



**ROMEY UNIVERSITY**

Freedom. Fidelity. Family.

Est. 1888

Teach Me

ALEXANDRIA HOUSE

# Teach Me

Alexandria House

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## Nadia

“The way your eyes flash when I slide inside, the look you give me when I get nasty and snide. The noises your body makes when we mate, the feel of your hands on my back when your soul I take. The way you see inside my heart to my mind, and that body of yours? So got-damn fine.

“The way your shit don’t stank, and how you let me spank . . . that remarkable ass of yours. How you use me for your pleasure while at the same time easing my pain. The way you scream my name. Yeah . . . these are a few of Nyles’ favorite thangs. Just a few, much more from which those came, but that ain’t nobody’s business except she who wears my name.”

After a few seconds of awed silence, deafening applause filled the inside of the Karr Auditorium on the Romey University campus. How the homecoming organizers managed to get *the* Nyles Adams to perform was beyond me. The man was world-famous, talented beyond imagination, rich, handsome—

“Damn, that man is sexy!” Brooklyn informed me. “His wife is one lucky-ass woman! Lawd! I’d swim the Mississippi River for a taste of that!”

Rolling my eyes, I said, “He’s cute, but he ain’t *that* fine, and um, don’t you have a whole husband waiting for you at home?”

“Worst mistake I ever made in my life,” she muttered.

“And a child with said husband?”

“The only thing good about being married to that fool.”

“That *rich* fool.”

“Yeah, and you know what? That’s the problem! If he wasn’t rich, then he wouldn’t have been able to fool me into marrying his old cantankerous ass.” She blew a frustrated breath through her full lips and fell against the back of her seat, and all I could do was shake my head at my beautiful, dark chocolate-skinned friend. With gorgeous wide-set eyes, a perky nose, and a tall, leggy frame, not to mention a ridiculous singing voice, Brooklyn could’ve easily been a superstar rather than a millionaire’s trophy wife, but she’d made that bed and an adorable daughter, so that was that.

“Would you two be quiet? I actually wanna hear the man’s poetry and not you two geese honk.” That was Sharla, who had an actual crush on Nyles Adams, was an official member of his fan club, and was the reason me and Brooklyn were there. “I know you think you’re asexual, Nadia, but I am *very* sexual, and you’re fucking up my ability to have nasty thoughts about this man.”

I rolled my ass while Brooklyn mumbled, “He ain’t tryna catch nothing from your nasty ass.”

“Stop hating on the fact that I have regular, satisfactory sex and your married ass obviously doesn’t,” Sharla countered.

“At least I haven’t acquired half the dick germs in this town. You just be fucking anybody.”

“But I’m fucking. When’s the last time you did without your man being hooked up to a Viagra IV?”

“Okay, that’s enough! Y’all hush so we can enjoy the show,” I said.

They both leaned forward and gave each other the evil eye before turning their attention to where Nyles Adams was bringing his gorgeous wife onstage and kneeling before her. In seconds, we were all mesmerized by the words that flowed from his lips in tribute to the woman he loved, and on either side of me, I could hear my friends periodically sighing. I didn’t sigh, because I knew love like that was a fantasy as well as a social construct, and the words he spoke, the way he gazed at his wife, was all an act. Love never worked out. All it caused was heartache and pain and misery.

But damn, it looked so genuine, so real, that I almost wanted to believe it was.

Almost.

# Nathan

I wasn't really into poetry, but this dude was on fire! Standing up there in a track suit and some crazy Jordans, he wasn't your typical poet. I mean, dude had a diamond grill! And his words were so real and raw, and shit, *black*. He was the blackest poet I'd ever seen or heard, but it wasn't like I was an expert on poets. Anyway, I had to admit that I was glad I'd taken my boy, Luke North, up on his offer for me to come with him to this show. I was actually enjoying myself.

My eyes were glued to Nyles Adams as he knelt before his fine-ass wife and began to speak: "When the Most High made me, he put a stamp on me, made me fine as hell, sexy as sin, so talented it's a damn shame, and then he said, *This is good*."

"Next, he gathered the hosts around his throne, called a special meeting, had the royal architect draw up the plans . . . for you. Because for a nigga like me, he knew he couldn't half-step and make no mess, not that he ever would . . . but I digress.

"So he took a gold chisel, molded you from my very heart, because my ribs were too weak to build you. That's why my heart beats for you, why you're so beautiful. Because you are a reflection of the good buried deep inside of me, good that only floated to the surface when you came into my life.

"Shit, baby . . . you breathed life into me. Resurrected my bones, cured my leprosy, made a blind man see, made my lame ass walk. You're my messiah, my savior, my life.

"My vice.



“My motherfucking wife.”

I shook my head and chuckled as I joined everyone else in the auditorium in giving this man a standing ovation.

Luke nudged me. “I told you dude was good.”

“Man, thanks for inviting me.”

“No problem. About time your ass left the house for more than school or running errands for the fam.”

I didn't argue with my friend, because I definitely needed this night out of the house.

## Nadia

I flipped through the stack of quizzes that Clark, my TA, had graded for me in record time, took a sip of my coffee, and sighed as a text message alert filled the tiny space of my windowless office.

Mommy: *I thought you were having dinner with me yesterday?*

I frowned and replied: *I said that? I don't remember saying that.*

Mommy: *You didn't say that but you should've. I could drop dead any day now, be off in the ancestral realm somewhere.*

Me: *Mommy, you're healthier than me. You need to stop.*

Mommy: *I'm getting old, Nadia. You should be spending as much time as you can with me. You want me to be old and lonely?*

I fought not to roll my eyes as if she could see me through the text message, then replied: *How could you possibly be*

*lonely with Braeden living with you?*

*Mommy: Braeden isn't much of a conversationalist unless we're fucking.*

*Me: Mommy!*

*Mommy: Oh, stop acting like that's the first time I've used that word around you. Come to dinner tonight. I won't subject you to what I eat. I'll have Braeden make his corned beef and cabbage for you.*

*Damn, she was pulling out the heavy artillery.*

*Me: Okay, but have him put on a shirt. Please.*

*Mommy: What about pants?*

*Me: Mommy!*

*Mommy: See you at six, my love.*

I set the phone down and sighed, almost jumped straight up out of my chair when it started ringing. My baby sister.

“Your mother just called me,” was how I answered the phone.

My baby sister giggled. “She’s got you sitting over there in your business suit blushing, huh?”

“She tried. I swear Mommy needs help.”

“No, Mommy is Mommy, the most reliably, unflinchingly blunt woman in the world. She’s always spoken her mind and been a super freak. Remember her nudist phase?”

“How the hell could I possibly forget that?”

More giggling. “Hey, you got a moment? I know you’re probably busy doing professor shit.”

“Got a class in thirty minutes. What’s up?”

“Sooooo, I have this idea.”

I groaned inwardly. My sister’s ideas were always something from another dimension. Ginger was smart, smarter than my PhD-having self in a lot of ways, but there was a lot about her thinking that I just didn’t get. “Okaaaay,” I replied.

“Don’t be like that. Hear me out.”

“I’m listening.”

“So, I’ve been doing a lot of research, you know . . . trying to fine tune my chakras, sharpen my psychic abilities, all that, and I think I’m ready.”

“For what, Ginger?”

“To further my education.”

Well, I didn’t see that coming. Ginger was a firm believer that any knowledge one needed could be obtained with a simple Google search and that advanced degrees were a waste of time and money. Never mind all the incorrect information floating around on the inter-webs.

“Really, Ging?! You’re serious? You know you can use my employee discount here at Romey U and—”

“No, silly! I’m talking about fucking.”

“First of all, what is it with you and Mommy and that word?” It wasn’t that I didn’t curse, but that word just bothered me.

“Fuck? It’s a beautiful word. Some people might disagree, but I think it’s very high on the vibrational scale.”

“Here you go with that mess. Ginger, what does . . . *fucking* have to do with education?”

“Sex is just as effective as meditation for opening your root chakra and releasing the Kundalini energy, which takes you to a higher plane of consciousness. I’ma know all kinds of shit!”

Whatever that meant.

“Um, don’t you already have sex, Ging? I mean, you’re not a virgin, right?”

She sighed heavily into the phone, as if I’d just been declared the village idiot. “I’m twenty-six. *Of course*, I’m not a virgin. What I’m saying is, I’ve got to find the right partner. Someone who’s on my level vibrationally.”

“And where do you plan on finding this partner?”

“On Tinder.”

“Aw, hell . . . bye, Ginger.”

“Fine, have a closed mind. Just know that I read about this on the *Psychology Today* website.”

“Yeah, right.”

I was still shaking my head as I gathered my satchel and left for my first class of the day.

# Nathan

It wasn't my intention to be late, but I was. So I was as quiet as possible when I slipped inside the auditorium, thankful that the doors were in the back, so I didn't have to disrupt class and was virtually undetected as I slid into a seat on the back row, put my backpack on the floor, and pulled the little desk down over my left thigh. I squinted ahead of me, trying to find the person the voice flowing from the speakers in the room belonged to. It was a nice voice—feminine but strong, like she knew her shit. Confident.

