. But I didn't think she'd thought about me like that. I didn't know shit about women's sexuality. Shit, I'm still learning, truth be told.

I couldn't even focus on the movie after that. I sat there for another two hours wondering if I'd read her wrong. Despite her innocent demeanor, eighteen was grown, and her taking the initiative to kiss me was a sign that she knew what she wanted. *Should* have been, anyway, but I was conflicted. Still in protective mode.

I took her to dinner after, but I barely had an appetite. I was too busy warring with myself, trying to figure out if messing around with her made me an opportunist. A creep. Or if my hesitation was driven by the fact that I didn't trust her to know what was best for her. I was sexually active at the time, but it's not like I was a dog. I had no plans to mistreat her, so, why not?

In the end, I called myself compromising. I ate her out that night, and it ended up being the right thing to do because I found out later that it was the first orgasm she ever had. She was happy. Very satisfied. Neither one of us had a single regret about it, so that was the green light we both needed to move forward.

After that, it was on.

“Cass?”

“Hmm?”

“Are we planning on singing tonight, sweetheart?”

“Yeah.” Her voice was breathy and soft. “We are.”

I inhaled deeply as my eyes drank her in. Head to toe, even dressed down, she was sexy as hell.

“I’m not rushing you,” I said. “I just wanted to know. I have all night.”

“It won’t take all night.”

I chuckled at that. “Well if it did, it wouldn’t be a problem. I can handle it.”

She opened her eyes. “Trust me, I know.”

A smile spread slowly across my face. “Are we still talking about music?”

“You tell me.”

A staring match ensued, lasting until I said, “Don’t start something you can’t finish.”

She smiled at my warning before taking a step backward and planting herself on the stool. I pressed record. She pulled the microphone down to meet her mouth and began singing the opening ad lib.

It was...passable. Not good, not bad. Just there.

I turned off the music.

She looked at me, waiting.

“Again,” I commanded.

Her chest rose high, then fell slowly.

“Make me believe it.”

She nodded, and I turned the music back on.

Her voice was...how to describe it? Well, I guess I'd always imagined that it must be what angels sounded like. Clear, even, velvety, and smooth. Absolutely, singularly stunning to hear. She had the familiar timbre of a baptist church choir soloist, but that voice could turn on a dime, gracefully morphing into something that sounded like sin, and she could take words that might sound vulgar coming out of another artist's mouth and make them sound beautiful and sweet.

I mean, the first verse of “Remember You” started with the words, *spread me open*, but coming out of her, they came off romantic and dreamy.

That was Cass in general, though. She had an aura about her. She once told me I turned her out, but to this day, I wonder if it was the other way around.

“How was that?” she was saying.

I hadn't heard a word.

“Again.”

She nodded.

This time, I listened. It was almost there.

“Better,” I said, my voice still low. “I don’t believe, yet. I don’t think you’re there.”

“So get me there,” she purred.

I sat back in my chair and rubbed my chin, staring her down as I thought about how best to approach this. I was no stranger to calling on my own emotions. Most creatives do it. But I didn’t want to overshadow hers with mine, because then it wouldn’t be authentic.

What I was feeling for her right at this moment was strong and relentless. I’d been feeling it since I first laid eyes on her earlier. Desire. Burning, aching, unyielding desire. I wanted to express that to her, but I had to temper it.

“This song is about remembering a lover,” I finally said. “That one. Everybody has one. The one who imprinted on your body. And your soul. Turned you out. Had you doing things you said you’d never do. Desperate, willing to scratch and claw just to get another taste. And then one day, they were just...gone. Out of your life. Leaving you hungry. Ravenous.”

She closed her eyes and nodded.

“Now imagine seeing that person again for the first time in...” I trailed off.

My dick was throbbing.

“Imagine that reunion,” I continued. “What would you say? What would you do? They’re familiar to you. Their face. Their smell. Their skin. All the little things they liked. Their favorite

spots. Their favorite positions. The places you used to touch. The sounds they made...

She gripped the edges of the stool.

“It’s the moment you’ve been waiting for since they walked out of your life. How would you feel? How would *it* feel?”

She swallowed and nodded.

“Do you feel it?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Let’s do it again. Make me believe it.”

She opened her eyes. “You will.”

“I will?”

“Mm hm.”

I grinned at her. “You know what else I want?”

“What?” she breathed.

“I want you to make me *feel* it, too.”

“I can do that.”

“Word? You gonna do that for me, Cass?”

“Start the music.”

I ran the music back and closed my eyes, and when she moaned that first note, a groan rumbled in my throat.

The French have a word—*frisson*—that describes the chills you feel when you see or hear something that moves you. We use it all the time in music. You wanna evoke that in your

listener, and Cass had always done that for me with her voice. Often. Even when she wasn't singing.

The first time we made love, it was that little moan, that perfect melodic expression of pleasure, that pushed me over the edge. I had wanted to take my time with her, to savor her, to learn her, help her discover what she liked. But I didn't last long enough, because she made it impossible.

When I came, she gripped my back and asked me if I was okay—she was alarmed, because she'd never seen it before. I couldn't speak, so I nodded with my eyes squeezed shut. I wasn't just okay. It felt so good, I was floating on a fucking cloud, ten million miles above the earth, grabbing at the stars and wishing I could make it last forever.

There's sex, there's good sex, and then there's Cass.

“Did you believe it, Rome?”

I opened my eyes as best I could and nodded. “Yeah. You convinced me.”

She smiled and tilted her head slightly to the right, something that used to make me wanna ravage her. I never understood what it was about it that got me going, but it did. Every time. Without fail.

And now was no exception.

“Did you feel it?”

I cleared my throat. “I did. We ready for the first verse?”

“*So* ready.”

I chuckled at that, shaking my head to let her know she was pushing it.

“Alright, go through it once and then I wanna layer the last line.”

“Got it.”

“Alright, here we go.”

Spread me open like you used to

My heart, my soul, my mind

But baby don't forget my body

If you're so inclined.

It's been a long time coming

This reunion of two

I make no claims about my heart

But I know my body remembers you

I knew it was just a song. I wasn't even particularly fond of the lyrics. Or the arrangement, for that matter. But hearing her sing them...to me...in my studio...it put me even further under her spell, and before I knew what was happening, I was on my feet, leaving the control room to enter the booth. Her eyes followed me, her body stilled and tense. I approached her slowly, keeping my eyes on her face, watching for a sign that she didn't want me as bad as I wanted her.

I saw nothing.

I walked up on her and stopped two inches away, sliding my arm around her waist as I stared into her eyes.

“That? Was fucking *perfect*.”

She tilted her head up. I angled mine downward. When she opened her legs to allow me to get even closer, I lost my good sense.

I kissed her.

Her lips were just as full and soft as they were the first time. Just as I was slipping my tongue into her mouth, her arms were encircling my neck to pull me closer. The throbbing in my dick had stopped by now, giving way to a dull ache, which I knew to be a feeling of longing. The only cure was Cass, but I was smart enough to know she was gonna cut this off long before we got to that point.

Sure enough...

She pulled away and leaned back, breathing hard as she dropped her arms.

“We should stop.”

I was already nodding, because I knew her too well.

“Cass...” I trailed off, my head spinning. “You still got it.”

“I never lost it.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief.

I kept my hands around her waist. They were comfortable there.

“It’s been five fucking years since I tasted your lips,” I said.

She touched her fingertips to her bottom lip as if to prove to herself that it wasn't a dream. "I forgot how good it felt to kiss you," she said softly.

"Everything we did together felt good," I said as I stared down at her. "I didn't forget."

"You don't forget anything."

"Yeah. Especially the things that are important to me."

"Well, maybe one day you'll graduate from remembering to actually *listening*."

I frowned, my heart pounding as the ice cold water of her words splashed against it. "The fuck does that mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean." She put her hands out and pushed me gently, nudging me out of her space. "Let's just finish this. I'm getting tired."

"What did you mean?" I insisted.

"Just leave it alone. Now's not the time."

"When's the time?"

"Whenever I don't have an album coming out."

"Right, right. Makes sense. Because last time you had an album coming out—"

"Stop! Just...I need to focus. We both need to focus."

"Alright. Whatever, Cass. It's all about you."

"That's right."

"Just like always."

“Just turn the fucking music on.”

I blew out a sigh and stalked back into the control room.

We worked straight through “Remember You”, managing not to kill each other or rip each other’s clothes off. It’s only because we were both pissed. Folks on tv seemed to always wanna fuck in the middle of a fight, but me and Cass never got down like that. And that was still holding true for me now. As horny as I’d been earlier, I was over her and this whole task. So I was relieved when she called it quits and said she was going to bed. I was slightly less relieved when she said she’d be sleeping upstairs, because that meant I would be on the couch, but it was my own fault. I’d offered, and it was too late to renege.

While she waited for Shaneka to come back from wherever she’d run off to, I pulled Marlo to the side.

“Alright, she’s sleeping upstairs. Do me a favor and move all her snacks and shit up there. Bags, too.”

“I got you.”

“I’m gonna need something to sleep in. My toothbrush and...just bring my whole kit thing, it’s in my bathroom.”

“Bet.”

I stared through the glass, putting eyes on the woman who had turned my life upside down. The woman I still loved, truth be told.

“Oh, and Marlo?”

“Yeah?”

“Take down all the pictures of Justin. Put ‘em in my dresser drawer or something.”

“Cool.”

I wouldn’t be sleeping for a while, so I didn’t bother to power my machines down before I left the control room. I passed Cass to make my way to the desk in reception. I needed to make a phone call.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Mama.”

“Hey. You called just in time,” she said breathlessly. “We just got his PJs on. I was about to tuck him in.”

“Sorry, I got caught up. Put him on for me.”

There were muffled voices, then some shuffling, and then a little voice filled my ear.

“Hello?”

“Hey, buddy.”

“Hi, Daddy!”

“How was your day?”

CASTRA

“SO WE’LL START FRESH in the morning. Eight am.”

“Ugh.”

Rome chuckled. “You know how I am.”

“And you know how *I* am.”

Rome was a morning person. The kind who thinks he’s getting the worm. I, on the other hand, preferred to get my beauty sleep. The music would be there at eleven am same as it would be three hours earlier. It made no sense to me to try to force it at the ass crack of dawn, but most producers were like Rome.

I’d do it. I had to. But it wasn’t gonna be pretty.

“Daphne went home,” he continued from behind the reception desk, “but if you need something, you can have Shaneka get with the concierge. Shit doesn’t shut down around here until two am.”

“I should be fine.”

He nodded. “They just changed the sheets on my bed this morning.”

“They?”

“My cleaning ladies. Fresh towels, too. The whole nine.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I lingered, waiting for...something. But there was only cold silence. “Well, good night.”

“Good night.”

Disappointed, and not sure why, I rode with Shaneka up to the fifth floor. It was only ten-thirty, but we were both exhausted.

As soon as I got off the elevator and walked through the double door to Rome’s apartment, I frowned. The place seemed cold. Nondescript. The walls were stark white, and the floors were shiny, bare wood.

Rome was...warm. Sensitive. Creative. His old apartment, where we spent so much time when we were younger, had all the trappings of a young single man—a Nintendo *and* a Sega, black leather couch, a freaking wicker lawn chair in the living room, and a liquor bottle shrine on the kitchen counter. It was a hodge podge of tackiness—albeit spotlessly clean—but it was so *him*.

This place was not.

“Did he just move in here or something?” Shaneka said, looking around.

“I don’t know.”

“Seems like a hotel.”

“I know. But I bet if you open the fridge right now, it’s full. With mostly fruit.”

We made our way to the small kitchen so Shaneka could prove me right. We both burst into peals of laughter when we saw the rows of neatly-arranged fruit in his fridge.

After grabbing us two waters, Shaneka and I made our way through the small living room toward the hallway.

You’re sleeping with me, right?”

Shaneka looked at me and smiled. “Actually, you don’t mind if I sneak out later, do you? Just one day back in town and my hoes are already paging me.”

I let out a hearty laugh. “Which one will you choose?”

“That’s the hard part. Andre’s finer, but James is more fun.”

“Fun’s good.”

“Oh, yeah? And how would you know?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ve had fun. Occasionally.”

“Girl, you’re growing cobwebs on that thing.”

“Shut up.”

The bedroom wasn’t much better. He didn’t even have blinds on the windows, although with the view he had, I could

understand.

Atlanta's skyline was pretty lackluster compared to, well, every other major city, but it had its charm. Late at night, the traffic was sort of mesmerizing, and the Olympics had given the city a bit more character.

"What's this room?" Shaneka called to me from elsewhere.

After dropping my purse on the bed, I exited the bedroom and hooked a right, following Shaneka's voice until I was in what looked to be Rome's office.

I'd finally found him. The almost anal organization of everything on the desk, the posters and plaques lining the walls, the small tv in the corner for watching his beloved Steelers and 76ers play while he was working.

I realized he must have spent most of his time in this room when he wasn't downstairs in the studio, so it made sense that it felt so much like his old place. I teared up, which surprised me, because I'm not a sentimental person.

But I *am* nosy, so when a stack of picture frames caught my eye, I walked over to them. They were out of place, and it struck me as odd. Rome didn't do clutter. His stepfather had drilled that into him his whole life. So the haphazard stack didn't belong.

I realized, too late, why they were stacked up in the corner. Someone had tried to hide them from me.

I stared at the little boy's face—Justin was his name—and felt like the floor dropped out from under me. I stared until my

tears turned him into a blurry blob of colors, instead of the entity that ruined my relationship.

“Ain’t this the interview that almost killed his career?”

After hastily wiping my eyes, I whirled around to see Shaneka holding up a *Right On* magazine. June of 1993. I knew it well. It was the second time I’d seen it today.

“Yep.”

“Why would he keep this?”

“Don’t know. Producers are weird.”

Shaneka chuckled. “Still can’t believe his bitch ass cheated on you.”

I went to speak, to offer a response to that, but all I could muster was a defeated, “Yeah.”

She peered at me curiously. “Alright, now. You ain’t in that booth falling in love, are you?”

“Of course not.”

“Good, cuz you can do way better than his ass.”

I placed the picture face-down on top of the stack. “He’s not that bad.”

“Cass. Come on, now. The man had a baby on you. It don’t get much worse than that.”

I didn’t respond to that, because I was too busy thinking about Shaneka’s question about me falling in love. Truthfully, it wasn’t possible for me to fall in love with Rome, because I’d

never fallen *out* of it. That's what made this whole thing so fucking painful.

But a smile broke through the pain when I caught a glimpse of the *Goodfellas* poster on the wall to my left.

Rome took me to see it opening night seven years ago. I wouldn't say it was our first date. It wasn't even planned. We'd been working when he mentioned that he loved mafia movies, so I suggested taking a break to go see it. I had absolutely zero interest in the mob, but I had *hella* interest in sitting next to Romell Brooks in the dark.

He was a perfect gentleman, unfortunately, and I was a coward. It took me a whole hour to work up the nerve to kiss him. Just a soft, lingering peck. No tongue, because he didn't offer any.

It was...awkward.

I hadn't realized it at the time, but up to that point, Rome saw me as a little sister. He thought I was attractive when he met me, but once we started working together, he began to take on more of a mentorship role with me.

I had no such hang-ups. I just thought he was cute and wanted to kiss him.

So I did.

We watched the rest of the movie in awkward silence, our heads staunchly and stiffly facing front at all times, and I thought we were both gonna pretend it never happened. Until he asked me about it on the car ride home.

“What was that?” he’d said.

“What?”

“That kiss. Why did you do that?”

“I don’t know. I just wanted to.”

He didn’t respond, and I thought that was the end of it.

It wasn’t.

I mentioned that the Italian food in the movie had made me hungry, so we drove around until we found an authentic Italian spot. He fed me pasta until I pushed my plate away in agony, then he took me back to his apartment and went down on me. I had my first orgasm that night.

It was a good night.

That all seemed like a lifetime ago.

As I lay there, in Rome’s bed, I was struck by a severe case of life imitating art—all I could think about was that night, and the subsequent nights. *Remembering*. The way his hands felt on my skin. His lips. After that first night, we went further every time, culminating in a first experience that was physically uncomfortable but emotionally exhilarating.

He was so tender with me, so loving. We weren’t officially together at that point, but it felt like we belonged to each other. Like our bodies were made for one another. It sounds so corny, but he was that one for me. I knew it on the first night.

I let out a sigh. Time slowly ticked by. Seconds, minutes, hours...sleep was elusive, and the past continued to haunt me. A past that held both passion and pain.

I knew where things went wrong, but I viewed the past through a very particular lens—one in which *I* was the injured party. One in which *I* was the one who was right.

But now?

I wasn't so sure anymore.

Time has a way of blurring the lines. Smudging the boundaries.

I knew when I first saw him today that I wasn't nearly as angry with him as I wanted to be. My feelings were complicated, but my visceral reaction to him had been crystal clear.

The butterflies. The pounding heart. The shortness of breath. The falling sensation.

I sat up and went back and forth before finally deciding not to change out of the dowdy white nightgown I was wearing. I grabbed my purse, slid my house shoes on, and padded to the door. I knew exactly what I wanted to do, and during the short elevator ride down, I managed to convince myself that it was the right decision.

The glass doors were unlocked, so I entered and found Rome right where I thought he'd be; in the control room, working. He was concentrating on something, so he didn't see me until I was right in front of him.

“I thought you’d be down here sleep,” I said when his eyes met mine. “What are you working on?”

It seemed to take him a minute to register my presence. “Getting a jump start on these mixes.” He turned his nose up. “That’s what you sleep in now?”

Ignoring that, I sat on the couch and gave him a once-over. It was dangerous, because these were the times I was most attracted to him. What’s worse, the years had been very kind to him. He was even sexier today, especially now, with his brows furrowed, his bottom lip between his teeth, his head bobbing to the music. This was the Romell who had inspired my adoration. My infatuation.

It was the *other* Romell who had killed all that.

“I remember that,” he said, gesturing toward my pink and yellow paisley head scarf. “Old faithful.”

I chuckled at that. “Remember that time I got out of the shower and couldn’t find it and it turned out you were under the covers wearing it?”

“Of course I remember,” he said with a grin. “You beat my ass.”

“I did not beat your ass. I punched you in the chest.”

“Yeah. That shit hurt. Heavy-handed ass.”

“Whatever.” I stared down at my nails, searching for an opening.

“All the money you got and you still wearin’ that raggedy scarf.”

I looked up at him and shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess...so much changed in my life in such a short period of time. It feels good to hold on to things, I guess. Things from before.”

He inclined his head in agreement. “Makes sense.”

I took a deep, shaky breath. “I saw a picture of Justin.”

His face fell. “Sorry. I told Marlo to put them all away.”

“He did. I was snooping.”

He nodded but stayed silent, waiting, his face tense as he braced for my reaction. But all I said was, “He’s adorable.”

“Cass—”

“It’s fine. I just wanted you to know that.”

Our eyes met again, and something unspoken passed between us. It was starting to feel like old times again, when my young, dumb self swore he could read my mind. That we had a special, otherworldly connection or something. The reality was probably that we spent so much time together, we learned each other on a deeper level than most coworkers do.

My parents were deeply concerned about that. Rome wasn’t even a full two years older than me, but he may as well have been forty years old the way they watched him around me. We started working on my album in the summer, so my mother was able to tag along and watch us like a hawk. But once

school started back, she had to go back home to take care of Carmen, my little sister.

My parents went to the label and pleaded their case, and that's when Tamika Matthews entered the picture. My round-the-clock babysitter. That satisfied my parents, but Tamika would prove to be...inattentive. Me and Rome slipped right under her radar.

At any rate, here we were, seven years later. Older, but not wiser, at least on my end. Because the truth was, I'd come down here for some relief. I didn't wanna talk, and I didn't wanna work.

"Why'd you come down here, Cass?" he said, interrupting my thoughts.

Reading my mind.

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You said you thought I'd be sleep, so...what was the plan?"

"I couldn't sleep."

His eyebrow went up. "Why is that? Used to be, soon as your head hit the pillow, you were snoring."

"I've never snored."

"Okay," he said with a smirk.

I stared at him, at his handsome face. At the bulges in his forearms. The veins. The deep brownness of his smooth skin.

His Adam's apple, bobbing with every swallow. His hands. Large. Strong. Useful.

I ached for him to touch me.

"I don't sleep well anymore," I explained. "I honestly haven't slept well since *Just Castra* came out."

He stood and stretched before walking over to sit on the other end of the couch.

"Remind me, which album was that?"

I tilted my head. "Seriously?"

"Ohhhh," he said in faux recognition. "The album I *didn't* work on. That's right. Now I remember."

"You're so lame."

"Why haven't you slept since then?" he asked, his face going serious.

"I don't know."

His eyes flickered over me. "Okay, so you couldn't sleep and came down here to...what, watch *me* sleep?"

"You know why I came down here."

He chuckled. "Maybe I wanna hear you say it."

But I didn't feel like saying it. I didn't feel like talking at all, anymore. So I stood to my feet and took two steps, stopping in front of him. His eyes followed. He stared up at me, a questioning look on his face until I put one knee on the couch next to him, then the other. His expression changed, then, his eyes darkening as I straddled him.

His hands went to my hips, on instinct, it seemed. Mine went to his shoulders.

“Say it,” he commanded.

“It should be obvious by now.”

He pushed up with his hips, just enough that I could feel how hard he was. My breath escaped me, and my limbs felt weak. Rome had always been my weakness.

“I want you,” I admitted.

He nodded slowly. “Well, here I am. You can have whatever you want. That ain’t never changed.”

I pressed my lips to his to quiet that admission. I didn’t need to hear that right now. I was already half love-drunk. The last thing I needed was for him to charm me back onto the merry-go-round that was our old relationship. No, this was just good old-fashioned sex. No strings.

Yeah, I was probably kidding myself.

He slipped his tongue between my lips, and I almost laughed when I tasted sweetness—had to be the kiwi. Rome had always loved fruit. Inexplicably, like ‘I’d rather eat strawberries than cake for dessert’ kinda love. And he had to have them in the studio in case he wanted to snack on something. It was weird.

But it made him taste so good. All of him.

As I brought my hands to his face, I tried to recall the last time we made love. Had to be before Justin was born. That

whole time period was a blur to me, but I distinctly remembered the encounter being fraught with emotion.

But there was none of that today. Just pure lust. And the feeling was mutual, if Rome's greedy hands were any indication. Everywhere he could touch, he did, and I eagerly leaned into his grasp every time, grinding against his erection, seeking relief. I was hungry for him.

Ravenous.

"Hold up," he murmured against my lips, and then his right arm was reaching, his body leaning us in the direction of the hand that was rummaging around somewhere I couldn't see. When his hand reappeared, it held a shiny gold foil packet.

I recoiled. "Condoms in the studio? Are you serious?"

"What?" he said, and he looked genuinely confused.

"How many cute young singers have you fucked in here, Rome?"

"Cass," he trailed off with a sigh. "Please don't fuck up this moment."

"You did that on your own. How many?"

He leaned back as if to demonstrate his outrage. "Are you seriously asking?"

"Yeah."

"Then, none of your damn business. How you gon' question me about some shit like that? Have *you* been celibate for the last five years?"

“First of all—”

“Nah, don’t answer that,” he said, chuckling bitterly. “I already know. Streets are talking.”

“You of all people should know not to believe everything you hear.”

I *said* that, but to be perfectly honest, the streets were right this time. I’d shared the company of some of the finest men in the industry. It was good company, too, especially Devante. Whew. But that was my business, not Rome’s.

He tossed the condom on the cushion next to us, but as frustrated as he seemed to be, he didn’t move me off of him, and he didn’t release his grip on my hip.

“Look, we’re both trying to get broke off,” he said. “We always got that part right. Why are you ruining it?”

“Because condoms in the studio is gross.”

He shrugged, his eyes fixed intently on my face. “Okay, it’s gross. You’re absolutely right. Now, can we fuck?”

Sighing, I realized I wanted to fuck more than I wanted to fight, so I grabbed the condom packet and tore it open. While I pulled it out of its wrapper, Rome reached into his jogging pants to pull out his dick, which I quickly covered.

When I sank down onto him, we sang a duet of impassioned moans. I was overwhelmed by the fullness of him, the familiarity of him. I held myself still, letting my mind catch up with my body, I suppose. Because this was a moment, one I’d

waited five years for—although I hadn't realized I'd been waiting. Every man I messed with, I compared them to him.

None fully measured up.

I stared into his eyes and felt mine filling with tears. So I closed them, and felt his lips on mine once again, his hand moving to the back of my neck. He thrust his tongue into my mouth, almost roughly, but I didn't mind.

I deepened the kiss and pressed myself further into him. Everything about it felt effortless, like this was where I was supposed to be. His hands gripped my hips. His tongue lapped mine hungrily. His dick filled me thoroughly and completely. I began to move, to soothe the needy ache that had been throbbing between my legs since I sang the first note of "Remember You."

Rome was correct. We had always had gotten this part right.

DANGER

CASS LOVED TO RIDE me.

It used to bother me, only because I prided myself on having a good stroke game. I'd lay on top of her and she'd immediately flip us over, leaving me laying there thinking, damn, my shit must be real weak if she wants to be in the driver's seat all the time.

But I let her, because she was good at it. Or, I should say, she *got* good at it.

The first time was rough. She didn't know what she was doing, and her nerves were making her whole body tense up. Once I got her calm. she asked me, in that velvety soft voice, to teach her how to please me. I damn near fell in love with her right then. But I never taught her how to please me. I helped her figure out how to please herself, and that was when she blossomed. But once turned into most of the time, which eventually turned into almost every time.

It wasn't until we were deep into our relationship that I really understood this. I began to understand her as a person. Her dreams. Her fears. Her needs.

Her parents were strict. At first, anyway. Checking in every morning and every night, making her go over her schedule like she'd get grounded for deviating from what they considered her daily routine. Her label coordinated her every move, which isn't out of the ordinary with young artists, but coupled with her folks, it was a lot.

And then there was her church.

I remember the day she brought me the letter, half in tears, half amused and on the verge of laughter. It was on the Cuffe Lake AME Church letterhead, address to Cass, and the general thrust of it was that as a member of the Singing Angels choir, she was setting a horrible example for the other young women in the church. Toward the end, the pastor included a list of ways Cass could improve her image, including, but not limited to, "Covering up that midriff." And then he made sure to remind her that her tithes and offerings were still very much appreciated.

So this was a young woman who hadn't yet come into her own. It seemed like even her own thoughts about herself were scattered and unreliable. Getting her to make a decision and then *stand* on that decision was like pulling teeth. She saw herself through everybody else's eyes. She followed everybody else's rules. She couldn't even eat what she wanted most of the time.

But there was one thing nobody had to tell her, because she knew it for sure.

She loved sex.

And she knew what felt good to her.

Those moments with me were the only times she felt like she had any kind of control in her life.

Once I realized that, it was easier for me to fall back and let her do her thing. Plus, like I said, she got good at it, and I enjoyed the hell out of it.

Like now.

She'd just started moving on me and I was already close. But that was her effect on me. When we first started, I had to train myself to stay calm and not cum too quick. I got good at that, but now I was wondering if I'd lost my mojo.

We'd see in a minute.

I grabbed the hem of her gown and lifted it over her hips. She raised her arms so I could lift it over her head, and once I did, and her braids cascaded back down her back, I tossed it to the side.

Her breasts were in my face, now, and I wasted no time palming them. Gently, because I remembered her not liking me to touch her roughly. They were slightly bigger than they were back then, a fact I could feel but not see. She moaned softly when I kissed her right nipple. Again with the left. I opened my mouth and caressed her nipple with my tongue,

causing her grab the back of my head and pull me closer. It wasn't necessary, though. I was headed there anyway.

Sweet and perky, her nipple hardened in my mouth before I released it to capture her lips once again. She was riding me like she used to, slow and passionate, and I was fine with that. I didn't know if I'd ever get this chance again, so I wanted to prolong this. To savor her. To get my fill before she left me. Again.

"Fuck," I whispered against her lips. "Did you miss me, Cass? It feels like you missed me."

She nodded as she worked her body up and down, gliding on my dick, making me wish there was no condom between us. She was so fucking wet for me. I was about to lose control.

I took her pretty face in my hands. "I missed you, too."

Her eyes locked on mine before slowly fluttering shut, and her keening whine indicated to me, like it always did before, that she was getting ready to cum. That hadn't changed at all. I don't know why I was relieved by that.

"I feel that," I told her between kisses to her neck.

She stopped moving and grabbed my shirt, pulling it over my head and dropping it next to us before pulling me into her. Her nipples brushed my chest just before she pressed us skin-to-skin. She was warm and soft. I was hot and slightly sweaty, and being pressed against her was gonna make that worse, but I didn't care. I never cared when it came to her. I just went along, content to do whatever she needed me to do.

All I ever gave a fuck about was making her happy.

Why didn't she see that?

“Mmm, yesssss...”

“There you go. Cum for me, Cass.”

“Yesssss!”

I moaned with her as her walls squeezed and pulsed around me, holding her trembling body tight as I mentally fought against my own nut. She always tried to pull me along with her.

Once she was still, and her head was resting comfortably on my shoulder, I prepped for part two. Cass was completely useless after she came, so the rest was up to me.

That never bothered me at all.

Moving my hands from her hips to her ass, I gripped her tight and stroked her from the bottom, harder and faster until she cried out in my ear. Even through the condom, I could feel her pussy get wetter, and *that*—her involuntary, primal, biological response to me—was always my weakness and my undoing. Try as I might to hold it, a few moments later, I nutted hard, my body going stiff as pleasure surged through my every nerve ending and I filled that condom with five years' worth of pent up longing and love and pain.

After, she lifted her head and brought her eyes to mine. I used to hate when she did that, because she swore up and down that she could read me. Being young and prideful, I'd

always done my best to hide my true feelings from her. The love. The lust. The *terror*.

It's a scary fucking thing to fall that deep in love with somebody, because you just know, way down in your marrow, that they have the power to fucking destroy you. A power you give them when you let them in. Like you've hired your own assassin. But even with that knowledge, I never actually believed Cass would hurt me. She wasn't experienced enough to be jaded by the bullshit. She didn't have it in her to break my heart. That's what I thought, anyway.

Until she did.

“What you lookin' at?”

She shrugged. “You know I always liked looking at you.”

“Back then, yeah. Trying to read my mind and shit.”

She chuckled. “It worked, though.”

“I just let you think that.” I let my head fall back against the cushions and gazed into her eyes. “What do you see right now?”

After a few moments of gazing right back, she shrugged again. “I think I've lost my powers. I don't see anything.”

That was ironic, because I loved her just as much now as I did back then. Maybe more, now that I knew what it felt like to lose her.

“You must not be looking hard enough.”

She didn't answer, instead choosing to press her lips against mine. It was so soft and slight, it felt more like an accident than a kiss. I let her linger there, just barely brushing my mouth, because I was intrigued. I wanted to see what she'd do next. Where this would lead. Because back then, she turned cold after sex.

Maybe cold is too strong a word.

Aloof? No.

Disconnected. That was it. Cass would disconnect. She was like a guy that way.

So this was new.

It was kinda nice, though.

Especially when she sucked my bottom lip into her mouth and bit down gently.

Then she kissed the spot she'd bitten, healing it before going in for another nibble. Another kiss, then her tongue was caressing mine again. She brought her hands to my face. I slid mine up her back, relishing the softness of her skin. And we just...made out. I'm not sure how long we sat there kissing on my couch, but we didn't come up for air until her pager went off.

"Your boyfriend's wondering where you are," I joked as I pulled away, already missing her lips. "Tell him you're busy."

"Shut up."

She reached over and grabbed her gown. I helped her pull it over her head. She stood and stretched. Never even bothered to look and see who was paging her, which made me wonder if I was onto something.

I elected not to ask.

Because truthfully, I didn't want to know.

Cass being out of sight, out of mind had made these past few years bearable for me. But now that she was right in front of me—now that we'd just made love—I was right back in that place. I cared. I wondered. I worried.

“Thank you,” she said as she slipped her house shoes back on.

“Thank you,” I repeated softly. “Thanks for the dick, Rome. Peace out.”

“Stop,” she said with a chuckle. “I need my rest. And so do you.”

Fuck.

I had questions. Lots of questions.

Did this mean something?

Were we gonna do it again?

Was that her boyfriend paging her?

But all I could say was, “Let's make it nine am. I'll let you sleep in.”

“Ooh, a whole hour.”

“You want me to make it seven?”

She stuck her tongue out at me and took her leave, and I didn't get shit else done for the rest of the night.

DANGER

DAY 2 WASN'T GOING well, which was a stark contrast to the euphoric perfection we'd produced last night.

I fell asleep thinking about it, and then I dreamed about it. Woke up hard as a rock, and then I lay there thinking about her, and us, until the sun made its ascent.

Five years. Five long years without her. Without her lips. Her skin. Her hair, in all its various iterations. Her scent. Just...her. I loved that girl so damn much. I've written more songs than I can count and I still haven't been able to accurately describe the way I felt about her. The weight and the depth of it...there were no words. Not now, and not back then.

So I expressed it in other ways. Well, *one* other way.