I continued my visual search as I pulled out my pen and notebook. When I finally found her, my mouth dropped open. She was sliding off a stool in the corner of the platform at the front of the room. My eyes followed her as she walked to the middle, continuing to speak. She was wearing a tan pantsuit, nothing tight or revealing, but damn, she was *fine*. The kind of fine a pantsuit can't hide, and although I was supposed to be paying attention to what she was saying, I couldn't. All I could do was smile and thank the whole damn universe for this mid-semester schedule change.

Once class had ended, I waited for the room to thin out, stood from my seat, and ignored the stares that were directed my way. I was used to them anyway. A big, six-foot nigga with dreads that met the backs of his thighs was supposed to get stared at.

I had to wait in line to talk to her, and when my turn came, she was busy typing something on her iPad and didn't bother looking up at me as I said, "Um, Ms. Day—"

Eyes still on that iPad, she interrupted me with, “*Dr. Day*. I earned that title, have the student loan balance to prove it. So, I’m going to need you to use that title, Mr. Moore.”

Well, shit . . . okay. “Uh . . . you know who I am?”

She finally looked up at me with hard eyes. They were a strange color I couldn’t pinpoint. Or maybe they were a combination of colors. The skin of her round expressionless face was a smooth copper. She was pretty as hell—juicy lips, thick manicured eyebrows. Her hair was cut in a nice little short fade and was a light brown, almost blond color. And as she stood from her seat, I could see that she was shorter than me, maybe five-eight, and upon closer inspection, I could confirm that she was indeed fine, just the way I liked my women. I might have liked her *specifically*, but her attitude?

Damn!

“Yes, I know who you are,” she replied. “You’re the man who somehow managed to get a schedule change after the deadline, walked into my class late, and called me *Ms. Day* after I spent years in classrooms—both virtual and literal—did research, and wrote a dissertation.”

“Okay . . . my apologies, *Dr. Day*. I didn’t realize that was your title. The paperwork just said *Day*, no title.”

“Apology accepted. Mr. Moore, I don’t know where you left off in the class you were originally enrolled in, but in here, we are on chapter seven, which deals with motivation and emotion. It would behoove you to have the entire chapter read before class meets again, and be sure to download the course syllabus from the class’s online portal.”

I nodded. “Thanks for the heads up.”

She let her eyes drag over my body, appearing to size me up. They landed on my face as she asked, “Was there anything else?”

“Uh, no. Just . . . thanks for your time.”

“Good. See you Thursday, Mr. Moore. *On time*. You may think your entry was undetected, but this auditorium has sloped seating. Not as sloped as say, a stadium, but the back row is raised enough for it to be virtually impossible to enter this room unnoticed. I saw you enter, and it was distracting. I’m sure it was distracting to the other students as well. Be on time, Mr. Moore, or don’t bother coming at all.”

She left without giving me a chance to respond, and all I could do was watch her walk away. Her ass was perfectly proportioned to that nice body of hers. Not over-the-top big, but she had an ass. A nice one.

And that? The entirety of that interaction? Well, it turned me completely on.



## Nadia

He grasped my sweat-slicked ass cheek, squeezing it as he thrust with measured aggression, plying into me repeatedly as I buried my face in the pillow, moaning and groaning. He filled me up in a way I'd never known was possible, making me ache and throb.

He felt so damn good.

Like the remedy for everything that ailed me.

This man was the antibiotic I'd needed so long ago when an infectious sorrow had snaked through my system and hardened my heart.

He slid out of me, flipped me over, and settled between my thighs, those impossibly long dreadlocks framing my head as he leaned in to kiss me, and as he glided back inside me, he wore a bewildered expression on his face, and said, "My apologies, Dr. Day, for tearing this pussy up."

My eyes popped open, and I quickly took in my surroundings—my stark-white, clean-walled bedroom—and muttered, “What the hell?”

I was dreaming about having sex with a student? A remarkably striking student, yes, but a damn student? What was going on with me? I didn’t even like sex, never understood the hype despite the scientific realities of serotonin being released during an orgasm and the euphoria that accompanied it, but that feeling didn’t last long enough to have to deal with what came along with sex—heartache, disappointment, lies, a wet ass. Who had time for all that?

But despite those sensible and grounding thoughts, my vagina was throbbing, rhythmically signaling a need for a release.

I sighed, closed my eyes, and shook my head. No, I was not going there. I didn’t need sex. This was a reaction to the fact that I was having dinner with my hypersexual mother. That had to be it. Hell, I hadn’t desired sex of any kind in years, which was why I’d declared myself asexual.

I glanced at the clock on my bedside table and yawned. Then I flipped over in the bed so I could finish my dream. Not that it was a good dream or anything like that. I just didn’t like cliffhangers.

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My grandmother named her Faith, but she never thought it fit, so she re-named herself Lovely, making her official it's-on-her-driver's-license name Lovely Day. However, she insisted Ginger and I call her mommy. Not mother or mama or mom—*mommy*, because mommies are young. Mommies don't age, and Lovely Day was holding onto her youth like it was the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. For the past twenty or so years, she'd been a vegan, only drank alkaline water, had never straightened her wild mane, smoked weed, rarely raised her voice, and kept up a regimen of daily yoga and nightly sex.

And hell, it worked.

My forty-nine-year-old mother was fine, could pull any man she wanted, and put women my age—twenty-nine—and younger to shame.

She was putting me to shame right that moment as she opened the front door of my childhood home and pulled me into a hug, enveloping me in the familiar fragrance of a fruity perfumed oil she said made her irresistible to men. Then she backed away from me a bit and took me in while I did the same to her—tiny hemp halter top and flowing mandala-printed skirt, bare feet. Her usual uniform, the one that made her look like a goddess with a crown of black kinky curls. Not a strand of gray, and I knew for a fact she didn't dye it.

In contrast, I was wearing khaki pants and a royal blue Romey U polo. My natural hair was cropped close to my scalp, because I just did not have the time or desire to deal with it. Not exactly a goddess look.

“You been getting plenty of rest?” she asked, after she appraised me. “You look tired.” In her youthful, free-thinking, freedom-loving way, she was still a mother, and at that moment, she sounded like one.

“I get plenty of sleep, Mommy.” *But a dream did awaken me last night. A nasty, heart-thumping dream.*

“My love, there are two kinds of rest: the one that requires sleep, and the one that requires stillness. I know you have no problem sleeping. You never have, no matter what was going on in your world. It’s stillness you never mastered. Always so busy, trying to keep your mind off of—”

“Nadia!”

Saved by Braeden.

“Hey, Braeden,” I said, as my stepfather pulled me into a hug. Well, stepfather wasn’t the right term since he and my mother weren’t married, as Mommy didn’t believe in marriage. But the man who was exactly my age—we actually shared the same birthdate—had been her constant companion for five years, and since this was her longest relationship to date, he was the closest I’d ever had to a stepfather. I liked him. He was quiet, kind, and adored Mommy. He was muscular and handsome, too, but I really didn’t notice all that.

“Is Ginger joining us?” I asked them both.

“No, she said she had a date. So, it’s just us three,” Mommy informed me. “Let’s eat!”

Dinner was Braeden's corned beef and cabbage for me, as promised, while he and Mommy had vegan ribs and potato salad, which I tasted and loved.

"I don't see why you won't open a vegan restaurant," I said, as I spooned the best potato salad I'd ever had in my life into my mouth. "If I had you to cook for me every day like I did when I was living here, I'd totally go vegan again."

"Because I make more money selling sex toys. Oh, and I'm thinking about adding a jewelry case to the store. What do you think about this pendant?" she asked, lifting it from her chest.

I focused on what looked like a tribal necklace, a white, curved bone-looking thing hanging from a chain. "I noticed that. It's gorgeous."

"It's a raccoon dick bone," she said, matter-of-factly, making me choke on my potato salad.

Braeden quickly hopped up and slapped me on the back, sending potato salad flying across the table. Then he handed me my glass of alkaline water and headed from the breakfast nook where we were having dinner to the kitchen sink, returning with a towel he used to clean up my far-flung food.

"You okay?" my mother asked, her concerned eyes on me, oblivious to the fact that her words had caused this near-death experience. "Something go down the wrong way?"

"Um, yeah . . . I'm fine now," I said, once I could talk again. "It's nice, Mommy. The necklace, I mean."

She gave me her usual, brilliant white smile. “Isn’t it?! I got one for you and Ginger, too!”

*Shit.* “Thanks, Mommy.”

After I enjoyed my mother’s vegan brownies and chicory tea, I left with my raccoon penis bone necklace, a handful of flyers about an upcoming erotic paint and sip party to be held at *Passion Play*—her sex shop—and Tupperware containers full of the night’s leftovers.

Gotta love mothers.

## Nathan

I watched my kids eat in ways that were signature to their personalities. My daughter shoveled food into her mouth like it would disappear if she took her time, while my son picked up one green bean at a time, placing it into his mouth. Ian only ate from one of those divided plates reminiscent of a school cafeteria tray, because he had a thing about his food touching. Mecca ate from a regular plate, scooping up mashed potatoes and green beans at the same time, barely taking her eyes off her phone, so I texted her: *We need to talk.*

I saw her roll her eyes when the message popped up on the screen of her phone, and without looking up, she replied to me via text: *About what?*

Me: *Look at me, Mec.*

This time, she lifted her eyes *and* rolled them for all to see. By all, I mean my mother, who sucked her teeth, and said, “Umph, let me go in this damn kitchen before I whoop her ass myself. That attitude is too much for me. Ian, stop picking at that food and finish eating!” Then she took her empty plate into the kitchen.