After our first time, we kinda got addicted to each other. Anytime she was near me, I had to be touching her. If I couldn't touch her, I had to be looking at her. If I couldn't see her, I was picturing her in my mind. And any free moment we

had, we were sneaking off somewhere to be grown. I smiled to myself remembering that Cass was usually the aggressor in those scenarios.

But I was always ready, willing, and able.

We managed to be discreet. For a time, anyway. We started having sex right before Thanksgiving. By Christmas, the label knew. I don't know how they knew, but they did, and it all came to a head the night Tamika, Cass' handler, caught us fucking in the back seat of my car.

Cass was so upset, she started crying. She thought for sure Tamika would tell her parents and then they'd fly in and break us up. What ended up happening was that Tamika told, her parents yelled, and then they...left us alone. We were both confused by that until Lanelle pulled me aside and told me the check for Cass' advance had cleared. Apparently the DeAvalons were willing to tolerate me as long as their mortgage was getting paid.

I never told Cass about that, though. I just rested easy in the knowledge that there was nothing standing in our way. Everybody was cool with us, so *we* got cool with us. It was a fucking dream; we'd wake up, go to the studio and make music together, go eat and hang out, then go back to my place to screw each other's brains out.

Life was good.

So good.

Until we got sloppy.

But back to day 2.

As soon as I walked into the studio, the vibe seemed different. More relaxed, more casual.

It felt like old times.

And me and Cass were getting along at first...actually, I'd say we were flirting our asses off—also like old times. Smiles, a few winks, her sticking her tongue out at me several times... that was all well and good. But once we got to the current song, a slow, depressing piece about loss, her whole demeanor changed. That playful, flirty side diminished quick, and I had a feeling I knew why.

We didn't have time to waste, though, so I kept pushing her.

“Again, Cass.”

“Fine.” She sighed and tugged at her Lakers cap, pulling it further down over her eyes. “Run it back.”

Life is but a dream

Until it turns into a nightmare—

“Nope. Again.”

“I hate this song,” she mumbled, more to herself than to me.

Chuckling, I asked the logical question. “Then why'd you put it on the album?”

“The label likes it.”

“You have veto power, right?”

“Of course. I just...” she trailed off, shaking her head. “I don’t really hate it. It just puts me in a space I don’t like.”

“I actually think it’s one of the strongest tracks on the album, musically speaking. I see why they picked it.”

Her lower lip poked out a little, settling into a pout. “Okay. I mean...if you think that, then fine. I trust you.”

“Good. So let’s knock this out.”

She took a deep breath. “Remind me, where are we again?”

“Second verse, third line.”

She nodded.

Life is but a dream

Until it turns into a nightmare...

“Again.”

She started once more. It was beautiful, but utterly without feeling.

“Nope. Again.”

She crossed her arms in front of her, almost like she was hugging herself. “What specifically are you needing me to do, Rome?”

“I need you to emote. I don’t hear the pain.”

She sighed, then opened her mouth to speak. She seemed to think the better of it, and after a few deep breaths, she said, “Okay. Okay. Let’s go again. I got it this time.”

We started again, and two words in, I cut the music.

“You didn’t even give me a chance to sing it!” she yelled.

“I saw where it was going,” I said. “You’re killing me right now, girl.”

“But—”

“But, nothing. I’m sick of this shit, Cass. I know you can do better.”

Andrew nudged me with his elbow. “Maybe you should ease up a little,” he whispered.

“Nah, we’re wasting time. Cass, do it again.”

She flipped her braids over her shoulder, her head high, her expression defiant. “You know what? I’ll just take the song off.”

“What? Why?”

“Because it’s just...it’s not...it doesn’t really gel.”

“I disagree. Me and Drew resequenced the whole album. It fits perfectly where it’s at right now.”

Next to me, Drew nodded.

“Well, I don’t like it. Take it off.”

“Bullshit.”

“Excuse me?” Her eyes narrowed under the brim of her cap. “I can take it off if I want to.”

“If you didn’t want the song on the album, why didn’t you say something before you recorded it?” I leaned back in my chair and put my hands on top of my head. “I don’t get you, Cass. After all this time, you’re *still* letting other people make decisions for you. At a certain point you gotta grow the fuck up. For real.”

“Dude—”

“I got this,” I snapped at Drew.

“She’s gonna break,” he warned, but it was too late. I was in a zone.

“I liked it when I heard it, but I don’t like it now,” she explained. “I changed my fucking mind. And since it’s *my album*, I can do that. I should be able to do that without you judging me.”

Her voice broke at the last word, and I could see the tears in her eyes from where I sat. Still, I kept pushing. We were too close to let up now.

“What’s your beef with this song, Cass? Tell the truth.”

“It’s depressing.” Her lips trembled. She hugged herself tighter.

“You said yourself the album concept is about loss and healing.”

She stared down at the floor. In a soft voice, almost child-like, she asked, “Can we push it to tomorrow?”

“No. We can’t. Let’s go. Second verse.”

She took another deep, shaky breath and began to sing.

This time, I let her finish. After, everyone was quiet while she stared at me through the glass, searching for the praise she thought I was withholding. But that wasn’t it at all. I was frustrated, and mostly with myself. I used to get the best out of her in two or three takes. She probably thought I was blaming her, but I was actually blaming myself.

“Let’s go again.”

She sucked her teeth before yanking her headphones off. I jumped to my feet as she tore out of the booth.

“Cass, hold up!”

“No! I’m done. I can’t do it anymore.”

I jogged down the hallway after her.

“You have to.”

“No, I don’t.” She stopped to turn around, tears streaming down her face. “I can’t.”

I came to a stop in front of her and grabbed her hand.

“You’re running away from your feelings,” I said. “I know you don’t want to, but you gotta face it, deal with it, and then put it in your music. Don’t be scared of it. Use it.”

Her glare caused me to back up a step. She’d never looked at me that way before. Eyes full of fire, nostrils flared, lips

trembling. It scared me.

“That’s so fucking easy for you to say,” she spat. “Just leave me the hell alone, Rome.”

“No. We need to talk about it. We never have.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Cass. It’s time.”

She shook her head.

“Listen to me. You gotta process it.”

“No, I don’t,” she said. The sadness had been replaced by defiance. “I’m here to sing, not for a therapy session. If you wanted to hear what I had to say, you should have listened to me back then. It’s too late.”

“Look,” I said, my tone softening, “I’m sorry if I pushed you too hard. Actually, I’m not sorry. That’s my job. But I didn’t mean to make you lose it like this. I’m just trying to get the best performance out of you. That’s all.”

“Okay, but you have to learn how to read the room. You push me too hard, I’m gonna crack. Especially when...” she trailed off. “It’s hard for me, Rome.”

I stared into her eyes. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were... suffering so much.”

“I wasn’t, until...his picture.”

I sighed. “I hate that you had to see that.”

“Well, I did.” She sniffed. “The eyes. The nose. The little smile. It looks just like mine.”

I put my arms around her waist and pulled her into me. “Of course it does, Cass. You’re his mother.”

CASTRA

I GOT THE NEWS on a Wednesday.

I remember this vividly because *Unsolved Mysteries* was on, and my mother was glued to the screen, as always, eager to be entertained by some stranger's personal tragedy. She had no idea I was dealing with one of my own.

While that creepy theme music played in the background, I was peeing on a stick...fitting, I suppose, because I was on top of the world. Number one album, nominated for several awards, and in a relationship with my first love. Having a baby would have turned my life into a horror story.

And it did.

I cried for an entire week after I found out, then I told Rome. He was stunned speechless, and I was hurt by that. I don't know what I expected, but it was definitely more than silence. I guess at the time, I didn't register the fact that it was his life, too. His career. I was too focused on myself, so I felt like he let me down.

A few days later, he proposed and I said no. That I was way too young. That was the end of that.

Then I broke the awful news to my parents. They were livid. At me, at Rome, at the label, at Lanelle, at my manager, Coco, and especially at Tamika. But as bad as their reaction was, it paled in comparison to the tongue-lashing my father doled out to Phil Barone, the head of Prospect Records. All the curse words he couldn't say to me and wouldn't say to Tamika were hurled at Phil. He took it all without actually accepting blame, I guess because he had too much power and influence to give a shit about an artist's father yelling at him.

Pregnancies seem long, but there was no time to wallow in anger or regret. It was time for damage control. Meetings turned into debates which turned into arguments which resulted in everyone's version of a solution being offered.

My mother said I had to keep it. As a Christian woman, she said repeatedly, she couldn't see any other solution. My father, the deacon, shocked me with his suggestion: Let's just get rid of the problem altogether.

My label agreed. So did Lanelle. They seemed to think me having a baby would destroy my momentum and the quasi-good girl image they'd cultivated. Tamika suggested keeping me hidden until I gave birth, then giving the baby up for adoption and pretending it never happened.

Once Rome was brought into the discussion, he said it was up to me, although he mostly agreed with my dad. He was okay with adoption, though. The next best thing.

At first.

The worst part about all of this? Not one person asked me what *I* wanted.

For the record, I wanted no parts of any of it. I was firmly in my dad's and the label's camp on that. I'd worked too hard. My debut album came out in January, and I got pregnant in October. My press run was winding down, but there were photoshoots, interviews, and a short tour on the calendar. I couldn't afford to stop.

But I also couldn't break my mother's heart. I couldn't make myself commit what she saw as the ultimate sin. So I decided adoption was best.

Days turned to weeks, and weeks turned to months. Once I started showing, I stopped all appearances and refused to talk to any media. The timing was almost perfect, though, because my album was still coasting along, selling well even with the abbreviated marketing push. We'd made the best of an ill-timed situation. Only four months until I could put it all behind me.

And then I found out the sex, and everything changed.

DANGER

I BRUSHED HER TEARS away with the pads of my fingers. She closed her eyes and took a shaky breath.

“Are you ready talk about this?” I asked her. “We may never get another chance.”

She opened her eyes and nodded.

I grabbed her hand and led her to the elevator. We rode in silence, and that silence persisted when we entered my apartment. She took a seat on the floor, for some reason. I rested my tired body on the couch and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

All that waiting still didn't prepare me for what came out of her mouth.

“I only realized this recently.” She wiped both sides of her face with her palms. “I had him for everybody else.”

I peered down at her. “What do you mean?”

“I just wanted to sing. That was all I ever wanted. And I was doing that, living my dream until...him. I wanted to make it all go away, but everybody else had their own agenda.”

She put her face in her hands and cried silently. I wanted to reach out to her, to hold her and comfort her, but what she was saying confusing to me, because I didn't remember it that way at all.

“I had him for my mother,” she continued. “Then I *kept* him for you. And I guess, all these years, I've resented you for that.”

Feeling defensive, I opened my mouth and said the absolute worst thing I could have at that moment.

“You could have said no, Cass.”

She brought her tear-rimmed eyes to mine. “It was too late by then!”

She was right, of course.

And it wasn't fair of me to even make that argument, because Cass was too easily influenced back then to say no to anything. It was all of us against her, and we all understood that.

She never stood a chance.

She began to cry again. “You were all for the adoption. You were supportive. You told me I was doing the right thing. And then when I told you it was a boy, you switched up.”

My head dropped as that washed over me. “I know.”

“It hurt. I don’t know why, but it did.”

“I get it. But...I was young and stupid. I wasn’t thinking about it from your side of it. I was thinking...fuck. I’m sorry.”

“So if it had been a girl—”

“Cass—”

“No! I need to know this.” She turned to face me head-on. “You were fine with your daughter being given away, but not your son?”

I hesitated, trying to think through what she was insinuating. “When you say it like that, it sounds bad.”

“Because it was.”

I sighed and brought my eyes to hers, as hard as that was. “If I could take it back, I would. Believe me. I wasn’t trying to hurt you, and I definitely wasn’t trying to force you into doing something you didn’t wanna do.”

“Nobody asked me what I wanted.” Her shoulders slumped. “Nobody cared.”

“*I* cared.”

“Well, you had a funny way of showing it.”

We sat in silence for what seemed like hours. I kept an eye on her, trying to read her body language, hoping to get inside her head. This was news to me, and I couldn’t say I fully understood it. It’s not like I forced her to help me raise Justin. I was a single father in every sense of the word.

As I stared down at her from my spot on the couch, I started to feel frustrated, and resentful of the fact that she didn't seem to understand what I'd gone through.

"You do realize I made sacrifices too, right?" I said, trying to keep my tone even. "Please tell me you didn't forget that part of it."

"Hmm...let's see. My body and heart versus your career." She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, that's the same."

"Don't downplay it, Cass. I almost got blackballed."

"Okay, but you didn't."

My teeth gritted. I jumped to my feet and stormed off to my study, returning only after I'd located what I was looking for. Back in the living room, I walked up on her and dropped the magazine on the floor next to her.

"Read it."

She looked at it, then up at me. "I've read it a million times."

"And you can still look me in the eye and act like I didn't take a public bullet to protect you?"

She crossed her arms in front of her. "Honestly, it was the least you could do."

"And I'm not asking for praise. I just want you to acknowledge it. Because you ain't the only one who suffered."

I was on top of the world when Norris Hall from *Right On* magazine came calling. It was February of '93, and Danger Brooks was a household name. Norris said all the right things on the phone—particularly the part about me being the reason Castra's first album was so successful. Just a month before, she'd fired me off the production of the second album, so when he said that, I ate that shit right up.

My youthful hubris was the reason I marched my happy ass into that interview completely cold and unprepared. I should have known better, but I didn't. I couldn't even blame lack of sleep, because Justin was seven months old at that point and sleeping through the night.

I let my ego get me caught up

It started out okay. He was tossing me softball questions, letting me get comfortable so I would let my guard down even further. He was good at that, and to this day, I still don't hate the player. Only the game.

“So I hear congratulations are in order!” Norris announced cheerfully, and that was the beginning of my nightmare.

“For what?”

“The little bundle of joy...”

My stomach dropped, but I played it cool. “Oh. Yeah. Thanks.”

Norris grinned. “Not to be too forward, but everyone wants to know if you're married.”

“Um...no. Not married.”

His eyes lit up. “From what I understand, you and Castra are still together, no?”

I chuckled uncomfortably. “No, we’re not.”

“See, that confuses me,” he said with a hand on his chin. “If my math is right—”

“Listen, it’s no need to be doing math. Me and Castra aren’t together, I’m not married, and I have a son.”

“Are you with the mother?”

I should have shut it down right then, or at least pushed back a little. But I panicked and said the first thing that came to my mind.

“My family is doing just fine. My son’s mother is doing fine. I’d like to protect her privacy. Respect that.”

That was it. I hadn’t confirmed anything. I thought I’d sidestepped the whole thing.

And then the article came out.

Cass stared at the cover.

“They chopped and screwed every word I said. Made it sound like I had a baby on you.”

“I remember.”

“Good. Then you also remember people from your camp taking that shit and running with it.”

She finally tore her eyes away to look up at me. “I never told them to do that.”

“Oh, I know that. Trust me. But you also didn’t do shit to stop it.” I leaned down to get a little closer. To really drive my point home. “I was supposed to work with Janet, Toni, *and* Tevin that year, and I got dropped for cheating on Black America’s sweetheart.”

“You want me to thank you?” she said bitterly.

“Nah, because that’s not the part that hurt me the most.”

She stared blankly, and my heart thundered in my chest as I prepared myself for the confession I was about to make. I’d never said it out loud. Pride, maybe. Ego. But it was past time I unburdened myself.

“I’ma just say it. Cass, when you had me dropped...that shit...it...” I faltered, searching for the words. But they were pretty simple. The truth always is.

“You broke my fucking heart.”

The pain in her eyes when she looked up at me made me want to shed a few tears of my own.

“I had to,” she managed to say.

“Bullshit.”

“How would it have looked?”

“Fuck that. Y’all dropped me so you could make an album all about getting your heart broken. Which never even fucking happened.”

“Okay,” she said softly. “So we both made mistakes.”

“Well, at least you’re finally admitting it.”

Cass probably didn’t even remember that day. Why would she? But I did. Vividly.

I hadn’t found a nanny yet, so my mama had Justin. He was only six months old. She wasn’t Cass’s biggest fan at that point, but she knew how much working on the second album meant to me. I’d been preparing for almost a year.

I remember Mama being real cautious when she talked about it, though. Looking back, I think she knew it wasn’t gonna happen, but me being young and idealistic and thinking I knew Cass better than she did, it never even crossed my mind that she might pull out.

So I gathered my engineer, my mixers, rented out the best studio I could afford out of my own pocket—only the best for Cass—and stocked up on her snacks. I knew her. I knew what she needed. And dammit, I was excited. We hadn’t talked much, but I knew the vision, and we were a team. It was gonna be amazing. I thought it might even be the thing that brought us back together.