Ian didn’t even lift his head in acknowledgement of what Mama said. He just scooped up a perfect spoon of mashed potatoes and slid it into his mouth.

Turning my attention to my sixteen-going-on-thirty-six-year-old daughter, I lifted my hands, and in sign language, conveyed to her: *Your teacher called me.*

Mecca rolled her eyes *again* and signed back: *So?*

I closed *my* eyes and took a deep breath, thinking to myself that she had to have more attitude in her lanky body than any other hearing-impaired person in the entire damn world.

Me: *So why aren’t you doing your homework?*

*Because it’s stupid,* she replied, smacking two fingers against her forehead with force.

Me: *What’s stupid about history?*

Mecca: *Everything. Why do I need to learn that stuff?*

Me: *So you can get into a good college and get a good job one day.*

Mecca: *Why do I have to go to college when you're rich?*

Me: *Right. I'm rich, not you.*

Then this little girl closed her got-damn eyes.

I beat on the table, startling Ian, who softly said, "That's rude, Daddy."

"You just finish eating," I shot at him.

To that, he shrugged and placed a perfectly symmetrical cut piece of chicken breast into his mouth.

"Mecca, if you don't open your damn eyes—shit, she can't hear me," I muttered. So I texted her: *You need to open your damn eyes!*

In response to her phone vibrating against the table, she did just that, replying to my text with one of her own: *Daddy, I just want to eat in peace and quiet. I will do the homework.*

Then she took a bite of her chicken and closed her eyes again.

"These damn kids are going to kill my ass," I mumbled.

"Ass is a swear word, Daddy," Ian informed me. "Damn, too. And you said that one twice."

"Yeah, I know, buddy. My bad."

"And shit. You said shit, Daddy."

"Uh, yeah. Didn't meant to. Sorry."

"That's okay. Mecca makes Grandma Sammy use swear words, too."

Just then, Mama re-entered the dining room with a cup of coffee she set before me. "She sho' in the hell does. I see she



done closed her eyes on you, too.”

“She stays closing her damn eyes on me,” I replied.

Ian’s head snatched in my direction again. “Grandma, you said hell, and Daddy, damn is—”

“I know, Ian. I know,” I groaned.

## Nadia

“Serenity Springs, Nurse Flores speaking.”

Relief washed over me at the sound of the familiar voice. The last thing I felt like doing was trying to explain who I was and why I was calling to some new person. “Good morning, Nurse Flores. This is Nadia Day. How’s she doing?”

“Good morning! She’s doing wonderful as usual.”

That meant there was no change—good or bad. “Great, she’s still eating well?”

“She is!”

“Has—has she had any visitors lately?” That translated to any *new* visitors. It was stupid to think that he would visit her. No, it was actually an impossibility, but I could dream. There was no law against that.

“Yes, Antionette and Donna were here on Sunday. They all had a really nice visit.”

“Good. Well, I’ll let you go. Thanks, as always.”

“Oh, you know it’s not a problem. Have you given anymore thought to what we discussed about you coming to see her? I know she’d love a visit from you.”

All I could do was hold the phone, and that was all I needed to do. She knew the answer to that question. She knew it wouldn’t change. It hadn’t changed in almost ten years.

“I see. Talk to you next week?” she asked.

“Yes. Talk to you next week.”

After I’d ended the call, I sat at my desk and sighed. I was so tired, but I’d slept, a dreamless sleep, thank goodness. Maybe I was the “I need stillness” kind of tired, like Mommy had alluded to. Or maybe—hell, I don’t know. Maybe I just needed a *change*.

Nah, I didn’t do well with change. I’d *never* done well with change, so that couldn’t be it.

Turning my attention to my computer, I decided to check my email and smiled when I saw one from my baby sister. That smile disappeared when I saw what she’d sent, a link to an article titled, “*Good Sex*” and the *Super-conscious Mind* on the *Psychology Today* website.

What the hell? She wasn’t playing about this. Shaking my head, I told myself I didn’t have time for that. I wasn’t a damn sexologist. I didn’t like thinking about or even talking about sex. As I said before, sex was overrated and divisive and a waste of time. Sure, colleagues of mine were rich because of their specialization in sex, but I didn’t care about that, would never care about it. I was more concerned with the human

heart, what drives it to devotion, even to death. That was what fascinated me, not screwing.

Closing my eyes, I rubbed my forehead, closed the tab on my computer, and then decided I'd better get myself together so I could teach my damn classes.

\*\*\*\*\*

He was a smug son-of-a-bitch, this Nathan Moore. Sure, he was attractive, but he knew it, and everyone else knew he knew it. But he was also smart. *Very* smart. As I watched several of the young ladies in the class fawn over him, I tried to remember why he was allowed to make a schedule change so late in the semester. The only people who got away with stuff like that were those whose family name was chiseled into the cornerstone of one of Romey U's buildings. But he was a Moore. There wasn't a Moore Hall or a Moore Gymnasium or a Moore Complex. So that wasn't it, unless his mother had been a Chastain or a Morgan or a Smith, or one of the other names adorning the dozens of buildings that made up this historically black university. Or maybe he was a rapper or someone famous. That would explain the mile-long dreadlocks and the watch that held so many diamonds, I could see them sparkle all the way from his usual back-row seat.

I twisted my mouth to the side, letting my eyes rake over all of what had to be at least six feet of him. He was tall *and* wide, kind of dangerous looking. Biceps bulged through the arms of his long-sleeved t-shirt. His smile, as he indulged one young lady who grasped a lock of his hair, was brilliant, lush lips framed by a neat goatee and mustache. His brown skin was so smooth. Nathan Moore was magnetically attractive, a rare type of handsome, so maybe that explained why I was staring at him long after class had ended rather than gathering my things and rushing back to my office until it was time for my next class—my usual routine, which was a part of my work-home-work-home-work continuum.

He threw his head back and laughed, and then almost as if he felt my eyes on him, turned his head and looked at me.

In response, I dropped my eyes and started tapping indiscriminately on the screen of my tablet, almost let out a yelp when I heard a voice say, “Dr. Day, can I speak with you for a moment?”

My eyes shot up to his face. The man was standing directly in front of my table, the one situated on the platform at the front of the auditorium. He’d just been a half a room away from me. Damn, he was fast.

Clearing my throat, I nodded, dropping my eyes back to my tablet. “What can I help you with, Mr. Moore?”

“I have some questions about today’s lecture. Can I ask them now or do you want me to schedule a time to meet with you in your office?”

For some reason, that flustered me. “Uh . . . did I not make something clear in my lecture? I try to be very concise and

perspicuous, as this is Psychology 101, a foundational course.”

“No, you were very clear and thorough. I’m just fascinated with the fixed action pattern theory of motivation, how there’s something inside of us that predisposes us to act a certain way.”

Well, the theory ran deeper than that, but he smelled heavenly, like a combination of cedar and spices, and his aroma was so potent that I couldn’t think clearly, so I gathered my things and abruptly stood from my chair. “Please schedule an appointment. You can do that online. Excuse me.”

I left before he could reply, rushing to the safety of my office.

## Nathan

Handing the papers back to my son, I smiled at him. His eyes were stretched wide in anticipation, as if he could've possibly gotten anything wrong. Ian was a ten-year-old genius. If I listened to his teachers, he would be in high school right now rather than fourth grade. But I knew that wasn't what he needed. He needed to be a kid, even if his intelligence was that of an adult. Or shit, maybe *I* needed him to be a kid, even if he did have a whole collection of adult problems—obsessive compulsive disorder being the main one. Then there was his autism spectrum disorder that manifested itself in his limited diet choices and absolute obsession with the old TV show, *In Living Color*, and any commercial, along with his inadequate social prowess. Doctors, therapists, meds—yeah, his world was adult enough without me accelerating it even more.

“Good job, Ian,” I said, ruffling my hand through his thick hair. “Good job.”

“Thanks. Can I go watch TV now?”

“Yep. Go ahead. It’ll be time to brush your teeth soon, though.”

He nodded as he gathered his papers and books, neatly arranging them in his backpack. “Eight-thirty. I know, Daddy. Eight-thirty.”

I chuckled and watched as Mecca grabbed his arm when he passed by her and signed *Goodnight* to him

He signed back: *Goodnight, Mecca.*

Then it was just me and every parent’s nightmare—a teenager. The thing with Mecca was, she was just as smart as Ian. Her issue was she didn’t care. School meant nothing to her. She didn’t get off on over-achieving. She didn’t care what other people thought of her in that way. Now, if we’re talking sci-fi movies, gadgets, crystals, and sneakers? That’s a different story. She was all about the latest trends when it came to those things, and the only way I could get her to halfway act right was to bribe her with shit like that, which was pathetic, but hell, what else could I do? Yeah, I was rich, had set things up where she and Ian would be taken care of for the rest of their lives, but anything could happen. They needed to get an education and have the option of being self-sufficient. That was why my old ass was in college trying to finish a degree I’d abandoned a long time ago. My thought was if my kids saw me pursuing my education when my bank account said I didn’t need to, they’d see the value in it. That was lost on Mecca, and Ian, he was going to do his best anyway. He couldn’t help but to do his best.

So I was wasting my time and energy, wearing myself thin trying to finish this degree, but I had to finish it, because that



was how *I* was wired. I set goals and I smashed them.

My phone buzzed with a text message, snatching me off the carousel of introspection.

Mecca: *I'm done.*

I looked up with a frown to see that she'd left the dining room table, our usual homework spot.

*When the hell did she skip out of here?*

I must've really been zoned out.

I looked down at my own unfinished homework, then toward the dining room doorway, trying to decide if this was a battle I wanted to fight with her, because shit, a nigga was tired. It didn't take long for me to remind myself that my first priority in life was being a father, so I dragged my ass to her room, to the door I knew was locked, and started to beat on it, realized that was a waste of time, then pulled my phone out and texted her: *Unlock this damn door.*

It took her two minutes to unlock it, because she had to be at least a little defiant. But finally, the door swung open, and I was face to face with a female version of me, right down to the dreadlocks that swung past her waist. Her dark brown eyes flashed annoyance as she crossed her long arms over her chest.

I raised my eyebrows and held out my hand. She knew why I was there. In a silent huff, she spun on her heels and my eyes toured her room—a huge painting of her mother hung on the wall beside her little platform bed; posters of scenes from *The Matrix* covered the rest of the walls. *The Matrix* was her obsession, had been since I introduced her to it when she was Ian's age. She called it a classic because I guess it was to her.

There were crystals of all kinds on every available surface and a tank full of exotic fish on her dresser. Her TV was tuned to an episode of *The Walking Dead* with the closed captions rolling.

Finally, she turned from her desk, papers in hand, and thrust them toward me, hands on her hips as she waited for me to check her homework.

Handing the papers back to her, I said, “Good job,” because she could read lips, and well. That was why she was able to go to a regular school rather than the blind and deaf school. It didn’t hurt that I’d also hired her an assistant who accompanied her to her classes.

*I told you I was finished*, she signed, with attitude. I swear she did *everything* with attitude.

*Just making sure*, I signed back.

“Now can I get back to my show?” she asked, verbally.

I smiled at hearing her voice. She rarely spoke, as sign language was her communication of choice. I kissed her forehead and signed: *Goodnight, princess*.

Her eyes softened as she said, “Good night, Daddy.”

# Nadia

“Brooklyn, put the ladder back,” I said, gripping my forehead.

“Why? He can still get down. He can jump. It ain’t that high.”

“Because you’re acting on emotions. You love him, and you actually don’t want your husband to jump off the roof of your house and break his neck.”

“Yes, I do! I can’t stand his ass!”

“Brooklyn, where is Bailey?”

“In the house taking a nap.”

“Do you want her to wake up to a dead father?”

“She’s three. She won’t even miss him. He’s always working anyway, or at least that’s the lie he tells me! Where’s the money, Isaac? Huh? What did you do with the got-damn money?!”

This was what happened when a girl who grew up in abject poverty married a rich, much-older Afro-Belgian businessman, a former footballer who made a fortune in wines and spirits. Brooklyn was obsessed with never being poor again, so obsessed that she checked their accounts like a compulsive gambler checks Powerball numbers. There was some money missing, *a lot* of money missing from one of their accounts, and in Brooklyn’s mind, that meant Isaac spent it on another woman, an even younger woman, and was going to leave her and their little girl for that woman and take her comfortable lifestyle with him.

The poverty mindset is a bitch.

Especially since he'd already explained to her that he'd used the money for some investment.

I had no idea what the man was doing on the roof in the first place but still tried to reason with my friend. "Brooklyn, put the ladder back. *Please*. I can't hang up until you do that, and I have work to do, papers to grade, classes to teach."

She sighed into the phone, and I could hear poor Isaac in the background, begging her to put the ladder back in his thick accent. "Please, Brooklyn! Stop this! I bend down sideways to get along with you!"

Yeah, he had a problem with idioms.

"Fine," she finally said.

"And talk to the man. Call me back later, and please don't be needing bail money when you do."

"Don't be silly. I'd just give you my debit card, and you could use my money to bail me out."

"Jesus . . . you know what? Bye."

"Bye."

I shook my head and decided to check my email before my appointment arrived. Ginger had sent me a link to another article titled: *The Magic of Sex*. A quick scan of it told me it was full of information about how sex was a mood lifter and a pain reliever in addition to a bunch of other stuff.

Yada, yada, yada.

She was bound and determined to drag me on this higher consciousness sex journey with her, just like she tried to do

when she was obsessed with the benefits of rose quartz, or that time she was deep into moon worship. But this sex thing hit a nerve, because one: Nathan Moore had triggered something in me that had me feeling marginally horny, if that was even a thing for me (I was sure it wasn't, but something was going on), and two: I got enough of that from my mother with the gifts she kept plying me with. Every time she put a new product on her store shelves, she gifted it to me. I had tons of vibrators and condoms and lube I'd thrown in a box I'd shoved into the depths of my closet. I needed to throw that mess away, but . . . shit, I had no idea why I kept that stuff. Maybe because Mommy gave it to me, and I adored her. Both Ginger and I had absentee fathers, mostly by my mother's choice. I think that was because she wanted us to see her as our world, and it worked in my case. We might have been like night and day personality wise, but I loved that woman more than anyone in this world and envied her openness and freedom sometimes. I just wasn't wired that way. Not anymore. I'd worked hard to rewire my brain. Things worked better for me that way.

A knock at my door pulled me back to my office in Opal Hall, to the present, to the task at hand, a meeting with—I glanced at the calendar on my computer screen—Nathan Moore.

*Shit.*

How in the hell did I not know this meeting was with him?

I blinked and swallowed, glanced down at my olive-green pantsuit and nude pumps, crossed my ankles, and took a deep breath. “Come in!” I called through the door.

And he did, sauntering into the space cramped with a desk, chairs, and bookshelves like he owned it, wearing jeans, a t-shirt that had to be designed to showcase his arms, and expensive sneakers. His dreadlocks hung free, and he wore a smile which opened up a face that was impossibly handsome.

He was so fine.

Big and fine and sexy.

And then there was his cologne . . .

Intoxicating.

And those long dreadlocks made him remind me of a mocha-skinned Jason Momoa.

Dayum!

I was staring at him, and I knew it, but I couldn't stop. So his smile faltered a bit and his eyes darted around my office until I pulled my sexless-by-choice self together, and said, "Have a seat, Mr. Moore."

The smile reappeared, and my body whispered to me that I'd been dishonest about not wanting or liking sex and that me being marginally horny for this man was a gross understatement. When he settled in the chair in front of my desk and slid down into a slouched posture, letting his thighs separate, my body upped the ante by raising its voice and accusing me of being a lying-ass-bitch who undoubtedly, most definitely, wanted to screw this man.

I gathered myself *again* and folded my hands in my lap. "So what was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

His hooded brown eyes lit up as he rested his elbows on the arm of the chair and leaned forward a little. My eyes fell to his full lips as he began to speak. “Motivation. It’s an urge to do what needs to be done to reach a goal or make something happen, right?”

I nodded. “Correct.”

“And you said motivation can be propelled either internally or externally?”

“Yes, intrinsic or extrinsic forces can affect one’s motivation . . .”

“What I gotta do to motivate you to ride this dick?”

My eyes stretched wide, and my mouth dropped open. “What did you just say?”

“I asked you which do you think is the most common? Intrinsic or extrinsic?”

“Oh, uh . . .”

“Or do you think we all have a balance of both?”

“Yes? I mean . . . yes, I do.”

“Me, too. This really fascinates me, because I’m dealing with a teenage daughter who’s only motivated to make my life harder than it has to be.”

“Oh . . . you have kids?” *He’s probably married too, and here you sit, having nasty auditory hallucinations about the man.*

“Yes. Two. Anyway, I was always intrinsically motivated to do my best. I like excelling and succeeding. Always have. But

my oldest child couldn't care less about those things. It's frustrating as hell, excuse my French. She's too smart for this."

"Well, let's not forget the extrinsic. Environment affects motivation, as well. Is she growing up the same way you did?"

"Definitely not. I grew up poor. I'm not poor anymore."

"Hmm, an un-poor man in college? I knew you were a non-traditional student, but I didn't know you were *that* non-traditional."

He decided to show me what that smile looked like in a lopsided state. "Non-traditional, i.e. old?"

"Mature."

"Nice euphemism. I made my money in sports. Ten years in the NFL."

"I didn't ask you that."

"But you wanted to."

No sense in denying the truth. "Is that how you managed to change your schedule in the middle of the semester? With your NFL money?"

"No, I did that with my Tacos for the Soul franchise money. I donated some of that to the business department."

"I see."

"Does that bother you?"

"Yes."

"Then that means if I ask you out on a date, you'll say no?"

Aw, hell. I was hearing things again. What did he say? It looks like snow?



“What?” I asked, begging my brain to wake up.

“Will you let me take you out? Dinner, drinks, whatever you want.”

“Won’t your wife have a problem with that?”

He held up his left hand and pointed to his vacant ring finger. “I’m not married.”

“Baby mama?”

“Deceased.”

“Girlfriend?”

“Haven’t had one of those in a long time, Dr. Day.”

“Oh.”

“So?”

“Um, no.”

“Because I’m rich and I use it to my advantage?”

“Because I’m your teacher and you’re my student.”

“Then I’ll drop your class.”

“It’s too late to drop it.”

His eyes searched my office. “I won’t tell if you don’t tell.”