She broke up with me right after Justin was born, only I was too stupid to realize it. She kept blowing me off; too busy, traveling, working with her vocal coach, working out, you name it. And I believed her, holding out hope that she’d come back around once we started making music again.

As I sat in the studio waiting for her, my excitement slowly waned. With each passing minute, I got more nervous. My stomach was in knots. She was late. Not unusual, but she hadn't paged me or anything. One hour turned to two, then three, and then one-by-one, people started politely excusing themselves and leaving the studio with pity in their eyes and sympathy in their goodbyes. Then the call came in. And it wasn't even from her. It was from Lanelle. Just two little words.

“It's off.”

I was devastated.

“I bet you loved it when the album didn't chart,” Cass said quietly.

“Actually, I didn't. Because even though I was hurt, and mad as fuck, it never even crossed my mind to root for you to fail. I could never do that.”

She looked up at me with surprise in her glassy eyes. “Why not?”

“Because...” I slid off the couch and landed next to her on the floor. “Because I love you too much.”

She stared straight ahead, then at the floor, and I waited for her to return the sentiment. Her silence was disappointing, but not surprising, because she'd clearly been holding onto her anger and pain for as long as I had, but a lot more intensely. The idea that I pressured her into keeping Justin against her

will...whether it was true or not, it was how she felt, and that had to have taken a deep toll.

I was preparing to speak when she leaned over and rested her head on my shoulder, stopping me in my tracks.

“I’m sorry for my part in...in letting you take all the blame,” she said quietly.

I closed my eyes and exhaled, only realizing just then how much I needed to hear her say that.

“And I’m sorry for...fuck. For making you have a baby you didn’t want.”

She sniffed, then wrapped her arm around mine. “You didn’t make me.”

“It feels like you think that, though.”

“I...I don’t know what I think,” she said. “I’m still confused. I just...I feel like it would have been easier if he went to strangers. That’s a clean break. But *you* having him... just....” She shook her head, and her braids swept lightly across my skin. “It’s a constant reminder. How could I be around you and not think about him?”

She burst into tears. On instinct, I maneuvered us so that her head was against my chest, my arms locked tightly around her.

“I’m sorry, Cass. I’m so sorry.”

I held her through this round of tears, only letting go to retrieve a roll of tissue. I tore off several squares and dabbed her face until her cheeks were dry.

“Is my mascara running?” she said.

I smiled. “Yeah, you have a little raccoon thing going on right now.”

“Shut up.”

Laughing, I grabbed the wet tissues and tossed them into the garbage on my way to my bathroom, where I grabbed a tub of Vaseline off the counter.

I came back and handed it to her to hold, then popped the top and scooped a small amount with my finger. Gently, I spread a thin layer under each eye.

“I can’t believe you remembered that,” she said with a weak smile.

“As many times as you made me help you take your makeup off? I could do this in my sleep.”

She brought her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. “Can you be honest with me about something?”

“Anything.” I wiped a clean piece of tissue under her eye to remove the Vaseline.

“Why did you change your mind about the adoption? Did you just...not want a girl? Were you...” she trailed off, almost as if she was afraid to ask the question or hear the answer. “Were you scared to have a girl because you thought she’d be like me?”

I stopped mid-wipe. “What? No. Cass...no. How did you even come up with that?”

“What else was I supposed to think?”

“Baby, I swear to you, it didn’t have anything to do with that.”

“Then what was it?”

I took a breath and let it out slowly, letting my hand drop from her face.

“Okay, look. When I found out it was a boy, it scared the shit out of me.”

“Why?”

“Because I imagined what his life might be like and...my worst nightmare was that he’d end up with a father like mine.”

CASTRA

MR. DOZIER.

Well, *Captain* Dozier. That's what he made everyone call him, but I never was clear on what he did in the military. I only met him once, actually, and it was a strange encounter. He didn't say anything to me, he just grinned at Rome and said, "So you *do* like girls."

Besides the oddness, the captain didn't make much of an impression on me one way or the other, but the specter of him loomed very large in Rome's life, and not in a good way.

The first time I ever saw Rome cry, it was when he was talking about the captain. He wasn't Rome's real dad; his mom had gotten remarried when Rome was in elementary school. But he'd helped raise him, and from the way Rome talked, it seemed like the man had done a good job. Rome left home at eighteen and became a success pretty quick. The captain seemed to have been a major reason for that.

And then I found out why.

Rome wasn't launched from the nest by loving parents. He had fled the nest to get away from a tyrant. It all came rushing out one night at his apartment. Mrs. Dozier called to say the captain was in the hospital. He'd fallen off the roof while trying to clean the gutters, and it wasn't looking good.

Alarmed and in supportive mode, I asked Rome if he wanted me to drive him to the hospital. But I'd misread the pain on his face. He wasn't anxious or scared. He wasn't upset at all. He was wrestling with a thought that was extremely un-Rome like.

"What's wrong?" I'd asked.

"I...I don't know. I just feel like..." he trailed off. I waited, and after several moments, he finally spoke again. *"I would never wish death on somebody, but if that motherfucker died, you'd have to stop me from doing backflips across his grave."*

Rome was a kind soul, sensitive and thoughtful and nice, so hearing those words come out of his mouth was jarring. And that's when he opened up to me, and it all became clear.

The captain never put hands on him. His mother wouldn't have it. So he did other things to punish Rome. Made him kneel on rice. Pushups until his arms gave out. Yelled at him. Called him names. Told his family he was gay because he was into music.

"It wasn't even the gay thing. I ain't never been into the gay-bashing shit. If I liked dudes, I'd like dudes. It's the fact that he tied it to music. That was my passion. That was the

thing I loved. That's why he attacked it. Boys aren't supposed to play piano. They're supposed to play sports."

A tear fell.

"I joined ROTC in high school just to shut his ass up, and even that didn't work."

"Your mother didn't stop him?" I'd asked.

"She was under his spell."

I put my arms around him that night and held him until he fell asleep. The captain died a few weeks later, but the worst part was that it only made Rome feel worse. He couldn't figure out why he was so sad about it, and I was too young to understand that complicated feelings often arise when someone passes. Hate them or love them, there may still be deep sadness.

I wish I'd known enough to tell him that.

"Why didn't you tell me that?" I asked, a tear streaming down my face.

"I don't know why," he said quietly, clearly uncomfortable. The captain was still a sore spot, and I was picking at it. "There was so much going on, and we were both overwhelmed and...it was just a crazy time."

"All this time, I thought—"

"It was never about you," he insisted. "Please understand that."

“I wish you had told me.”

“Why?” he said, genuinely curious. “What difference would it have made for you?”

“Because knowing what I know about him, and you...I get it. And I could have told you that, and we could have worked through it and maybe...maybe things would have been different.”

He heaved a heavy sigh. “We fucked this all up, didn’t we?”

“As only we can.”

We shared painful laughs at that. Rome unrolled more tissue and dabbed the tear off my cheek before wiping off the rest of the Vaseline, and the mascara with it.

“Better?” I asked somewhat playfully, because I felt lighter. A weight seemed to have lifted off of me just that fast.

Rome nodded as he gathered the tissues and crushed them into a ball in his fist.

“Not to change the subject,” he said, “but we only have one more day to get through five songs. You think we can do it?”

“Two days ago I would have said no, but I think we can. We’re still a good team.”

“Always.” He stood and reached out a hand. I grabbed it and let out a soft grunt as he pulled me from my sitting position onto my feet.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s do this.”

DANGER

WE WORKED OUR ASSES off. Got through three songs before we took a break. Cass said she was going for a massage, and I almost started an argument with her about her not eating lunch, but I ultimately decided to keep my mouth shut. She might have been hungry, but she looked happy, so I let her be.

While I waited for her return, I sat down at Daphne's desk to go through some papers. Financial shit. I was doing very well for myself, a fact I was extremely proud of. I was still eating off of Cass' first album, for one thing, but the royalties from my most recent projects had me in a position to be set for life.

I was aggressive about saving, because times were changing. Every writer and producer I knew was keeping an eye on the industry, especially as it related to piracy. Used to be, nobody worried about the bootleg man doing his thing at the barbershop or out the trunk of his car. Now? *Everybody*

was the bootleg man, burning CDs faster than we could make the music to fill them.

New tech is cool, and I'm not opposed, because if there's one thing I know about the industry, it's that the labels are always gonna make sure they get their profits. Any adjusting they do usually benefits the writers and producers, so I wasn't too worried. Yet.

The artists should have been, though. They always get screwed.

I was halfway through my self-audit when I got a page from my boy, Dominic. We went all the way back to junior high school. He was making a name for himself writing songs over at Jive.

They'd tried to hire me a few years ago, but I turned them down. That in-house employment shit doesn't work for a man like me. I enjoyed my independence too much.

“Dom! What up, nigga?”

“You, playboy. What's goin' on in Hotlanta?”

“Dog, don't nobody say that shit down here.”

He laughed. “Aight, for real, what's good?”

“Man, I been in the studio. With Cass.”

“Oh, shit,” he said, his voice tinged with disbelief. “How's that going?”

“Honestly, it's been up and down.”

“Yeah, I bet. With y’all Ashford and Simpson lookin’ asses.”

“Fuck you,” I said, laughing.

Dom didn’t know the truth about our situation. Nobody did outside of our families and a select few folks at the label. But I know there were rumors. There always are. But when a rumor can’t be proven, it always fizzles out. Eventually.

“We’re up right now,” I said. “Been in here humming. I feel good about it.”

“Word. So I guess that means she’s not taking it hard.”

“Taking what hard?”

He was silent for a full thirty seconds, and then, “Fuck.”

“What, Dom?”

“You really don’t know?”

“Man, if you don’t—”

“Aight, aight. You ain’t hear this from me.” He took a deep breath. “Prospect is dropping her.”

“Are you serious? They didn’t tell me that.”

“Damn. See, this is why I don’t smoke during the day.”

“Why are they still doing the rollout, then?”

“Trying to recoup. But trust me, it’s over. She could go to number 1, and she’s still outta there.”

“Why?”

“Well, the word is that she’s difficult, bad attitude, et cetera. And that they lost too much on that flop second release.”

“But—”

“But the *real* story is that it ain’t really about her at all. The big labels are pivoting, man.”

“To what?”

“White pop girls. That’s the next wave, and the labels been gearing up to get behind this whole pop renaissance. Sparing no expense for this shit, either. R&B is finna be backburnered, man. It’s bout to be Beckypalooza out this bitch.”

“Fuck.”

“Sorry. But I mean, you could shop her around with some of the black labels. The contracts might be smaller, but they’ll get her where she needs to be. Her talent ain’t never been in question. She just made some fucked up decisions, that’s all.”

“Yeah. Well, I appreciate the heads up.”

“Not a problem. Aye, real quick. You’re tight with Sean, right?”

“Nah, not tight. I’d say we’re cool. Why?”

“I’m cool with him, too, but between us, keep her away from Bad Boy. They ain’t the best choice, money-wise. And definitely don’t send her here. We’re still cleaning up Rob’s messes.”

“I met him in Chicago a few years back when he was still with PA. Remember I told you I thought that nigga was

weird.”

“Yeah, you told me about that. And you ended up being right.”

“Damn. Why are y’all cleaning shit up? Throw that nigga to the wolves. He needs to be in jail.”

“It ain’t up to me. Wish it was.” He paused for a moment. “I’m sorry about Cass. But I think she’ll be alright. Just make sure you take care of her. Watch out for her. But you always have, though.”

“Yeah.”

After we hung up, my head dropped in defeat. All this hard work. All the shit we’d been working through to bring back the magic...none of that shit mattered anymore.

I had to tell her. How, I wasn’t sure, but she needed to know. But how do you tell someone that all of their effort, everything they’d sacrificed for and shed tears over, was all for nothing? That their career might be over? After the emotions of the last couple of days, I wasn’t sure she could even handle it.

Producers and song-writers have to be in touch with our emotions, otherwise we wouldn’t be able to make good music. But this shit here...it’s a lot harder to navigate when you’re this close to it.

Cass was gonna be crushed. Singing was all she had. Her family acted a fool when her second album flopped, and from what I’d been hearing, her last relationship crashed and burned. And then, there was me. And Justin.

This was a mess.

But I resolved to tell her because I owed her that much, and then I was gonna figure out a way to help her. We may not have been together anymore, but she'd always be my first love. She'd always be special.

In my head, she'd always be mine.

CASTRA

“IS EVERYTHING OKAY?”

Rome raised his eyebrows. “Yeah. Why are you asking me that?”

“I don’t know. You seem...distracted.”

Which was an understatement. It was day three, and Rome wasn’t himself.

Rome in the control room was a man on a mission, no matter what else was going on in his busy life. His studio was his cocoon. His sanctuary. But today, as miserable as he looked, it seemed more like a torture chamber.

Rome looked at Andrew, then back at me, his expression pinched. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Cass. I’m straight. Run that last part back.”

“Okay,” I said, because there was no point in pushing him.

I was only halfway through my verse when he stopped me. Again.

“What now?”

“I don’t know.” He stared down at the levels like he expected to see the answer there. “I think...I think we might need a break.”

“A break?” I looked at Andrew, who shrugged. “We have, like, less than twelve hours to finish.”

Without another word, Rome turned off the sound, said a few words to Andrew, and was on his feet. With his hand, he gestured for me to leave the booth.

I returned the headphones to their stand and exited the side door of the booth. I frowned at him, and worried about the angry look on his handsome face.

“What’s wrong, Rome?”

“Nothing,” he said quickly. “I want you to take a ride with me.”

“O-kay. Are you sure?”

He smiled for the first time all day. “You trust me?”

“Always.”

He held out his hand. “Alright, well, come with me, Ms. Castra Lashae.”

“Ugh. Why are you trying to annoy me, Mr. Romell Jermaine?”

Laughing, he led me to the elevator. We rode down to the bottom level and exited into the parking deck, finally stopping in front of a shiny black Mercedes.

“When did you get this?” I said as I inspected its sleek, sexy curves.

He shrugged, trying to act all nonchalant like this car wasn't his pride and joy. He'd always been into cars. Stayed with a car magazine in his hands back then. Car mags and kiwis.

“A few months ago,” he answered proudly. “You like it?”

“You know I'm not really into cars, but yeah, I love it.”

We pulled off, headed to God only knew where. These little field trips were a regular part of our relationship the first time around. Rome was spontaneous like that, and always fun. I loved that about him.

I reached into the back seat and grabbed his leather CD case, flipping through while he swiped his card at the parking garage gate.

“Who's releasing next year?” I asked as I reached the back pages full of blank CDs. There was music on them, I knew. Rome always had all the early demos.

“Lauryn's coming out.”

“From Fugees?”

“Yep. It's that third one, at the bottom.”

“Is it any good?”

“It's better than good.”

I made a mental note to steal it from him later. “Alright, what else is in here?”

“This girl group out of Houston. They’re young. Q has a girl, Tamia. Voice is insane. Her debut is in there.”

“So we’re on a nickname basis with Quincy Jones now?” I asked playfully, and when Rome grinned, I laughed at how adorable it was. “Look at you, all in love and whatnot,” I teased.

“Nah, we’ve talked a few times,” he said, still smiling and trying to hide it. “Nothing serious. We ain’t best friends, but we’re cool.”

“You should see your face right now.”

He shook his head. “Anyway, Brandy and Monica are in there, too.”

“Ooh, which one is Brandy?”

“Silver CD at the very back.”

I slipped it out of its plastic covering and slid it into the CD player. I loved me some Brandy. She opened for me once in LA.

“Alright, where are we going?” I asked over the music.

“You’ll see. I just wanted to get you out of the box for a little while.”

“Well, thank you, I guess. But I thought we had some momentum going.”

He sighed, his thick eyebrows inching closer together. “You were right about me being distracted. I got some heavy shit on my mind.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

He thought for a moment before reaching over to pat my knee. “Maybe later.”

We spent about fifteen minutes on I-20 East before getting off and heading down some side streets. It wasn't until we pulled into the strip that I realized where we were.

I stared up at the sign with the biggest smile on my face.

“Are you for real?”

He chuckled. “Yes, ma'am.”

“Did you really...?” I trailed off, staring out my window at the modestly-sized brick building in front of us.

It was smaller than I remembered. A little rougher looking, too. But otherwise, it was exactly as it was six years ago when I was here last.

Sgt. Singer's Pizza Circus.

A place where kids can run around and play stupid games while an animatronic rat sings show tunes on the stage. The country ass, bama version of Chuck E. Cheese.

But it was fun.

Fun I never had as a kid.