“There’s nothing to tell. There will not be anything to tell in the future, either, because I’m not risking my job for a date. I worked very hard to get here, owe the government a lot of money for the years of education and training it took to get here, so no. Full stop, Mr. Moore.”

“What if I pay off your student loans? Will that change that no into a yes, full stop?”

“You’d pay ninety-thousand dollars in loans off just for one date?”

“With you? Yes.”

I was caught somewhere in between being insulted and flattered. “Mr. Moore, you’re very handsome, charming, intelligent, and my best student. I respect all of that about you, but I’m not for sale and neither is my career. So again, *no . . . full stop.*”

He sighed. “Okay, but I graduate in a few weeks. This is my last semester. Your class is one I inadvertently skipped over a couple of years ago.”

“You’re a senior?” How did I not know that?

“Yes, ma’am. So, once I graduate . . . dinner, drinks, whatever you want?”

I couldn’t stop the smile from spreading across my face. “Mr. Moore, I have a class to prepare for—”

“No problem. I’ll leave, but I won’t forget that you didn’t say no.”

“Mr. Moore—” I said, stopping him in his tracks.

“Yes, Dr. Day?”

“Don’t forget to read the next chapter on—”

“Sensation and perception. Already read it.”

Now *that* was sexy.

## Nathan

I wasn't supposed to ask her out. At least not yet, but there she sat in her office, certificates hanging on the wall behind her head—a BS and an MS from Romey U, a PhD from Tulane. Bookcases full of books, live plant on the corner of her desk, and her. So pretty. So poised. So damn intelligent.

That was by far what I liked most about her—her mind, and how those suits she wore fit her body, especially her booty. Dr. Day wasn't skinny, but she wasn't fat either. In my eyes, her body was perfect. And her smile? I was sure it could stop time . . . if she'd share it more often.

But she rarely smiled, always no-nonsense, real fembotish. A steel veneer always in place. But there was a vulnerability there. I was sure of that. Just like I was sure I was the one to see behind it, that I was made to embrace her vulnerability. Either that, or my dick was just indiscriminately getting hard at the sound of her voice or at the way she walked across that platform clicking on that remote for that projector, or more

likely, the way she smelled or how *Mr. Moore* rolled off her tongue.

Yeah, I had it bad. In the midst of trying to raise two kids, run several businesses, deal with family drama, and finish my degree, I was crushing on a woman.

At thirty-six damn years old.

“. . . you good with that, Nate?”

I frowned at my friend, then remembered I was sitting across from him, supposed to be having a meeting with him. “What?” I asked, not even trying to play it off and pretend I had been listening.

Luke sighed. “Okay, what’s got you all zoned out? Mecca giving you hell again?”

“Naw, man . . . I’m used to that.”

“Ian? He done started giving you trouble?” Skepticism filled his voice.

“Of course not. Ian is still . . . Ian.”

“Your moms?”

“Naw, Sammy is good as long as she’s got her coffee, *Maury*, and lottery tickets. She’s . . . she’s really been a lot of help to me since she moved in. Things are straight with her, and my brother is good, too, before you ask.”

“Then shit, what is—wait, you got you a new woman?”

I shrugged. “I ain’t got her yet, but I want the hell outta her.”

Luke smiled as he leaned forward in his chair, his food forgotten just like mine was. La Placer was our usual meeting spot, good food and never too crowded, but at that moment, the furthest thing from my mind was his sports agency that I had invested in.

“So you finally found a woman in Romey who caught your eye, huh? You been here, what? Three years? About time! I was beginning to wonder if your ass was trying to train for the priesthood.”

I smirked. “Ain’t like I ain’t been getting none. Don’t play yourself.”

“I know you keep ass on speed dial, but you ain’t never been like this over mere ass. Who is she?”

“One of my teachers who isn’t willing to risk her career for me.”

“You do like a smart woman. Always have.”

“Right.”

He glanced around the restaurant, leaned in, and lowered his voice. “You still like that other stuff?”

“You still like Melanie Hale?”

“Damn, okay. You ain’t have to call my wife by her old name.”

“You didn’t have to ask no shit you already knew the damn answer to.”

“Man, look . . . I forgot you’re sensitive about that. You know I’m not judging you. I ain’t never been like that with

you. I'm just saying, she's a college professor. You think she'd be into it?"

"Her? Definitely not. I'm tripping, ain't I? We're supposed to be handling business and I'm sitting here thinking about a woman I'm not even with yet."

"Yet?"

"*Yet*. Oh, I'ma make her mine. Just might take me a minute."

"What about her not being down with what you like?"

"For her? I'll let it go."

"Daaaaaaamn."

"I know, man. I know."

## Nadia

"So you're not coming? But you bought a ticket!"

Instead of looking at Sharla, I kept my eyes on the road. "I know, but I just don't feel like going to that thing. Getting dressed up, having to be around people I don't know? And I'm not the biggest Joe fan."

When she didn't reply, I chanced a glance to see her staring at me with her mouth open.

"What?" I said.

"How the hell could you be a black female and not be a fan of Joe? I mean, I know you've always been a little different, and I honestly love that about you, but are you going to sit there behind the wheel of this car and say you are not a fan of the man who gave us *All the Things (Your Man Won't Do)*? Huh? Are you?"

I shrugged. "I'm just not a fan."

"Just like you're not a fan of sex, huh? I don't get it."

"You don't have to get it, but you also don't have to ridicule me about it."

"I'm not trying to—you know what? Fine. I'll go to the benefit without you. I'm not letting you stop my fun. And besides, I knew you'd back out. You always do. The only reason you're attending this event tonight is because it's expected of you as a professor."

"Isn't that why you're going, Dr. London? I'm sure your dean made your attendance sound as important as mine did."

"Maybe, but I actually like being around people anyway, unlike your predictably anti-social ass. Nadia, it's been a long time since you made this transformation. I really wish I could have my old friend back, the one who possessed an ounce of spontaneity. You're growing old before your time."

"Wow, so I look old now? *And* I'm boring?"

“You don’t *look* old, you *live* old. When’s the last time you went to a movie, ate out, went on a date, bought something that didn’t come in two pieces—pants and a jacket—to wear? You’re not necessarily boring just very, *very* predictable.”

I was done talking to her, because she’d hurt my damn feelings. Maybe I *was* predictable or living the life of an old woman, but I had great credit and a nice car and an apartment that was to die for. Predictability meant stability. I liked stability. I loved knowing what each day would bring. The alternative was hard. The alternative had broken me before in a way that my life now was luxurious to me.

Once I’d finally parked in front of Hood Hall, where the donor appreciation reception was being held, Sharla reached over, laying a hand on my arm. I fixed my eyes on my honey-skinned friend as she spoke.

“I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings. Sometimes I forget how you’re wired, how you have to deal with things in your own way and in your own time. You’ve been my girl since our freshman year of college right here on this campus, and I love you. I don’t want you to be mad at me.”

“I’m not. Now let’s go in here and get this over with.”

The reception was nice, but then again, it always was. In the three years I’d been teaching at Romey U, I’d never missed attending one of these, even though I found schmoozing with



rich people undesirable. But this time, I knew one of the donors, was his teacher, and was at least a little attracted to him.

Just a little.

So, as I made my way through the huge conference room that held hors d'oeuvres and glasses of wine, there was a lightness in my step and a sense of anticipation in my spirit. Would Mr. Moore be wearing a suit? Would his beautiful dreadlocks be hanging free or pulled back in a ponytail? Would he be happy to see me? Would he give me one of those smiles of his that made my stomach flutter? Although I didn't ask and he never told me he'd be there, I was sure he would. But he wasn't there. He never came.

## Nadia

I was torn between being disappointed about his absence from the reception and being intrigued. He'd missed an opportunity to be fawned over, bowed to, overly thanked for his contribution to the university when other donors lapped all of that attention right up. To top it off, I'd seen the donor report. Nathan Moore had donated more than anyone else, and he wasn't there. To me, that spoke volumes about his character, and made an attraction to him that was already undeniable progress to unrelenting. The reception was on a Friday night, and I spent both my waking and sleeping hours that weekend thinking not only of him but of the things Sharla had said to me on the car ride to campus. I did need to start living more. I was pre-aging myself, and maybe I wasn't really asexual. Okay, I definitely wasn't asexual. It was just that sex was a big part of my past, a past I couldn't seem to atone for no matter how hard I tried. A past I couldn't escape, because a part of me was still back there . . . with *him*.

So, I was a little off my game come Monday and relieved I was showing a movie to my 101 class, because I definitely didn't have the wherewithal to lecture.

Mr. Moore snuck in a little after class started, but that didn't bother me as much as my elation at seeing him. Up until that point, I'd started having some irrational thoughts about him maybe being mad at me for turning him down. Then I asked myself why I cared if he was mad. Hell, I didn't even know him, and he didn't know me. Nevertheless, his late arrival boosted my mood and even made me want to smile . . . a little.

As the movie—*The Matrix*—played, my mind wandered, rehashing what Sharla had said for the millionth time, and I asked myself if enough time had passed for me to be able to shift back to a semi-normal life, to let a little of the old me seep back into my pores.

I missed her, the old me. I missed her a lot despite the trouble she got me into.

Once the class time had drawn to an end, I stopped the movie and cut on the lights, announced that we would finish the movie when class met again. I was preoccupied with securing my DVD and turning the projector off when his voice made me flinch. I figured he'd come apologize for being late at the very least, so it wasn't the fact that he spoke, it was the timbre of his voice. It sent shockwaves through me.

“Dr. Day, I'd like to apologize for being late today.”

I was poised and ready to give him a snippy comeback until I looked up at him, at his tired eyes and the drawn expression he wore. Evidently, he had good reason to be late and my scaly heart ached for him. So I said, “I forgot to mention that your

daughter's intrinsic motivation, or lack thereof, could have been inherited from her mother.”

“What?” he replied, eyebrows knitted together.

“What we talked about the other day? You didn't understand how your daughter could be so unlike you. Is she like her mother?”

He lifted his eyebrows and nodded. “Smart, defiant, hard-headed. Yeah . . . that would describe her mother. I guess I forget that sometimes. Her mother's been gone for a long time.”

“I'm sorry,” I offered.

“No, it's okay. Val and I had a complicated relationship. Maybe I'll share more about it with you over that dinner we're going to have after I graduate.”

I gave him a smirk. “I never agreed to that.”

“You never disagreed, either.”

Shaking my head, I said, “Well, Mr. Moore, I need to get to my office.”

“You mind if I walk with you? There's something else I need to ask you about.”

I hesitated, then nodded. “Sure.”

As we left the auditorium, he said, “So after we watch the rest of the movie, you'll be doing a lecture about it, right?”

“Yes, The Psychology of *The Matrix*. It's one of my favorite lectures, and I cover motivation, too.”

“What made you incorporate that movie into the class?”

I shrugged as we reached my door. “I’ve always loved that movie and its messages. Thought I’d share what I’ve learned from it with my students.”

“My daughter loves that movie, too. Um . . . do you think she could sit in on your lecture?”

“Doesn’t she have school?”

“Yeah, but I’ll win dad of the year in her eyes if I can get her a seat in that auditorium for your lecture. Letting her skip school will only sweeten the pot.”

The thought of the young woman eagerly absorbing my knowledge made me smile. “Sure, she’s welcome to come.”

I was gifted with a new smile from him, a modest one that didn’t show his teeth. Nice. “Thank you.”

As I opened my office door, I heard him behind me saying, “Good, now go in there and bend over that desk so I can make *you* cum. I like it rough. Do you?”

I snatched around and stared at him. “What?” I squeaked.

“I said, I really am sorry for being late this morning. I know punctuality is important to you, as it is for me—”

A piercing tone blaring through the campus intercom system interrupted him and made my heart hurdle into my rib cage. In response, I grabbed Nathan Moore by the arm, yanked him into my office, glanced up and down the hall for more students but saw none, and slammed the door shut, locking it. Breezing past Nathan, I rushed to my desk, and ordered, “Help me barricade the door with this.”

We’d done that before he finally spoke. “What’s going on?”

I collapsed into my chair. “That was the active shooter tone. Either there’s a real emergency or this is a drill.”

“Oh.” He fell into one of the other chairs. “I remember them going over that a while back. But shouldn’t you know whether or not it’s a drill? Don’t they tell the staff?”

“People who are a part of the drill know. The rest of the staff are just told that there might be a drill during the month—oh! We need to keep our voices down and turn the lights off, too.”

He did, and then we sat there in the darkness of my office. Both silent. Me, trying to process what was happening and trying not to imagine him doing or saying something freaky to me.

I quickly found out what was on his mind.

“This is crazy. Having to do it, I mean,” he said softly.

“It is. It’s sad, really.”

“Yeah ...”

“Why were you late?” I asked, but I wasn’t sure why I asked it. I guess I just needed to say *something*.

“Uh, my son is sick. Well, he was sick all weekend, but he’s better now, so I managed to sneak out to class, but I overslept. Sleeping in his little bed is hard, but when he’s sick, he doesn’t let me out of his sight.”

“Oh, what was wrong with him?”

“Flu.”

“Poor baby. How old is he?”

“Ian’s ten.”

“I bet it’s hard being a single father. How long has your wife been deceased?”

“She wasn’t my wife. We were never married.”

“Oh.”

“And she wasn’t my son’s mother. She died in childbirth while having my daughter.”

“I see.”

“I know what you’re thinking.”

“I’m not thinking anything, Mr. Moore. There’s nothing to think.”

“You’re thinking I have two kids by two different women so I gotta be irresponsible as hell, right?”

“No, if I was thinking anything, I was thinking how admirable it is for you to be raising your kids as a single father. Does your son’s mom help you?”

“No, she doesn’t, but I have help. My mom lives with me. She makes sure they get to and from school most days, helps with the cooking since I’m a world-class struggle cook, keeps the house clean when the maid’s not there. Plus, Mecca, my daughter, has her own assistant. I ain’t superman. I just do the best I can.”

“And I’m sure your children appreciate everything you do for them. Again, admirable.”

“Just tryna do what’s right. That’s all I know.”

“You have trouble taking compliments?”

I heard him chuckle quietly. “Maybe I do. Thank you, Dr. Day.”

“You’re welcome.”

“How about you? Married? Kids?”

“No and no, and shouldn’t you have asked me about my marital status before asking me out, Mr. Moore?”

“Hmmm, you’re right. It’s just that you’re so beautiful, I guess I mixed up the proper order of things.”

“I see.”

“So, you’ve never been married?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Been busy getting that PhD, huh?”

“I’ve spent a fair amount of time pursuing my education, yes.”

“What do you do for fun?”

I froze, because I didn’t know the answer to that. Finally, I said, “Um . . . nothing,” answering truthfully.

“That’s not good. You’re young, gorgeous. You should be enjoying life.”

“How do you know I’m young? They say black women don’t age. I could be sixty.”

“Are you?” he asked.

“Would you still be interested in me if I was?”

“Hell, I’d be even more interested.”

“I’m twenty-nine.”



“Now I’m not just interested. I’m *obsessed*. A PhD-holding professor at twenty-nine. My God, Dr. Day . . . that is the sexiest thing I’ve *ever* heard.”

I’m pretty sure I was blushing at that point, but still said, “And who said I wasn’t enjoying life?”

“Are you?”

“Yes.”

“If you say so.”

I thought for a minute or so and came back with, “I hang out with my friends sometimes. I forgot about that.”

“Okay . . .”

“Yes, we went to a spoken word show just a few weeks ago.”

“Word? I went to one, too.”

“And I probably had more fun in my past than you could imagine.” I was being defensive, but I couldn’t help it. He was insinuating that I was . . . boring, just like Sharla did.

“All right,” came out on another chuckle, and that pissed me off.

“Why are you laughing? You don’t believe me?”

“I didn’t say that. It’s just . . . I can’t see it. I can’t see how your youth could’ve possibly been wilder than mine.”

“What was so wild about yours? Nasty sex, drinking, drugs?”

“Yeah, and all at the same time.”

“Same here.”

This time, he outright laughed.

I leaned forward in my seat, my eyes narrowed in his general direction. “You ever live in a van, by choice?”

“You lived in a van? Seriously?”

“Yep. The summer before my sophomore year of college. Me and my boyfriend at the time, we lived in a van, traveled all over. We’d park it in Wal-Mart parking lots at night, shower in fitness clubs or at truck stops. Panhandle for money—”

“Panhandle?! Come on now. You ain’t gotta lie to me, Dr. Day.”

“I’m not lying. My mom is basically a hippie. I was raised around weed and vegan food and freedom. Freedom of mind, body, and spirit. She didn’t believe in marriage, still doesn’t. Barely believes in monogamy. I adopted all of those beliefs and practices for a long time. Hell, weed was like a food group for me from the time I was sixteen.”

“Did you like it? Growing up like that?”

“Didn’t like it or dislike it. It was just all I knew. If you mean was I happy? I was. I was very happy, loved.”

“You liked living in a van . . . with your boyfriend?”

“Immensely.”

“Why’d you change, then? I mean, it’s obvious you don’t live any part of that lifestyle now.”

“Because . . . because things fell apart in a bad way. Couldn’t keep living like that if I wanted to.”

“So you don’t want to? You don’t miss that life?”

I sighed. “Sometimes, yes, but the memories of the bad outweigh the truth of the good for me.”

“The bad must’ve been really bad.”

“It was.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me, too.”

We were both quiet for a moment or two, and then he said, “Maybe you can get it back. Maybe you can start over or something. Build a life where you can have fun. After all, now you know what to avoid to keep things from going bad.”

I thought about that for a few seconds. “Hmm ...”

“Just a thought.”

“Yeah . . . what do *you* do for fun, Mr. Moore? Still drinking, partying, having nasty sex?” I really wanted to know about the nasty sex.

“I hang out with the fellas, spend time with my kids. There’s this jazz spot I like to go to.”

“On dates?” I really wanted to know about that, too.

“I actually haven’t been on a date in a long time, Dr. Day, and it looks like I’ll have to wait even longer since you’ve refused my invitation.”

“But you understand why, don’t you? I mean, if you’re serious about it, it really will have to wait until after you graduate.”

“So that’s a yes?” His voice had perked up considerably.

“I didn’t say that, but ...”

“But you’re thinking about it?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Good, and while you’re thinking about it, think about me opening your thighs and licking you until you melt all over my face.”

He didn’t say that. I *knew* he didn’t, and I was beginning to wonder if I was losing my entire mind. Of all the things to imagine him saying, why this stuff?