My first time there was at the ripe old age of nineteen. After a particularly intense studio session for a demo, Rome and I got to talking over McDonald's...I ordered a happy meal, and he found that both confusing and hilarious. As I played with the little plastic toy I'd dug out of the bottom, I explained that

my parents rewarded me with happy meals when I'd done something good, and that it was the only time I ever really felt like a kid. Because once I expressed an interest in singing, they made it my whole life, and being a kid took a back seat.

Rome seemed to understand that, and I was glad he didn't judge my parents for it. Instead, we finished our meals and then he drove me to Sgt. Singer's.

I was the oldest kid there.

He couldn't keep up with me as I ran from one attraction to another. Ski ball, Ms. Pacman, the large indoor slide I had no business in, the tickets snaking out of the slot when I won at something and the cheap, overpriced trinkets I exchanged them for...it was the most fun I'd had in as long as I could remember. And the best part was experiencing it with Rome.

Lots of people would have found my childlike giddiness odd, but not him. He encouraged me, pumped me up, clapped when I won.

He was happy that I was happy.

I didn't know how rare and special that was at the time.

I stared up at the colorful marquee with a smile. I didn't expect that childhood magic to be there for me all these years later, but I appreciated the gesture all the same.

"Rome..." I trailed off, shaking my head.

"You don't wanna go in?"

"Oh, I absolutely wanna go in. I'm just surprised."

“Why would you be surprised?”

I turned back to him. “You remembered.”

He shrugged. “Why wouldn’t I remember something that put that big smile on your face?”

Touched, I leaned over the console and pressed my lips against his. I didn’t linger, because it wasn’t the time or place, but I made a mental note to get him out of his clothes at some point later today.

“Maybe it’s not that you remembered,” I said. “Maybe it’s that you still...care.”

He turned off the car and dropped his keys in his lap. “I can’t imagine there ever being a day when I don’t.” He stared straight ahead, his eyes taking on a dreamlike gaze. “I’ve thought about you every day for the last five years.”

When he brought his eyes back to mine, his heated gaze roamed my body from top to bottom. That, combined with the sweet words he’d just said, made me all tingly.

“Let’s just...let’s go in.”

He bit his lip, sending my body into overdrive.

“Seriously, Rome. Stop looking at me like that.”

Laughing, he tapped the tip of my nose with his finger.

“Alright. Let’s go.”

The nostalgia kicked in as soon as I walked through the door. Excited, I went from game to game, winning tickets and

earning smiles and laughs from Rome. Just as he once was—as he *always* was—he was happy to see me happy.

A line was forming behind me at ski ball, which was odd, because on either side of me, there were two other lanes open. But when I finished my game, I discovered I'd been recognized, and spent the next ten minutes signing autographs. Rome watched it all with a smile.

When I returned from my quick trip to the restroom, I found him at the tables looking at a menu. As if we hadn't eaten at this place a million times. It wasn't like they'd added lamb chops or something.

“What you want on your pizza?”

I took a seat across from him in the booth. “Oh, I can't.”

“Cass...” he trailed off, shaking his head. “Baby, eat what you want.”

“I shouldn't.”

“You should,” he insisted.

I waved at a group of little girls. “Just get one for you. I'll eat a piece of your crust.”

“Cass...trust me. Eat some pizza.”

I stared at him, trying to read his expression. So serious. Way more serious than was warranted for cheese and pepperoni.

“Why do I feel like there's something you're not saying?”

With what seemed like much concerted effort, he closed the menu and set it on the table in front of him. “Alright, look. I got word that they’re dropping you regardless of how the album charts. The decision was made before they even reached out to me.”

“Shit.” I sat back against the booth and stared down at the colorful placemat in front of me, my heart pounding in my ears. Tears filled my eyes until the world blurred around me. I couldn’t even honestly say I was shocked. It’s the business, and you never get comfortable in business. Ever. Still, I guess a small part of me had always seen Prospect as family, and to be unceremoniously dumped by them, well, it *hurt*.

“I’m sorry.”

Shaking my head, I blinked the tears away and took a deep breath. “Is it...was it something I did?”

He leaned forward and grabbed my hand in his, holding it tight.

“Listen to me. If you don’t believe anything else I say to you, believe this: it’s not you. You have the kind of talent that starts bidding wars. You understand? This is bigger than you. The tides are turning, that’s all. R&B is changing.”

I looked around me, staring at the little children running back and forth. Listening to the squeals and screams. Rome followed my gaze, squeezed my hand, then let it go.

“You ever bring him here?” I said, and he looked surprised by the sudden change in topic.

“You can’t say his name?”

“Just answer the question.”

He sighed and reached out to brush away my tears. “Yeah. I’ve brought him here before.”

“Did he like it?”

He smiled. “He did. But he likes Disney World more, for obvious reasons.”

I nodded. “Does he like kiwi?”

“Yeah,” Rome said between peals of laughter. “I swear, I didn’t force it on him.”

“I believe you.” I brushed some old crumbs off the table. “I’ll be honest. This place is a lot smaller and less fun than I remember. I mean, the nostalgia is great, but—”

“It’s wack, you can say it.”

Laughing, I sniffed and shook my head. “It’s not wack. We just...outgrew it.” I swallowed a gulp of water. “Like they say, you can’t go home again.”

Rome frowned. “Nah. I think you can. Not always, but every now and then. Sometimes home is the best place for you. Sometimes...” he trailed off and grabbed my hand again. “Sometimes you realize you never should have left in the first place.”

He kissed the back of my hand, and then we let that hang in the air between us. After polishing off an entire pepperoni pizza, we dragged ourselves back to the car and listened to

music in the parking lot. We must have been there for two hours before Rome brought us back to reality.

“Alright, we got work to do.”

“Yeah. Can’t say I’m all that motivated anymore.”

He turned the dial to lower the volume on the stereo. “If anything, you should be *more* motivated. Somebody will pick you up, Cass. You got too much talent and too many albums left in you to just retire.”

“Maybe.”

“If that’s what you want,” he said quietly.

“Of course it is.”

“Well, good then. I just...whatever you do, I want it to be *your* choice. I don’t wanna pressure you one way or the other. You’re a grown ass woman who knows what she wants. And whatever it is, I got your back.”

I looked over at him and smiled, and it was one of true happiness. Because I knew he meant what he said, and the absolute certainty of it was a comfort.

“Thank you, Rome.”

“You’re welcome.”

“If you’re trying to get ass, I’d already decided to give you some.”

Rome guffawed. “I wasn’t, I swear. But if you’re offering...”

“Oh, I’m not just offering,” I said, smiling slyly. “I’m throwing it right at you. Are you gonna catch it?”

His eyes darkened. “You already know you never have to ask that question.”

In the interest of getting back to the studio safely, I didn’t respond to that, and I also did my best to ignore the flutters in my belly and the moistness down below.

It was hard to ignore, though, and the ride back didn’t do anything to quell those sensations. I wanted him so bad, I could taste it.

“You know what I was thinking about yesterday?” he said as he pulled into the parking garage.

“Me?”

He grinned. “Of course. But I also thought about that time Tamika caught us fucking in the back of my car.”

I burst out laughing. “I remember that. In the Rabbit Cabriolet. I was so scared.”

He backed into his parking space. “I didn’t tell you at the time, but, *man*,” he said. “I had blue balls for two days.”

“Why?” I asked, trying not to laugh at that.

“Cuz she banged on the window right when I was about to cum and it made you hop up off me. I was pissed, and then the fucking pain set in.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that?”

“You had enough on your mind. I didn’t wanna add to it.”

“Aww, I’m sorry.” I glanced down at his crotch. “Are your balls okay?”

“Take a look,” he said, not missing a beat. “See for yourself.”

I looked around us, happy to discover that we were all alone in the parking deck. I angled my body toward Rome and put a hand on his dick, my excitement sprouting when I felt that he was already hard.

“Uh, I was just playing,” he said quietly, with absolutely no force or conviction.

“Shhh.” I leaned over and pecked his lips before reaching in to free him from the confines of his pants. On my knees on the seat, I leaned across the console, not caring at all that my ass was in the air. Rome didn’t care either, he simply reached over and palmed it while I planted kisses all over my favorite part of him.

“Shit,” he hissed as I took him right to the back of my throat. “You wildin’ right now, Cass. Goddamn.”

One hand squeezed my ass. The other fisted my braids as he pistoned his hips upward, fucking my mouth as I did my best to suck him dry.

“*Fuck*, I’m ‘bout to cum.”

I went harder, slurping and moaning and sucking and singing on that mic until it erupted, shooting hot cum straight to the back of my throat.

I swallowed every drop, sat up, and checked the mirror. As I suspected, my lipstick was gone, my braids were in disarray, and my mascara was making a run for it.

But it was worth it.

“Alright,” I said as I flipped the mirror up. “Let’s go to work.”

DANGER

MAN, YOU COULDN'T TELL me shit. I walked up in my studio like I was the king of everything. Daphne greeted me, and I threw my hand up like she was a peasant. Drew tried to say something to me but I brushed him off. Tasha mentioned something about a phone call from Prospect, but I didn't hear a word she said. I was too busy floating.

I mean, I'd gotten plenty of head. Some of it objectively better than what I got thirty minutes ago. But something about it being the woman I loved, the only woman who'd ever gotten in...that was special. It was sexier. More intimate. It *felt* better.

Cass had me wide open.

Again.

Fuck.

"Alright, where are we?" she asked from inside the booth.

I took my seat next to Drew and looked at the track list.
"We're finishing up 'Pieces of Me.'"

“Okay.” She put her headphones on, her face lit up by the sunny smile she wore.

“You good, babe?” I said. “You need anything?”

“I’m fine.”

“Yes, you most certainly are.”

Cass smiled, her eyes lowering towards the floor. Drew looked over at me, but I ignored it in favor of watching my girl blush.

I hit the switch and flooded the room with an up-tempo song that was pretty damn close to something I might have written and produced myself. DeMarco, the producer, had done some interesting things with the melody and bass line.

After Cass finished the first verse, I killed the music and sat back in my chair. “That was good. Actually, that was perfect.”

She beamed.

I put my hands behind my head and reclined further. “That high G was fire, girl. You must’ve done some throat exercises or something.”

Her eyes widened briefly before she burst into giggles. Beside me, Drew groaned.

“What’s wrong with you?” I said.

He rolled his pale green eyes. “I know you guys think you’re being subtle, but you’re not. And it’s kinda gross.”

Chuckling, I turned my attention back to Cass.

“Alright, next verse, baby.”

Her eyes lit up. “You know what I was thinking?”

“What were you thinking, beautiful?”

“I wanna add some reverb to the end of my verse.”

“I think we can make that happen.”

“Thank you,” she crooned. “I don’t know why, but I have all these ideas in my head. My creative juices are flowing.”

I nodded. “I think I know why.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Andrew murmured next to me as Cass laughed again and shook her head at my antics.

Ignoring him, I winked at her before we got back down to business.

As we worked through the final song, I started thinking about how good things were going, and wondered if there wasn’t something to my little innuendo. I was joking about our lovemaking being the thing that had her creative juices flowing, but that shit might have really been true.

Truth be told, neither of us had ever duplicated our success from her first album. I’d worked with some of the biggest names in R&B, won awards, and I was making money faster than I could spend it, but my *work*, the artistry and integrity of the music—what this was really all about—had never been the same since Cass.

Even the songs I’d written for her second album and passed off to other singers hadn’t quite hit that sweet spot. There was something about me and her together...a synergy. Symbiosis.

Magic.

My stepfather, rest his soul, made everybody around him miserable. Our household was functional, I mean *well-oiled machine* functional, but nobody was happy. Nobody was the best version of themselves. Me and my mother walked on eggshells to make sure we followed all his rules and kept him content, but in doing so, we were both stifled. Me, with my music. My mother with her gardening—Captain Dozier nitpicked and micromanaged her so much, she gave it up altogether.

That's not how we're supposed to be living. The people who love you are supposed to bring out your best, or at least support you so that you can be the best version of you. Cass had a passion for singing. Always had. Mine, of course, was making music. We brought out the best in each other, musically. Emotionally. Creatively. And on the personal side, *sexually*.

But it didn't matter. Because her best version of herself didn't include being a mother, and it would be a real Captain Dozier move to pressure her into it just because I wanted to be with her.

Just because I couldn't live without her.

It was a harsh realization, but the only logical conclusion.

We finished up around nine, at which time I sent Marlo out to grab us some dinner while Drew queued everything up for the final mix. I inclined my head to Cass in the booth to get

her to follow me out into the hallway. There was one last thing we needed to do.

I wrapped my arms around her and hugged her tight before pulling away. “Since you’re feeling all creative, I thought maybe you’d wanna stay for the final mix. Give us your input.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m kinda tired.”

I studied her face and found the tiredness around her eyes. She was still beautiful, but she didn’t look fresh. She needed rest.

“Okay, I get it,” I said. “We went hard today.”

“We did.”

“It’s wild, Cass. It seems like you came alive in that booth after you found out they’re dropping you.”

She nodded. “I know. I was thinking that, too.”

“What’s that about?” I said, tightening my grip.

“I have no idea.” She flipped her braids over her shoulder and stared up at me. “Maybe with the pressure off, I could just...have fun with it. Enjoy singing like I did when I first started. Like when we...” she trailed off.

“When we made *Night*.”

She nodded.

I sighed, choosing my words carefully. “What happens after you walk out of my studio tonight?”

“Well, y’all do the mix. Send it over to Prosp—”

“No, I mean what happens with *us*.” I stared intently, holding her gaze, making sure she knew I was serious. “You and me.”

“I don’t...um...well, we made up, so I guess we’ll be... friends,” she said, averting her eyes.

“Friends,” I repeated, taking a few steps backward.

Her shoulders dropped. “What do you want me to say?”

“I want you to say...shit, I don’t know, Cass. Maybe that you wanna be with me.”

“I *do* wanna be with you.”

That stopped me in my tracks. I’d been expecting her to push back a little. A lot. But she just came out with it.

She really had changed.

I stepped back into her space and snaked my arm around her waist. “So then—”

“I can’t be with you, Rome. And you know why.”

“Are you sure? You don’t even wanna try?”

She rolled her eyes at that. “Just leave it alone.”

I blew out a sigh as she pushed me away. I felt her slipping from my grasp again, and there was nothing I could do about it. Again.

“What time are you leaving?” I finally said.

“Why?”

“I was thinking, before you go...maybe you wanna...I don’t know, talk about him.”

She crossed her arms in front of her and let her back rest against the wall. “Didn’t we do that already?”

I shook my head. “Not really. We got sidetracked.”

“What makes you think I wanna talk about it?”

“Because you haven’t dealt with it.”

“I don’t *wanna* deal with it.”

“Cass—”

“Leave it alone, Rome.”

“Baby, I know you’re scared.”

Silent, she stared down at the floor.

“I’m not asking you to be in his life. I just...I don’t want you to leave here holding onto that pain.”

“I thought you wanted me to put it in my music,” she snapped.

“Cass. Don’t be like that. You need to deal with it.”

Her body started to tremble ever so slightly. I almost thought I was imagining it.

“I don’t know if I can do it,” she said, and I would have dropped it had she stood firm on her ‘no.’ But she wasn’t firm. She was wavering, and as much as I knew I shouldn’t, I pushed her.

“You can. You can do anything you wanna do,” I said. “I’ve been telling you that since day one, right?”

“That’s just a thing people say to be encouraging,” she murmured.

“But in your case, it’s a hundred percent true.”

“But if that’s the case, my second album—”

“Was a blip on the radar. You have it in you to be a legend.”

She stared at me with glassy eyes, her arms dropping until they hung limply at her side.

“Why do you believe in me so hard?” she finally asked.

“Because you’re smart, and strong, and you’re talented as fuck, Cass. Why do you *doubt* yourself so hard?”

“I honestly don’t know. I mean, I know I can sing. I’ve never doubted that. Maybe I just don’t believe I deserve all the success.”

“I don’t understand that. At all.”

“Plenty of people can sing,” she explained. “On Sunday morning, any Sunday, go down to Cuffe Lake AME and listen to our choir. Or any choir anywhere in any black church. Why *me*, and not any of *them*?”

“I don’t know.”

“It doesn’t make sense to me.”

“Well, maybe it’s you and not them because that’s the way it was supposed to be. And trust me when I tell you, ain’t nobody out here paying you millions or standing in line to buy

your album because they wanna be nice. They're doing it because they enjoy your music. You understand what I'm saying?"

She shrugged.

"Baby, you're providing a service. It's an even exchange. Your success is proportional to the enjoyment you provide. That's all. This shit is work. You know that. So try to get all that *deserve* shit out your head. You wouldn't be a millionaire if you didn't have a million-dollar voice."

She raised her eyebrows. "That...makes a lot of sense."

"I know. Now, are you ready to do this?"