*Because you haven’t had sex in years. You’re young and horny! Duh.*

I shook my head, trying to clear it, and when I relocated my sanity, I caught the tail end of what he was actually saying.

“. . . I hope my persistence isn’t bothering you, but I can’t lie. I’m attracted to you, Dr. Day. I’d really like to get to know you outside of the classroom. Do you like to dance?”

The “all clear” tone sounded, and I breathed a sigh of relief. “Drill’s over,” I announced.

A second later the light popped back on.

Nathan.

He grabbed my desk to push it to where it usually sat while I blinked to adjust my eyes.

“Let me help,” I said.

“No, I got it.”

After my office was back to normal, we stood in the small space staring at each other until he finally said, “I should go. See you in class.”

“Yes,” I replied. “See you in class.”

Fifteen minutes of me sitting in my office staring at my closed door had passed when I picked up my phone and called Sharla. After she answered, I said, “Are you in class?”

“Yeah, they’re taking a test.”

“And you answered the phone?”

“Uh-huh. What’s up?”

“I’m going to the benefit.”

“For real? Good!”

“And I’m going to need you to help me find a dress.”

“Oh, that’ll be easy. We’ll just go to the old lady section of JC Penney.”

“Ha, ha, ha. I’m being serious. I need you to help me pick something out. Something like what you would wear.”

Silence from my friend, so I added, “I mean, I know no dress will fit me like it’ll fit you with all your curves and stuff, but—”

“Who is this? Put Nadia Angelique Day on the phone.”

“Sharla, really?”

“Girl, I’m flabbergasted. You’re serious?”

“Yes!”

“In that case, meet me at the mall at six. I know just the place.”

## Nathan

I had a habit of being talked into attending events I didn't really want to attend, not because I was antisocial or anything like that, but because I had so much going on, I was tired as hell all the time. Between being a single parent, a college student, and a businessman, I had little time for much else. But my friends were real friends who knew I needed down time, knew that I needed to balance my life, so they'd invite me to events and then nag my ass into accepting. This was one of those events, and my boy Luke was again the designated nagger. So there I sat at his table at some charity thing thrown by a woman's organization his wife, Melanie, or Mel, belonged to. Also sitting at Luke's and Mel's table was our buddy, Hart Abbott and his girl, Pia, another couple I didn't know, and Mel's sister, Tammy. I was pretty sure Mel was trying to hook me and Tammy up, and at least that told me Luke hadn't shared my business with her. She couldn't have known I had a thing for my professor.

Dr. Nadia Day.

Man, after spending that time in her dark office listening to her talk about a wild past that I wasn't convinced was really all that wild, I wanted to hear more. I wanted to learn more about her, because she was evidently more intriguing than I'd originally thought. Intriguing and beautiful, *gorgeous*, like a tightly budded flower. I would've given anything to watch her unfold.

"So, Nate, I have a question that Luke doesn't want me to ask you," Mel said, pulling my eyes from where they were unfocused on the middle of the bustling ballroom to her.

Luke threw his head back and groaned. "Baby, please. Don't do this."

"Do you like black women, or are you focused on making biracial kids like all those other football players?" she asked anyway.

My eyes widened. I knew she was referring to the infamous video of some current NFL players at a table with their non-black wives toasting to more light-skinned kids. "I *love* black women," was my answer. "All shapes and sizes."

Mel shot a look at her sister, who was right next to me, and hummed, "I heard that! You and Luke are a rare breed."

I shrugged. "Not really. I know plenty of athletes with black wives, they just don't get as much attention."

"Mm-hmm, have I formally introduced you to my big sister? Nate, this is Tammy. Tammy, this is Nate. You like older women, Nate?" Mel asked.

"Uh ..." I began, my eyes shifting to Luke, because what the hell?

He sat his ass there for forever long before saying, “Oh! Baby . . . Nate is kind of involved with someone right now.”

“Kind of?” Mel said.

Tammy, who was attractive but wasn't *Dr. Day* attractive, finally spoke up. “Mel, stop.” Then she turned to me. “Nate, I'm sort of involved, too, or at least as involved as I want to be. Mel just doesn't like him, so she's on a mission to find his replacement.”

“No, you said you and Tony the Tiger weren't serious, so I figured you could date around,” Mel returned.

“I *am* dating around . . . with Tony the Tiger,” Tammy countered.

Luke shook his head, and the only thought in my mind was who or what the hell was a Tony the Tiger?

I let my eyes wander the room as the two sisters continued their debate. When they landed on a vision in white, I adjusted in my seat. It didn't occur to me that she would be there or in that outfit or with makeup on. Dr. Day looked like she belonged on a billboard or the pages of a magazine or in my motherfucking bed.

Yeah, she *definitely* belonged in my bed.

Damn!

On automatic, I stood from the table and began moving in her direction. I heard a distant voice call my name—probably Luke—but I couldn't focus on that. I had to get to her, felt like I had everything to lose if I didn't.



# Nadia

I was so nervous to be stepping out anywhere in public wearing what I was wearing. I liked that it was a jumpsuit, because I didn't feel comfortable showing my legs, but this jumpsuit was white—a color I rarely wore. The bodice resembled lingerie, basically a bra with a lacy cut-out connecting it to the flowing pants. Sharla had picked it out and had to damn near drag me out of my apartment to this place. I felt uncomfortable in my gold heels and under the stares of what felt like everyone in the room. Sharla had also done my makeup, and I'd paid a visit to my barber to maintain my short natural. I looked . . . good? I even felt kind of sexy, but I couldn't help but wonder what these people were thinking, seeing me like this. I shouldn't have cared, but I did.

“Oh, I see Brooklyn! Let's head on over there and grab our seats, then I'm hitting the bar with these drink tickets,” Sharla said, grabbing my arm and pulling me through the crowded room to a table in the middle where I fell into my seat, thankful to be able to relieve the pain in my feet.

“Oh my gawd, Nadia! Girl! You look fabulous!” Brooklyn shrieked. “Sharla, you are a miracle worker!”

“Wow,” I said, then focused my attention on her husband.  
“Hi, Isaac.”

He smiled at me, his kind eyes twinkling as he said, “Good evening, Nadia.” He was neat, wore expensive clothes, but that Eastern-European accent of his always sounded out of place to me, contrasting his dark skin and strongly African features.  
“Aren’t you the cat’s chirp?”

“Meow, baby,” Brooklyn corrected him.

“Oh, yes. Meow,” he said, that smile unwavering.

I returned his smile, thanked him, and shifted my attention back to his wife. “Brooklyn . . . you act like I walk around in a paper sack all the time.”

“That’s not what I was trying to say. It’s just that I haven’t seen you look so feminine in forever! Thank God for you, Sharla!”

I rolled my eyes as Sharla graciously accepted Brooklyn’s accolades. Then I spoke to our other table mates—Brooklyn’s mom and a couple that ran in the same social circle as Brooklyn and Isaac, i.e., rich folks. Sharla was pointing out some guy to me who was supposed to be fine but was just mediocre in my opinion, when I heard a voice say, “Dr. Day.”

My heart started shuffling to some unheard song as I turned around in my seat and let my eyes glide up his body. Black tuxedo, ridiculously long dreads hanging free, an astonished expression covering his face.

He was absolutely beautiful.

Exceedingly so.

“M-Mr. Moore?” It was definitely a question, because I wasn’t entirely sure it was him at all, or if I was me, or if I was having a visual hallucination to accompany the auditory ones I’d been experiencing.

“Yeah, it’s me. Guess I *do* look different in this, huh?”

“Mm-hmm,” I hummed. And that was it, the full extent of my cognitive abilities at that moment. That was all I had.

“You look . . .” he licked his thick lips, his eyes searing into mine. “*Wow.*”

“Um . . . thanks?” I said.

Cue awkward silence and mutual gawking.

“Um, I’m Dr. Sharla London, a colleague and good friend of Dr. Day’s.”

Thank goodness for Sharla.

“I’m Nathan Moore. I’ve had the privilege of being one of Dr. Day’s students this semester.”

“Really?” Sharla gushed; then she said something else that my foggy brain couldn’t make out. When I finally snapped out of my stupor, she was introducing Nathan to our table mates.

“Well, I just wanted to speak and get my bid in for a dance with you once the show starts,” Nathan said, his attention on me as he let his eyes drop from my face to the exposed skin of my chest. When his gaze made its way back to my face, he gave me a lopsided grin.

My eyes were glued to his in spite of my desire to look away. “Dance? I—”

I was interrupted by the mistress of ceremonies speaking into the microphone, asking that everyone take their seats.

“I’ll be back ...” Nathan said. “For that dance.”

“Here, take my seat. We have a couple of extra ones, so I’ll just sit in one of those,” Sharla suggested.

With a gorgeous wide smile, Nathan thanked her and took the seat next to mine. I stared at him for a moment, butterflies swarming my stomach as if I’d never been in this man’s presence before, as if I hadn’t been locked up in a dark office with him just days earlier. He winked at me, turning to face the stage, and after blinking a few times, I did the same.

If I had to take a pop quiz on what happened on that stage up until there was a short intermission before Joe’s performance, I would’ve failed, lost my scholarship, and been kicked out of school. Sitting next to this man smelling like he was smelling and looking like he was looking, I couldn’t think. All I could do was breathe him in and feel his vibrations. Shit, I sounded like Ginger, but it was the truth. I could feel him without touching him. His nearness was unnerving and electric, and it took everything in me not to look at him or touch him. But when the lights came up, I felt his eyes on me, and slid mine to him.