Her face went blank again, then hard. "No. And I resent the fact that you're pressuring me to do it. Is this your way of—"

"Trying to make you stay? No. I mean, I'd be lying if I said it didn't cross my mind. But I wouldn't do that to you, Cass. As much as I don't wanna see you walk out my door."

I knew she was struggling, and I knew I was pressuring her, but I also knew that if she walked out that door without talking about Justin, she was gonna carry it with her for the rest of her life. And more than anything else, even us being together, I wanted her to be happy. I wanted her to have peace.

"If I do this...will you not...judge me?" she said quietly.

"Baby, I've never judged you for that."

"You haven't?"

I shook my head.

“Alright.” She stepped back and took several deep breaths.
“Let’s go.”

We were silent in the elevator, our gazes locked on the number as it moved from four to five, and the silence persisted as we moved down the hall and into my apartment.

I went straight to my study to grab my photo albums. When I returned, Cass had kicked off her shoes and gotten settled onto my couch. With her arms wrapped around herself, it was clear she wasn’t comfortable. I started second-guessing myself, wondering if I’d made a mistake.

I stopped and looked down at her.

“Cass, if you don’t wanna do this...I mean, I did kinda push you into it, but it’s not up to me. It’s up to you.”

“I know.”

“If you don’t want to, I’ll put this back and never bring it up again.”

Her chest rose as she inhaled deeply. Seconds ticked by as she picked at her fingernails. Finally, she brought her eyes back to mine, holding her hands out for the album.

“I need to do this, so just...give me the first one.”

I handed her the album and settled in on the couch next to her, one arm slung against the back, not close enough to touch her, but ready at a moment’s notice to hold her if she needed that.

I watched her as she opened the cover. The first page held a picture of Justin in his bassinet in the hospital, just after they'd cleaned him up. Cass was just out of frame, not wanting any pictures of her in that state. He looked like a tiny burrito wrapped up in that white, pink, and blue hospital blanket.

"I remember when you took this picture," she said.

"Yeah. That was a weird moment."

"It was a weird nine months."

"I know. I tried my best to—"

"No, you did," she cut in. "You were sweet. I didn't want for anything. It was just the...the knowing that at the end of it all, he'd be yours, and I'd always be the singer who hid her baby to keep her career."

"You and Janet Jackson."

She rolled her eyes. "That isn't true and you know it."

"I know. But everybody else believes it. And guess what? Janet still became the highest paid female artist in history. So it didn't matter in the end."

She flipped the page and smiled at a picture of me giving Justin a bottle.

"How old is he here?"

"Three weeks, maybe? Those first few months were a blur to me."

"Who's taking this picture? It looks professional."

I chuckled. “My mama. When she found out she had a grandbaby on the way, she made me buy her the best Nikon on the market and then she started photography classes.”

“That sounds like her.”

“Yeah.”

She looked over at me. “She still hate my guts?”

“She never hated you, Cass.”

She rolled her eyes.

“She didn’t,” I insisted. “She just didn’t understand what was at stake for you.”

She didn’t respond to that. Instead, she continued to flip through the album, a little faster this time.

“He’s so freaking cute,” she said fondly. “Looks just like you.”

“I know. No denying him.”

“His eyes...those are...” she trailed off. “It’s like looking at my grandpa,” she said, her voice breaking.

“It’s okay, Cass.”

“I don’t think I can do this,” she said, closing her eyes.

“You can.”

“You say that because you don’t understand what it’s like to...to know there’s a piece of you out there. Something carved out of you. I literally feel him missing from me, Rome. It hurts.”

“I’m sorry.” It was the only thing I could think to say.

“But I made the choice. It’s my fault.”

“It’s my fault, too. I should have...I don’t know. I should have done things differently. I would have if I’d known...”

Tears welled up in my eyes as I realized how hard this must have been for her. It was becoming clear now how much I’d contributed to that, and it was an uncomfortable feeling. I turned my head and blinked until my eyes were clear.

Maybe I needed this, too.

“Does he ever ask about me?” she said softly.

“Not in specific terms,” I said once I composed myself. “He doesn’t have a frame of reference for you, but he knows other kids in his class have mommies. He’s asked me if my mom is his mommy.”

“Ugh, don’t tell me that.” The pain in her voice was thick and heavy.

“You asked.”

“I know.” She flipped to the last page and stared intently the picture of Justin at his first birthday party, smashing a piece of chocolate cake into his little mouth.

“I almost sent a gift for this,” she said. “But then I thought, why do that to him? So I didn’t. I bought something, I just... didn’t send it.”

“It’s okay, Cass. He wouldn’t have known the difference.”

“Okay.” She stared at the picture for a while, seemingly fixated on something.

“You wanna see the other ones? There’s one for each year.”

She smiled, her eyes still fixed on the photo. “Of course you did that. Still overly organized.”

“Captain Dozier lives on, I guess.”

“I wouldn’t say all that. From what I can see, you’re an amazing father.”

Touched, I put a hand on her knee. “I appreciate you saying that.”

She brought her eyes to mine. “You’re also an amazing producer.”

“True.”

She chuckled. “And handsome. Still.”

I frowned. “Where are you going with this?”

She closed the book and set it gently on the side table before turning back to me.

“Let’s go to your room.”

“What?”

She leaned over and kissed my lips. “Let’s go to your room,” she repeated.

“Cass.” I stared into her eyes and tried to make sense of this turn of events. But there were no answers to be found there. Only lust.

“Please?” she said.

“You ain’t gotta beg me. I just...I don’t wanna...confuse the issue.”

“This isn’t that.” She kissed me again, with tongue this time, and all the blood in my brain headed due south.

“I just want you,” she whispered against my lips. “So bad.”

I felt weak. The sound of her voice, the light touch of her lips on my neck...my defenses were down. With my last ounce of willpower, I scooted a few inches to the right to put some distance between us.

“Are you trying to distract yourself from dealing with all this?”

“That’s not what I’m doing,” she said, scooting right back into my space.

“Okay.” I worked through it in my head. “If this isn’t about that, you’ll let *me* drive.”

She smiled slyly. “That’s fine. We can do whatever you want.”

“Mm.” I shook my head. “I’ve been waiting seven long years to hear you say that.”

“Shut up.”

Laughing, I pulled her closer to me. “Since we’re doing compliments, I just wanna say, for the record, that you’re an amazing singer. You’re an amazing person in general. And I still love you.”

Her expression softened as she stared back at me, and I felt a rush of emotion. I couldn't say this to her, not at this moment, but Cass was it for me. I would have married her that very moment if she was willing, because there was nobody before her and there had been nobody since her that I loved this deeply.

I stood and held out my hand. Her eyes shifted down and she looked at it for a few seconds, measured by the thundering beats in my chest as I worried that she would change her mind. Relief flooded through me when she put her hand in mine. I pulled her to her feet and led her down the hall to my room, where I stripped her out of her clothes, then me out of mine.

I laid her down gently before reaching into my nightstand drawer for a condom. She watched silently, letting me get all the way to the point of rolling it on before she spoke.

“Can you pull out?”

I shot her a look. She smiled back and did that head tilt I love.

“See, that's how we got in trouble last time,” I admonished. “Acting reckless.”

“I know,” she said, laughing. “It was just a thought. I wanted to feel you... *just* you.”

“The feeling's mutual, but—”

“No, it was stupid. Ignore me.”

I thought about it for roughly six seconds before tossing the condom toward the foot of the bed. She chuckled, her eyes

following me as I placed one knee on the bed, then the other, finally coming to rest on top of her.

She wrapped her arms around my neck. I stared into her eyes, dipping my head to kiss her softly. Our tongues met, timidly at first, and then they slow danced. She moaned softly into my mouth as I deepened the kiss, bringing her legs up until they were settled around my waist. I was raring to go, and I knew she was ready, but there was something I needed to do first.

I broke our kiss and moved down an inch or two to kiss the delicate skin of her neck, trailing kisses from the right side to the left before sucking her skin between my lips. I marked her, then moved down another few inches.

Her nipples pebbled at the touch of my lips, then hardened under the caress of my tongue. Once she started writhing against me, desperate for relief, I made my way down to the apex of her thighs.

I breathed her in. Her scent was intoxicating. When my tongue made that first lap against her sensitive clit, her whimpers echoed sweetly in my ears. I ate her with enthusiasm, hooking my arms around her legs when she tried to run, anchoring her and licking her until she screamed, her body tensed, and her legs clamped around my head.

After she came, I let her catch her breath, watching her chest rise and fall as her eyelids fluttered wildly. She was so beautiful to me.

I climbed back onto the bed and settled on top of her, not hesitating for a moment before sliding inside her.

The whole world just...stopped.

If only there was an equivalent to *frisson* that describes the sensation you feel when you sink into the woman you love. The simultaneous full-body chills and flush of heat...the teeth-gritting rush of pleasure...the belly flip...the tingles and tremors...the methodical build-up to the orgasm, and the overwhelming knowledge that when it comes, there's nothing on this earth that will ever come close to measuring up to the mind-blowing ecstasy of it.

“Cass...” I groaned, damn near dizzy behind the wet heat of her pussy. It felt *so fucking good*.

It felt like home.

Her long fingernails scratched my back as her hips rose rhythmically to meet my slow, deep strokes. Making love to her was a full-sensory experience, and one I never took lightly. It was an honor to be inside her.

Making her moan was intensely pleasurable.

Making her cum was my glory.

But there was also the unsettling understanding that without her, I'd never feel this good again.

CASTRA

I ALMOST DIDN'T LET him pull out.

To be perfectly honest, that's how we got caught up back then. I'd gotten good at hopping up and finishing Rome off with my hand, but one night, after Prospect's annual Halloween party and two glasses of champagne they shouldn't have let me drink, me and Rome had sex. *Lots* of it. And the last time, when he was about to cum, I didn't budge and he didn't ask me to.

Tonight, he was on top, which used to be a very rare occurrence. But I had no complaints. I loved the weight of his body on mine. I cherished the way he stared down into my eyes. And the way he sexed me so passionately, the way his strokes went deeper and deeper until I begged for a mercy he refused to grant. It was euphoric.

After I came a second time, he slipped his tongue in my mouth and commenced to pounding me, hard, fast, and deep. My legs encircled his waist, and when his eyes rolled back and a guttural groan left his mouth, I almost locked them.

Almost.

Instead, I did the responsible thing and asked, “Are you about to cum?”

He nodded.

“Don’t forget to pull out.”

“I know, baby. I w—oh fuck.”

He slammed into me and then pulled out. Instinctively, I reached down to grab his dick, jacking him off as he spurted cum on my stomach.

He stared down at me as he caught his breath, then rolled to the side with a grunt. We lay there, side-by-side, saying nothing and feeling everything.

After a few moments, he left the bed and walked off into the bathroom. I heard water running, then his footsteps again. When he returned, he wiped me off with a warm damp washcloth.

Clean now, I rolled onto my side and snuggled my face into the pillow until I found just the right spot. He lay next to me again, turning on his side to face me, smiling when I curled a finger to call him closer. He obliged, inching closer until our bodies were practically flush. I tossed a leg over him and sighed happily.

“You know what I noticed?” he said, his brows furrowed thoughtfully.

“What?”

“You don’t pull away anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“After sex. You used to roll away, or push me away, or face the other direction. You didn’t do that last night. Or just now.”

“Oh.”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t know,” I said, shrugging a shoulder.

I thought about it for a few minutes, finally saying, “Maybe it’s because I don’t feel guilty anymore.”

“Guilty?” He bent his arm and tucked it under his head.

“Guilty for what?”

“I was deep in the church when I was younger. You remember?”

He laughed. “How could I forget? That damn letter.”

I rolled my eyes at that memory. “Exactly. Anyway, I wasn’t supposed to be having premarital sex.”

He nodded. “That’s why you felt bad?”

“You don’t remember that gold ring I used to wear?”

“Yeah. What about it?”

“That was a purity ring. All the girls had to wear one and take vows when we turned sixteen.”

“Are you for real?”

“Yeah. Half of them were already having sex by then, but it didn’t matter.”

He frowned as he thought about that. “Just the girls?”

“Yeah. So I always felt guilty afterwards. Sometimes I’d even feel sick.”

“After you had sex? With me?” He looked incredulous.

“With anybody,” I said. “I mean, after we broke up.”

“That’s fucked up, Cass.” He rubbed my leg softly, his way of comforting me after that revelation.

“I know.”

“How long did that last?”

“I can’t even tell you,” I said. “But yesterday...and just now...I didn’t feel guilty or sick or ashamed. I felt...peaceful about it. Like it was where I was supp—.”

“Supposed to be,” he said, finishing my line. “I’m with you on that. Except it *always* felt like that for me.” He moved his hand from my thigh to my back. “I’m sorry you had to deal with that. Doesn’t seem fair.”

“It’s not.”

“Damn.” He shook his head, clearly upset. “Ain’t shit in y’all’s favor, huh? Y’all gotta feel bad about sex. Y’all are the ones who get pregnant. Y’all gotta make the hard decisions. Take birth control. Have an abortion. Keep it and raise the babies by yourself half the damn time. Lose time off your career path.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“Niggas always wanna talk about how women are never happy. If you ask me, y’all don’t complain enough.”

I burst out laughing at that. “You’re gonna get kicked out of the men’s club for that one.”

“I’m serious.”

I stopped laughing and stared into his warm brown eyes. “Is that why you never judged me? About Justin?”

“Nah,” he said with a sigh. “All that stuff just hit me thirty seconds ago. I didn’t judge you about Justin because I respected your choice. It was the right thing for you at the time.” He rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. “Men do it all the time. And, shit, he’s my son. I was gonna be a one-hundred percent type of father anyway.”

I didn’t respond to that. I couldn’t with the lump in my throat.

I let several minutes pass, and when I’d finally composed myself, I allowed my mind to drift to business.

“So it’s gonna be a late night for you tonight, right?”

“Yeah. They gave me a week for post, but I’ll probably knock it out in two days. I got some songs I’m working on for some people.”

“What people?”

“You always in my business,” he said playfully. “Dru Hill and Mary.”

“Well, I already know they’ll be hits. You have the Midas touch.”

Despite the compliment, he didn’t smile. Instead, he looked distracted. Almost pained.

“Rome? What’s wrong?”

The pain in his eyes when he turned to look at me was overwhelming. “Was this the last time, Cass? Tell me the truth.”

It took me a minute to say it, but it had to be done. “I wish I wasn’t, but...I don’t see any other way.”

“You’re breaking my heart, girl.”

“I’m breaking mine, too.” I put a hand on his cheek. ”
Romell Jermaine Brooks. You were my first love.”

He swallowed hard. “Is the love gone?”

“Of course not,” I said with no hesitation. “I’m still in love with you. How could I not be?”

He turned his body to face me again. “Then—”

“There’s no way I can be in your life and not be in his. That’s the bottom line.”

“What’s wrong with you being in his?” His eyes were pleading with me.

“What’s it gonna look like if I waltz into his life after five years? How do I explain that?”

“Men do it all the time.”

“Yeah, and the last thing I wanna do is act like a man. No offense.”

“I think you’re worrying over nothing.”

“I can’t do it, Rome.”

“Okay,” he said quickly. “I had to ask. I would have been pissed at myself if I let you leave without knowing where we stand. And now I know.”

Those were the last words he said to me until it was time for me to say goodbye.

A few hours later, after Shaneka had packed our things and called the car to take us to the airport, Rome and I stood awkwardly in the lobby of his building.

“Where you headed?” he finally said.

“I have radio promo.”

“Already?”

“Yeah. They’re releasing ‘Pieces of Me’ to radio next week, so...”

“Makes sense.”

“Yeah.”

Our eyes met and locked, and I felt a knot growing in the pit of my stomach. The absolute last thing I wanted to do was say goodbye to Rome. The man who had come into my life and loved me, invested in me, forced me to see my own potential for greatness, and the man who had never judged me for doing what I wanted. He was *the one*, and I was going to lose him.

“Listen, I don’t know when they planned on giving you the news, but...whenever it is, if you need somebody to talk to, hit my line.”

I forced a smile. “I’m sure I’ll be okay.”

He nodded. “I know you will, but I’m just saying. It might hurt to hear it officially. If it does, I’m here. That’s what I’m saying.”

“I appreciate it.” I shook my head. “You’re always here.”

“Always.”

I looked away towards Shaneka, who was still standing at the curb waiting for our car.

Rome cleared his throat. “You gonna take any meetings?”

“Not sure. I still have to break the news to Coco.”

“Have her schedule some meetings for you,” he said. “Make her earn that fifteen percent. I’ve been telling you that for years.”

It was true. He’d never liked my manager. He thought she was lazy. In truth, she’d never had to do much. Opportunities always seemed to be readily available. But now that I was apparently yesterday’s news, Coco was gonna have to earn her keep, and I wasn’t confident she’d be able to do much in that regard.

“Car’s here!” Shaneka yelled through the glass.

I looked back at the man I loved, the only man I’d *ever* really loved, and found myself scavenging the depths of my

mind for something to say.

“Well...” I said.

“Well...”

I turned to face him. “Thank you for everything you did. And do. Not just with the album.”

“You’re welcome, Cass. I...I’m always happy when I can make you happy.”

“Stop. You’re gonna make me cry.”

He brought his hands to my face and cupped my chin. “Don’t cry. Just understand how much I love you.” He chuckled. “Hard as I tried, I’ve never been able to shake you.”

I nodded as tears blurred the perfect picture of him. “Same here.”

He leaned in and pressed a soft, sweet kiss against my lips.

“I don’t wanna say bye to you. At all. This shit is...it hurts.”

At that, the tears finally spilled over. With the pads of his fingers, Rome wiped them away before pulling me into him. I let him hold me, breathing him in one last time before I nudged him away.

Once I was settled in the town car, I stared ahead stoically, refusing to torture myself by looking back.

CASTRA

“YOU KNOW THE QUESTION on everybody’s mind, right?”

I smiled at Hodge, also known as Andre Hodges, lead DJ for the afternoon drive show at Z94 in Cleveland.

“I don’t know. But I bet *you* do.”

“Mm hm. What was it like being back in the studio with Danger?”

I should have expected that question and prepared for it, but I didn’t, so I was completely caught off guard.

I took a deep breath and scanned the studio as I conjured up an answer. There were obviously lots of things I couldn’t and wouldn’t divulge, like us having sex—*amazing* sex—in the studio, or picking the scabs off old wounds, or crying together, or talking about the son we shared that nobody else knew about.

I thought back to Miss Ida Monroe and her instructions. *Be kind, be charming, be sweet, and most of all, be diplomatically*

ruthless about protecting your secrets.

“Well, as you know, Danger is amazing at what he does. The experience was amazing.” I smiled sweetly. “He’s a professional.”

“Uh huh,” Hodge grinned. “You’re right, we do know that part. But allow me to dig a little deeper.”

“Oh lord.” I forced out a laugh.

“Nah, nah,” he said, chuckling. “I’ve had him in this studio twice and he’s always professional. I think the burning question is about the *personal*.”

“Okay...”

“Did any of those old feelings pop up? Somebody wanting that old thing back?”

I pushed out another laugh. “You’re so silly. No, look, Danger and I had a relationship back in the day. We’re no longer romantically involved, but I will always consider him a friend.”

He narrowed his eyes playfully. “And there were no hard feelings?”

“None at all.”

“Even though—”

“No hard feelings, Hodge,” I insisted.

He seemed to recognize I wasn’t gonna take the bait. “Okay, okay. Loud and clear. So let’s talk about this album.”

Twelve cities in four days.

By the time I got to my parents' house in Memphis, I was dog tired. I slept from two am to two-thirty the next afternoon and *still* didn't feel refreshed.

Despite the lateness of the hour, my mother, bless her heart, had breakfast all laid out when I came downstairs. I gorged on eggs, bacon, a blueberry waffle, and grapes. Without a contract and the label pressuring me to look like a black Barbie doll, I figured I might as well eat whatever the hell I wanted.

My mother watched this with curious amusement.

"When I cooked all this food, I never really expected you to eat all of it," she said playfully.

I swallowed a bite of waffle and announced, "Prospect is dropping me."

"What?" Her dark brown eyes widened in surprise.

"Rome told me. He heard from a friend of his at Jive."

My mother always processed bad news the same way: with a cup of coffee and a cigarette. Let her tell it, she had quit the latter a long time ago, but somehow, one always magically appeared when she was stressed or disappointed.

She surprised me today. No coffee, no cig. Just concern on her face. "Why would they do that?"

"R&B's changing. Remember we talked about that?"

She nodded.

“I can’t explain it, but you can kinda feel it in the air.” I swallowed another bite of waffle. “Prospect wanted three rap features on my album. I had to put my foot down for once.”

“You’re such a purist. But change can be good. Maybe jazz will make a comeback. Ooh, or gospel!” she said with a twinkle in her eye. I smiled at that, because I’d sat through many a diatribe about what my mother called the Winans effect. According to her, gospel sounded too secular now, and it was all Bebe and Cece’s fault. “Lost without *who*?” she’d complained about my favorite song of theirs.

“Anyway,” she continued, “they’re complete fools if they think it’s wise to let you go. You’re gonna have labels beating down your door the second that hits the trades.”

“Maybe.” I popped two grapes in my mouth. “It is what it is.”

She regarded me curiously. “You don’t seem upset.”

“I know. It’s weird. I keep expecting to feel mad or hurt, but I’m just...numb.”

“You been drinking?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

I chuckled. “No. I’ve been *thinking*. A lot.”

“And what’d you come up with?”

“That maybe it’s not such a bad thing to cut ties with Prospect. Get rid of all that old baggage. I mean, I’ve been with them since I was seventeen.”

“Baggage? You wanted to sing,” Mama said. “That was all you ever wanted. To be a singer and to be famous.”

“Yes, and I had that. But I didn’t enjoy it as much as I thought I would. At least not...” I trailed off.

“Not, what?”

“Not after me and Rome broke up.”

Her gray bob brushed her shoulders as she recoiled. “Well, surely your singing career wasn’t all about him.”

“It wasn’t, but it was better when he was around. More fun. I just...enjoyed it more.”

She shook her head. “That man didn’t make you a star. You made yourself a star.”

“I know. That’s not what I’m saying.”

“Then what are you saying?”

I sipped my orange juice. “Creatively speaking, we were a good team. And romantically—”

“Wait, stop, do I wanna hear this?”

I laughed at the horror on her face. “Not that. I meant as a boyfriend, Rome was...” I trailed off and stared off into space. “He loved me. And he showed it. He was so encouraging. He was, like, the man behind the woman, and he didn’t mind being there.” I brought my eyes back to hers. “It was nice to have somebody with me who was always in my corner.”

Mama’s face softened. “He made you happy, didn’t he?”

“Very happy.”

She sighed. “I always liked him. I didn’t like certain things, obviously, but he was a good person. I could tell.”

My eyes narrowed. “Can I ask you something? And you’ll tell me the truth?”

“Of course. When have I ever lied to you?”

Ignoring that, I forged ahead.

“Rome’s apartment is right above his studio. I was hanging out with him there between sets and we got to talking about... Justin.”

She visibly tensed.

“There was this one picture of him. His first birthday. He was eating chocolate cake.”

She swallowed hard.

“There was somebody at the edge of the picture who I couldn’t quite make out, but the woman looked a lot like you.”

She stared down at the table.

“Was it you?”

She took a shaky breath as her eyes lifted to meet mine again.

“It was.”

I nodded. Part of me had already known. “Is there a particular reason you never told me about this?”

“We thought it—”

“*We?*”

“Your daddy was there, too.”

“Wow.” I pushed my plate away and tried to process what I’d just heard. I wanted to feel betrayed and angry, but I couldn’t quite conjure that up. I just felt uneasy, and I couldn’t figure out why.

“We didn’t wanna make you feel bad,” Mama explained. “Or guilty. You know we always supported your decisions—”

“No, you *influenced* my decisions. And you pressured me to do what you wanted me to do.”

“You didn’t want a baby. That was *your* choice!” she said, her lips trembling. “We just gave you options.”

“No, you manipulated,” I insisted. “Options would have been hey, you could have an abortion, have it and keep it, or have it and give it away. But that’s not what you said. You gave me scriptures and told me I would go to hell and then threatened to call Pastor Norwood.”

She stood and walked to the cabinet next to the refrigerator, reaching all the way to the back of the top drawer and coming out with a Virginia Slim.

“What do you want me to say, *Castra*? Okay, maybe I could have been more supportive.”

I shot her a look.

“Fine.” She lit up and took a long drag before returning to her seat. “I *should* have been more supportive. But it wasn’t exactly easy for me, either. You were legally an adult, but you

were still my baby. You'll always be—" her voice broke just then, giving way to tears. "It's not easy to parent a superstar."

"But it's easy to take their money."

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing."

"No." She wiped her face with the back of her hand. "Speak your mind."

I stared down at my plate, unable to look her in the eye when I said this: "For as strict as y'all always claimed to be, that parental supervision and guidance sure evaporated when the checks started hitting the account."

I looked up just in time to see her her eyes narrow. "Now wait a damn minute. Carmen had school. I couldn't be in two places at once. That's why I had them assign Tamika to you. For all the good that did," she added bitterly.

"Yeah, but you guys didn't even check on me after a while. And you never put up a fight when it came to Rome."

She sat back in her seat and blew out a puff of smoke. "So you wanted us to break y'all up? Because as I remember it, you said you were happy and in love. Were we supposed to forbid it from five-hundred miles away?" She took another pull. "And just in case you need a reminder, you were eighteen. Legally an adult. I had no real power over you. You just didn't realize it."

"I just feel like you could have...I don't know. Cared more."

She took a deep breath. “Listen to me, Castra. I cared. I cared too damn much. So much, I had to let go and give it to God. Because that’s what you have to do as a mother sometimes, just to make it through the day.” She took one last drag from her cigarette before stubbing it out on my napkin. “A piece of your heart is walking around in human form, and every day, it’s an act of faith and a...a freaking *coping mechanism* to make yourself believe they’ll make good choices and be safe and make it home at the end of the damn day. Let me tell you, sometimes I felt like I was completely dissociating from even *being* your mother. You were in an industry full of demons. If I hadn’t checked out sometimes, I would have worried myself into an early grave.”

“Okay, but—”

“Honey, one day you’ll understand. But until you do, all I ask for is a little bit of grace.” She stared at me with wet, glassy eyes. “I know I made some mistakes, but the one thing that’s always guided me is that I knew your dreams were coming true.” She smiled warmly. “I still remember you singing Anita Baker into a hairbrush with your towel wrapped around you like a ball gown.”

I, too, smiled at that memory.

“You wanted to be a star, and you are. I made sure of that.” She paused and grabbed my hand in hers. “Would you trade it? Be honest. Would you give it all back?”

I didn’t have to think about it for a second. I shook my head.

“Okay, good,” she said. “So the guilt I feel every day is self-inflicted. But I knew that already.”

“What do you feel guilty about?”

“Doing too much. Not doing enough. Being too strict. Being too lax. You name it, I feel bad about it. We mothers do that, too.”

I pulled my hand away to grab my glass, my throat suddenly dry. I downed the remaining juice and set the glass back in its place, trying to avoid her penetrating stare.

“I love you,” she began slowly, “but one of the things that *you* do that *I* don’t like is that you fail to take any responsibility for the choices you’ve made.”

I didn’t have an answer for that. I simply rolled my eyes.

“No, let’s just be honest about this. You made the choice to...” she tapped her index fingers together, “without protecting yourself. That’s on you, sweetheart.”

Defeated, I nodded.

“But again, you were grown. Old enough to make that choice. Hell, y’all could have gotten married and we wouldn’t have been able to stop it. So please don’t overestimate our level of influence. You weren’t neglected.”

“I know,” I said quickly. “You’re right. I didn’t mean to put it all on you.”

I sighed and stared out the kitchen window. It faced the front yard and the giant oak tree Carmen and I used to climb

when we were little. Back when I was an *actual* child, not a grown woman pretending to be one so I didn't have to take responsibility for my own shit.

"He asked me," I said. "To marry him. After I got pregnant."

"I know."

I whipped my head back around to look at her. "You knew?"

"Of course. He asked your daddy for your hand in marriage," she said, her eyes twinkling with amusement. "No shotgun necessary. He did that all on his own."

I shook my head rapidly. "How did I not know about this?"

"Because you and your daddy both said no." She laughed. "I felt bad for the boy."

So did I. I cried after I told him no. He took it well enough, probably because it was an act of desperation. Or responsibility. Definitely not an act of true love. Not back then. We weren't ready.

"So what else don't I know?" I asked, my eyes narrowing. "Let's just get it all out now. No more secrets."

Mama shrugged. "I think that's everything. Well, actually, Justin came here once."

I sighed and picked at my fingernails, too flustered and irritated to say anything else.

"You don't have to tell me."

I looked up at her. "Tell you what?"

“That you feel guilty. It’s eating you up inside. I see it. *That’s* why we didn’t tell you.”

“How often do you see him?”

“In person, not often. Danger sends us pictures, though.”

“He does?”

“Mm hm.”

“He never told me anything about this.”

She nodded. “We asked him not to.”

“What else?” I said, desperation creeping into my voice. I wasn’t even sure what I was looking for, exactly, but I needed more.

“We talk to him on the phone a couple of times a month,” she continued. “We send toys and clothes sometimes. Danger does a good job. Justin doesn’t want for anything, but we like to do it.”

“What does he call you?”

She smiled. “Nana and Paw Paw.”

I tried to swallow it down, but the sob that erupted from my chest was too forceful to be quelled. My mother’s eyes widened before she jumped up and rounded the table to put her arms around me.

I must have cried for ten minutes before the urge finally waned. Stretching away from me, Mama kept one arm around me while she reached for the napkin holder on the kitchen island behind us.

I accepted them gratefully, wiping my eyes and blowing my nose while she went back to her seat across from me.

“Now it’s your turn to tell *me* the truth.”

I nodded.

“Are you happy, C? Right now, deep inside, are you?”

I shook my head.

“Are you fulfilled?”

Again, I indicated in the negative.

“Well, that just won’t do, Castra. You’ve come too far and worked too hard to be miserable.”

I grabbed another napkin and blew my nose, then waited as a fresh round of tears sprouted from my eyes. While it felt good to talk to her, I hated the topic of our conversation. I thought I’d dealt with this already. I thought this moment had already passed. But no, I was still raw, and the pain was still fresh.

The guilt was waning, though. Just a little.

“What is it that you want?” she said. “What would make you happy? Be honest.”

“I know I want...I wanna sing, and I want more control over my career, and I want...” I trailed off, afraid to finish.

“Say it.”

I blew out a breath. “I want Rome.”

“Okay,” she nodded. “How do we get you what you want?”

“Well, I need a new contract.”

“That’s Coco. She don’t manage worth a damn, but you already know that.”

I chuckled. “And I’d need some favorable clauses in my new contract. Control over my name and brand, my masters, higher royalties...that’s just off the top of my head.”

“Good. You need to write all this down.”

I nodded. “And I wanna go to college.”

Her thin eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

“Yes. I was talking to Carmen a few days ago and she just sounds so...”

“Smart?”

“That, too,” I laughed. “I can’t explain it. She’s...worldly. Confident, the way she talks, like the stuff she says makes sense and...like she has authority. It’s so cool.”

“What would you major in?”

“Don’t know yet. But I wanna be able to say I have a degree. I’ll never be able to live in the dorm and have the traditional thing, but I want the knowledge. And the accomplishment.”

Mama smiled proudly. “Put that on the list.”

I returned her smile, but it faded when I realized I still had one more want to address.

“Rome...that might be the hardest one.”

“Why? That boy still loves you. That’s clear as day to anybody that knows him.”

“What about Justin?”

She spread her hands. “What about him? He’s your son.”

“I’ve been gone.”

“So?”

“So I feel guilty.”

“Again, I ask. Would you give it all back?”

“No.”

“No. So *your* guilt is also self-inflicted. And guess what? You can change your mind. If you’re ready for a family now, *abra cadabra*, there’s one already there with the love of your life and a sweet little boy who looks exactly like you. The door’s open, *Castra*. All you have to do is walk through it.”

CASTRA

THREE WEEKS AFTER MY last kiss with Danger, my third studio album released with little fanfare. I guess Prospect, who *still* hadn't broken the news to me, was cutting their losses. Promo was sparse. Follow-up was nil. I cried into my pillow for three days and accepted the fact that my career was likely over.

And then a funny thing happened.

Radio loved the first single, "Pieces of Me." Hot 97 in Atlanta did a listening party for the entire album live on air. And *Vibe's* music editor gave me a favorable review.

My album shot straight to number one on the R&B charts.

And it was mostly organic.

Lanelle sent me a huge bouquet of flowers.

My mom baked me a chocolate cheesecake—my favorite.

My daddy threw me a barbecue like only a Memphis man can, and my sister, Carmen, flew home from Hampton to

congratulate me. And eat up half the ribs.

I had a wonderful time. I was back, in all my glory, and I was now in an excellent position to be picked up by another label.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing.

The call came in while I was in my pajamas watching *All My Children*. I didn't recognize the number on the caller ID, but I answered anyway, just in case it was a label calling to offer me millions of dollars.

Wishful thinking.

"Castral, it's Daphne."

I sat up from my reclined position. "Hi Daphne. Is everything okay?"

"Yes. I'm calling on behalf of Danger."

"Okay..." I said, my mind working overtime coming up with all manner of horrible things that may have happened to him. Or Justin.

"You have meetings in New York at the end of this week," Daphne said.

That...wasn't at all what I expected to hear.

"Meetings for what?"

"You'll be meeting with Soull, Groundfloor, Treble, Nocturnal, and Sunscope records regarding a new recording

contract.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I was simultaneously shocked, touched, grateful, and irritated.

“Why didn’t *he* call me?”

“I’m not sure. I just follow instructions,” she said with an uneasy chuckle.

“No, I understand. That’s not directed at you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Rome hadn’t said anything about this when we last spoke the day I departed, so I was left to assume he’d just put all this together in the last couple of weeks. Coco hadn’t done shit, at least not yet, but I was content with that only because I was always content to sit around and wait for opportunity to come to me. And while that had worked out *fine*, it didn’t seem like the right strategy for a burgeoning legend. A real legend would make shit happen, no matter what it took.

It was time for me to take charge of my life.

Come what may.

“Okay, so what are the details?”

Two days later, Shaneka, Coco, and I boarded a plane to New York. Landing at JFK brought back memories of my first time

in the city that never sleeps, when I made an appearance on *TRL*. I didn't get to see much of Times Square that day because I was rushed in and out, but I remembered feeling like New York had proven its point; it did appear to be one of the best cities in the world.

Unfortunately, I wasn't going to see much of the city today, either. My meetings were back to back, and then I had to fly to LA to meet with Prospect. They'd finally decided to give me the news in person.

My first meeting went terribly. Soull was a small imprint under RCA's soul music umbrella, and they had very little to offer me in the way of creative control or royalty share. I knew before the coffee had been poured that I would be declining.

Sunscope wasn't much better, but Groundfloor was promising. They were willing to give me more creative control, including picking the directors for my videos. That was a big one for me. I wanted the Hype Williams treatment, but for some reason, Prospect had never been a fan of his style.

But Nocturnal was even better. Thanks to the success of the album, they were willing to part with a one-million-dollar advance. I didn't need it like I did back when I first got my start, but the symbolism of it was important. They believed in me, and they believed I still had enough life left in my career to recoup those costs.

Treble was my last meeting, and although they were only willing to give me a half-million-dollar advance, they were

offering higher royalties than anyone else. Like a lot of artists, I got screwed when CDs became more popular than cassettes, because my original contract included a reduced royalty rate for new technology. But Treble was offering the same rate on CDs and digital. The latter wasn't popular yet, but I learned my lesson the first time. I demanded equal royalties across media.

They seemed surprised that I asked, but they honored my request.

I left that last meeting with my mind already made up, but Marvin, my attorney, needed a day to look things over. Plus, I wanted to let them sweat a little, and I needed time to think about whether I wanted to negotiate for more. With a number one album and no contract, I was in the driver's seat for the first time in my life. It was exhilarating.

“How are you feeling?”

I looked up from my book to answer Coco, who was next to me in the aisle seat.

“My head is spinning.”

She nodded. “Well, you got what you wanted.”

“I did.”

“And yet you don't look happy.”

“Just a little irritated. I mean, I'm grateful that Rome set all this up, but he didn't call me himself. Didn't check on me while I was in New York. It just seems like he's washed his hands of me or something.”

She pressed her lips together in a tight line and shook her head. “I have something to say, and I’m gonna say it as gently as possible. You know that’s not easy for me.”

I chuckled, because it was true. Coco didn’t know how to not cuss folks out. Even me.

“Is it possible that Danger...like *you*...had to make a clean break? Because losing somebody he loves is too painful? And if that’s the case, can you really fault him?”

I felt that in my chest.

“Talk to me, Cass.”

“What do you want me to say?”

She shot me a look. “I want you to explain why you’re blocking your blessing.”

“Blessing?”

“Girl, the way that man loves you. Niggas don’t love that hard or that openly. Trust me, that shit is rare.”

“We had our chance, and you see what happened.”

“What I saw was your mama, your daddy, his mama, the label, and the press all giving their two cents and fucking up the groove. You’re grown now, sweetheart. Free to make decisions, just like you did an hour ago. Girl, you were a fucking boss in there.”

My chest puffed up a little.

“I’m not completely decided, yet,” I said.

“Yes, you are. I know you. I’ve been with you for almost ten years, little girl. You want the deal from Treble, and you want Danger back. You’re just too scared to make a choice and stand on it.”

“It’s hard for me.”

“I know.”

I’d been hiding behind other peoples’ decisions my whole life. It was easier. But that wasn’t gonna get me the career I wanted. The *life* I wanted.

“What if I choose wrong?”

“Then you feel bad for a little while, pick yourself up, and keep on stepping. Just like everybody else.”

Her face softened as she grabbed my hand and held it tightly in hers. “Just take a day or two and really think about it. Meditate on it. Pray about it. Whatever you need to do to get what you want out of life. Because Cass, you only get one, and it ain’t long. Choose happiness.”

CASTRA

“SIGN HERE, PLEASE.”

I picked up the woodgrain pen my daddy gave me, the one he used when he signed my first contract—I was seventeen, so unable to enter a legally binding agreement on my own. I twisted that pen back and forth between my fingers, enjoying the texture of the wood against my skin.

Then I changed my mind.

I reached into my tote bag and dug around until I found my favorite cheap ass pen. It was pink with a blue fuzzy top, and it cost the equivalent of ninety-nine cents at an airport in Tokyo. I'd had it for as long as I could remember. It skipped sometimes, leaving tiny gaps in the letters, but that little imperfection didn't make it useless. I loved it all the same.

That's what I used to sign my new contract. I decided to forfeit my half a million-dollar advance in exchange for the reversion of my masters to me at the end of ten years. That was a huge win for me. I also negotiated them down to a one-

year term with only two options, partial creative control over my name and likeness, videos, and producers, and an 18% royalty share that would increase by two points for every 500,000 albums sold.

In short, I was sitting pretty.

And I did it on my own.

On Treble's dime, Coco and I had a boozy lunch to celebrate, then I hopped on a plane alone. It was two hours from New York to Atlanta, and I was grateful for the time. I had a lot to think about.

Like Justin.

Childbirth was *horrible*. I mean, everyone knows that already, but the true lived experience of it was shockingly painful. And bloody. Gruesome. I cried during, because it hurt. I cried after, because I knew I was handing him over. And then, like my mother, I dissociated from it completely. Acted like it never even happened.

But I couldn't run from it anymore.

And I was quickly realizing I didn't want to.

Also? My mother was right—much as I hated to admit it. My guilt was entirely self-inflicted. Everyone in my life understood why I did what I did. Nobody blamed me at all. That was all me.

Now the public? They'd have plenty to say about it. I was gonna be judged by media, fans, and foes alike. I knew that

already. But I could tune them out. Only talk to friendly media, if at all. We could stay private. Insulated.

We could be happy.

I could be happy.

I practically skipped off the plane, floating all the way through the airport, on the train, up to baggage claim, and out to the car. I had the driver go straight to studio 79.

July ninth. Justin's birthday.

I went to the bathroom in the lobby of Rome's building to freshen up and psych myself up to do what needed to be done. I stared at myself in the mirror, appreciating what I saw. There's great beauty in being at peace. In control. Of exercising your own vision. Of making a choice because you know it's the best one for you. Of not fucking answering to anybody. In business and in life, I was calling the shots now.

I got off on the fourth floor and stopped short when I saw the red light on. Rome, or someone, was in there recording, and there was no telling how long the session would last.

I should have called first.

With nowhere to go and nothing to do but wait, I made the decision to go by his apartment on the off chance that Andrew was recording and Rome was at his place. Longshot, but there weren't many other options.

I rode up one floor and exited, hooking a right and walking until I was in front of his place. I smiled when I heard the tv blaring. Sounded like the *Flintstones*.

I knocked.

Light footsteps approached the door, and when it opened, my heart dropped.

“Oh my God!” the girl said loudly before clapping a hand over her mouth. “I love your music!”

I smiled weakly as I took a quick scan of her. She was pretty. Looked to be around my age, maybe a little younger. Thick. Kinda looked like Nia Long.

Bitch.

“Thanks,” I croaked. “Ahem. Is Rome here?”

Still in awe, it took her a few seconds to comprehend. “Sorry, I can’t believe it’s you. No, Romell’s downstairs in the studio.”

Romell.

The studio. Not *his* studio, but *the* studio.

This bitch was too familiar.

“Okay. I’ll go there, then.” I turned to walk away.

“Did you want me to call down and have—”

“No, they know me down there,” I said without stopping.

“Right, of course. It’s so nice to meet you,” she called after me. “I love your music so much. Congratulations on the album.”

“Thank you.”

I looked over my shoulder to give her one last look and felt bad for thinking of her as a bitch. She was actually very sweet, which really pissed me off and took the wind out of my angry sails. I was deflated. And a little hurt that he'd moved on already.

Oh well.

I pressed the down button, cursing myself for thinking it was a good idea to pop up like this. He had his own little world now, and I was stupid to think I could just slide in. He asked me to be with him and I said no. Of *course* he'd moved on.

I messed up.

I got on the elevator and pressed the L for lobby. My car was gone, so I could either call it back or wait for a cab.

I stepped off and went straight to the concierge to use the phone. Shaneka had been on me about getting a cellular, but I was still undecided. My mom had me convinced they expose you to radiation, and that was the last thing I needed.

The very nice man behind the desk placed the phone on top of the counter and walked a few feet away to give me some privacy. I got Sam on the car phone and told him to come right back. Destination: Hartsfield Airport. I was getting the hell out of Atlanta and never looking back. It was just as well. I had a dinner with Joseph Mack, president of Treble, in three days and I wanted to be sharp. I was about to make him my new best friend, and eventually, have him in my pocket.

I'd been standing at the door for about five minutes when Rome called my name.

I whirled around to face him, surprised he'd interrupted his session to come all the way down here.

"You were just gonna leave without saying anything?" he said, his face creased with disappointment.

"You were in a session," I said flatly.

"I would have stopped for you. You know that."

"I just...I just wanted...thank you for setting up those meetings for me. I appreciate it."

His shoulders relaxed, and the disappointment drained from his face. "Not a problem. Anybody say something you like? Make you an offer you can't refuse?"

I smiled at his corniness. "Yeah. I signed with Treble this morning."

He grinned. "Did you negotiate?"

I returned his smile because, well, I was pretty damn proud of myself. I couldn't hide that.

"Rome, I'm gonna own my masters before I turn forty."

He grabbed me in a bear hug and picked me up, pushing a squeal out of me.

"Congratulations. I'm proud of you, Cass."

He set me down, but his arms kept my body against his. I felt lightheaded as I inhaled his cologne.

“Thank you,” I managed to say. “I couldn’t have done it without your encouragement.”

“True.”

I chuckled at that.

He pulled back and stared at me for a moment before it seemed to dawn on him that I had come here from New York rather than calling him like a normal person.

“So...you flew all the way here to tell me that?”

I didn’t answer. Instead, my eyes narrowed.

“Was that your new girlfriend?”

He frowned. “Was *who* my new girlfriend?”

“The chick in your apartment.”

“Who, Latoya?”

I shrugged. “The really pretty one who answered the door. Are there others?”

He grinned. “No. And Latoya’s the babysitter.”

“Oh.”

“When my mom can’t keep him, Latoya gets him on and off the bus and watches him while I’m working,” he explained. “She’s good. Trustworthy.”

I nodded as I mentally picked my face up off the floor. “Right. It’s cruise season.”

“Yeah,” he said, chuckling. His mom loved a Caribbean cruise.

“Why do you care if she’s my girlfriend or not?”

“I don’t.”

He stared blankly.

“Okay. I do. I’m...” I trailed off, shaking my head. “I didn’t *just* come here to thank you.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

“I came to tell you I’m...scared.”

“Of?”

“You. Me. Us. *Him*.”

“He’s three feet tall. Maybe forty-five pounds.”

“You know I don’t mean literally.”

And then I uttered the words that had dominated my thoughts for a while now.

“I don’t know how to be his mother. I don’t even know where to start.”

He moved back into my space and stared down into my eyes. “I don’t know, either. And I can’t promise things will be perfect. But...whatever happens, I promise I’ll be there every step of the way. We’re in this together.”

I nodded. “What do I say to him?”

“I don’t know. But we’ll think of something together. Are we doing that? Together?”

I reached up to circle my arms around his neck. “Yeah. Together.”

He smiled again and leaned in to peck my lips.

“You wanna meet him?”

“Right now?”

“Yeah.”

I smoothed my hair frantically before pulling out my compact. Rome laughed.

“Chill. He won’t care what you look like.”

It was just as well. My hands were trembling too hard to get my compact open. I dropped it back into my bag and cleared my throat.

“I’m ready. Well, not really, but it’s not gonna get any better, so let’s just go.”

We rode in silence, although I did giggle a couple of times thanks to Rome staring at me.

“What?” he said with a grin. “I’m happy as fuck right now, Cass. I can’t believe I get to be with you. Finally.”

He stopped me just after we exited the elevator, pressing me against the wall.

“I waited five years for this,” he said. “You have no idea how hard it was being away from you.”

“Actually, I do.”

He nodded, bringing his hands to my face. “It was always you, Cass. I knew it then and I know it now.”

The words came easily to me. The truth always does.

“I love you, Rome.”

“I love you too, baby.”

His lips brushed mine, soft, then hard, before we smashed them together and forgot where we were.

“Wait!” I pulled away, dazed and breathless. “Don’t get me all worked up.”

“My bad,” he said, his eyes low and fixed on my face. Giving me that look. “Later.”

“Definitely.”

We shared a smile. I smoothed my hair down again and gave myself a once-over to make sure I looked presentable. He chuckled at that as he pulled out his key to open the door.

“Oh,” he said, stopping just before he turned the knob. “Who do you wanna be?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s up to you. Are you Ms. Cass, or are you... Mommy?”

I didn’t have to think about it.

“I’m Mommy.”

He looked relieved. “Alright, here we go.”

He pushed the door open and gestured for me to walk through. *The Jetsons* was on now, and there was a little boy on the floor not watching them, choosing instead to bang his trucks together. Latoya looked up from her spot next to him, her eyebrows raised.

“Hey,” Rome said. “Can you give us a second?”

She nodded. “Of course. I’ll be straightening up Justin’s room if you need me.”

She punctuated that statement with a giddy wave at me, as if she hadn’t just seen me thirty minutes ago. But this time, I smiled back.

Rome turned off the tv and knelt down next to Justin, who was clad in the cutest little Ralph Lauren sweatsuit. It was kelly green, the perfect shade against his deep brown skin.

He was adorable.

“What’s up, little man?”

“Hey, Daddy.”

His little voice melted my heart.

“I want you to meet somebody.”

Rome grabbed Justin in his arms and stood before walking over to stand next to me. I held my breath and waited.

“Justin, this is Castra. She’s...” he took a deep breath. “She’s your mommy.”

His big brown eyes finally settled on me, clear and rimmed with thick black lashes. They held the innocence and curiosity of any child, but there was also a hint of fear, and that hurt to see. I waited, not wanting to scare him, hoping this wasn’t the worst idea I ever had. I had no expectations, but I desperately wanted him to like me. I prayed he would. I was willing to do anything. I owed it to him.

“My mommy?” he finally said, his brows furrowed. He didn’t understand it.

“Yes.”

He looked at me again, then back at Rome. “*My* mommy?”

“Yes, J. That’s your mommy.”

Scared and anxious, I held myself perfectly still as he worked through it, and then my heart exploded in my chest when he reached out to me. I extended my arms and he jumped into them, immediately wrapping his little arms around my neck and putting his head on my shoulder.

Rome’s eyes filled with tears, so mine did, too, and then his arms were around us, holding us tight. We stood there together, crying, the three of us. A unit. A family. Sharing tears of both pain and joy. Sharing a new beginning.

I knew there would be growing pains and little bumps in the road, but that’s life. We only get one, and it’s too short to let fear impede it.

I chose this life. Finally. For me.

I couldn’t wait to live it.

CASTRA'S WIKI

Click [here](#) to read Castra's Wikipedia entry and see what she's up to today.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shae Sanders grew up sneaking her sister's Jackie Collins novels when she really didn't have any business reading them. But they stoked a love of edgy and steamy romance against the backdrop of business and power. Now, she writes about black love, lust, and relationships with a side of social stuff thrown in for a little razzle dazzle. In her spare time, Shae spends time with her husband and kids, watches her favorite shows over and over again, and teaches as an adjunct professor.

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