“You look absolutely beautiful,” he said, once he held my eyes. “I can’t get over it.”

Somehow, I managed to say, “How do I usually look?”

“Beautiful, but in an . . . educated way. I don’t know. This is just different. And I like it.”

“Because I’m uncovered? Because you can see all this skin?”

He shook his head. “No. Because I think I see a little of that girl you told me about—the old you. The free you.”

The free me? Something about that pierced me. It didn’t make me mad. It made me wonder, so I asked, “If you think I’m not free, why are you interested in me? Do you like slaves or something?”

He tilted his head to the side, a look of surprise on his face. “If what you told me about your past is true—”

“No *if*. It’s the absolute truth, Mr. Moore.”

“In that case, I want to liberate that woman. The one who smoked weed and lived in a van and was a damn freak in the sheets.”

“Did I say I was a freak in the sheets?”

“You did mention something about having experienced nasty sex, remember?”

“Did I?”

He smiled. “You did.”

I shrugged, somehow falling into the natural rhythm of flirting with this man. “I guess I did, but what makes you think you can make me be who I once was? What gives you that power to take me back to that woman? I’ve grown, matured. I’m not her anymore.”

“*You*. You’re gonna give me that power, because you *want* me to liberate her. You miss being her. I mean, you do miss having nasty sex . . . don’t you?”

The lights dimmed, and music filled the ballroom as the stage lights began to dance, eventually focusing on the mononymous crooner. I first shifted my focus to Joe as he sang *Stutter*, then I let my eyes peruse my immediate surroundings for the first time since sitting down. Everyone at the table was staring at us, and I mean *everyone*. Sharla and Brooklyn both lifted a brow at me, signaling their amusement. I was just about to pretend I needed the restroom when Nathan leaned in close to me, his breath caressing my ear as he whispered, “Full disclosure, you’re sexy in those suits you wear to class. But in this? You are downright sinful. I can’t tell you the things I’m fantasizing about doing to you right now.”

I wasn’t sure if that was my mind or his actual words, but still, I replied, “Please tell me.”

Silence.

Shit, it *was* my imagination.

“You really want to know, Dr. Day?”

Maybe it wasn’t my imagination after all.

“Mm-hmm.”

“I don’t think you’re ready for that. Graduation, dinner, then maybe I’ll tell you. Right now, dance with me.”

It was an order rather than a request, and oddly enough, I liked that little role reversal. So I watched him stand and when he reached for my hand, I obliged him, following him to the crowded dancefloor, and stepping into his arms. Joe was now

performing *Love Scene*, and Nathan Moore moved fluidly as he led me in our dance. I closed my eyes and leaned into him, long having forgotten that he was my student or that there were other people around, and that I was essentially half-naked.

He moved a hand from my waist to my back, warming my skin. Then he leaned in, pressing his mouth to my ear. “Mmm, you feel . . . I can’t describe how you feel right now. I could easily fall for you. Hell, I think I already am.”

I stopped dancing, backed up a little, and stared at him, hoping, *wishing* he’d actually said what I thought he’d said. “Really?” My voice was so thin, I doubted he’d heard me over the music.

But he did. “Yes, really,” he said, pulling me back to him.

“Mr. Moore?”

“Yes?”

“You’re gonna get me fired.”

“I promise I won’t. I can wait until after I graduate to make you mine.”

I believed he could wait. I truly believed he possessed that level of restraint. However, I was skeptical about my own self-control.

We danced through three more songs of varying tempos, but our tempo never changed. My head never left his chest, his hands never left my body, and my heart rate never slowed down.

## Nadia

“So you really think we believe that?” Sharla asked, as we climbed out of Brooklyn’s Escalade. “Honey, that dance y’all shared told a different story.”

“You *should* believe it, because it’s true. Dance or no dance, there is nothing going on between me and Nathan Moore. He is my student. I’m not about to lose my job for him or any other man,” I replied.

“You crazy as hell. I’d risk a job, a hobby, and change religions for a man that fine,” Sharla said, as we trekked toward the building. “Shit, those dreads alone would earn him unlimited pussy. I ain’t never seen a man that sexy before in my life!”

“As crazy as Sharla is sounding right now, I can’t even argue with her. That man was some kind of fine! Damn, Nadia! You have the restraint of a Navy whore,” was Brooklyn’s contribution.



“What does that even mean? What is a Navy whore? And why would they have restraint?”

“Shit, I don’t know what I’m saying. That Nathan was so fine, he’s wrecked my brain cells,” Brooklyn said, garnering a cackle and a high five from Sharla.

Shaking my head, I sped up, making it to the door before them.

Stepping inside, my eyes widened. The space looked good, *really* good, but then again, my mommy didn’t play when it came to business. This storefront, which was attached to my mom’s sex shop, had been a clothing boutique until it closed down a few months back. Ever the eagle-eyed businesswoman, my mom quickly leased it with intentions of holding various grown and sexy events there. The night’s event was the first of many to come, according to her.

“I can’t believe I almost missed out on this! You need to do better, Nadia. I mean, why didn’t you tell us about this?” Brooklyn asked, her eyes glittering with excitement. “Erotic paint and sip? Hell, I might get me in an orgasm tonight. Can’t tell you how long it’s been since I had one of those. Oh! Let’s sit over here near the open space in the middle. That’s where the model will be, right?”

So yeah . . . I didn’t put out the flyers or tell my friends, but they found out anyway, thanks to my mom’s social media advertising. In fact, according to my mom, the event was sold out. So I didn’t feel too guilty about the fact that the stack of flyers had taken up residence on my kitchen counter.

As Sharla and I followed Brooklyn, Sharla quipped, “The old man doesn’t give you orgasms? His mouth broke or

something?”

Brooklyn stopped in her tracks, and I sighed. We all met in our University 101 class at Romey U when we were eighteen, green as grass, and the only thing we had in common was our love for the over-abundance of black men on campus. We were all hot in the tail, had come from different walks of life, and somehow became best friends, but the one constant was Sharla and Brooklyn fighting. They'd been bickering for years, and it was damn exhausting.

“No, but he's on punishment, and when he's on punishment, so is my clit,” Brooklyn responded.

I kind of tuned the rest of their conversation out, because I knew how it would go. Sharla would ask Brooklyn what poor Isaac had done to get put on punishment and Brooklyn would give some dumb reason which would be directly connected to her insecurities, as unfounded as they were. Same old, same old. Her marriage made me think my mom's way of life was best for me, too. Sex, even love—which I still didn't really believe in—but no marriage.

“You girls made it!” Mommy gushed, entering the studio space from a door at the back of the room in a white, off-the-shoulder maxi-dress that took my breath away. I had to wonder if I'd look that peaceful and content if my life hadn't jumped the tracks years ago.

“Now, you know I wasn't gonna miss out on this, and I hear your fine man will be here modeling, too? Come on now, Lovely! You know me better than that,” Sharla declared.

Pulling Sharla into a hug, my mother said, “Well, when Nadia dropped by to pay for three tickets, I figured one was

for you, but I also thought maybe your man would be keeping you occupied and you'd stand me up."

Sharla backed out of my mom's arms and rolled her eyes. "My dearest Lovely, you know I ain't got no regular man. If I did, you'd be first on my list of people to inform."

"And you? You still got yours, or have you given that man a heart attack?" Mommy asked Brooklyn as she pulled her into a hug.

"She's trying her best to give him one, that's for sure," I muttered.

Brooklyn shot me a look that I pretended not to notice as Mommy moved from her to me, hugging me and kissing my cheek. "Thanks for coming, my love," she said.

"Wouldn't be anyplace else, Mommy," I replied.

"Mm-hmm," she hummed, because she knew me and was aware of my desire to be as far away from her shop as possible. "Well girls, get comfortable. Braeden and our other models will be serving wine in a few." She lowered her voice, adding, "And I have some good weed if anyone is interested."

"So Braeden really is modeling, huh?" I asked, trying to deflect from the weed comment, because I knew both Sharla and Brooklyn would partake, and I didn't feel like dealing with either of them while they were high.

"Yes, he is. Nude. All the models will be nude, but I'm gonna make sure my Braeden stands where you girls can paint him. You're in for a treat." Mommy winked at us and left.

"Awww, shit! I'm ready!" Sharla shrieked.

Sooooo, Braeden had a big dick.

A *huge* dick.

The biggest of dicks.

His dick was the biggest dick I had ever seen in my entire-damn-life.

Like, it needed its own zip code, deserved its own area code. Hell, his penis probably had a key to my mother's house and knew her Wi-Fi password. I was sure his dick had a first, middle, and last name plus a knee and an elbow to go along with the head and shaft.

Got. Dayum!

And it just felt wrong to stare at it like I was staring at it knowing he was my mother's man, but hell, how could I *not* stare at it? My eyes were glued to it through no will of my own.

"Girl, that damn thang is a work of art! Look at that network of veins! I feel like giving your mother a standing ovation right here and now for handling all that meat. Shit!" Sharla mumbled under her breath as she moved the paint brush indiscriminately over the canvas, her eyes glued below Braeden's waist.

We were supposed to be painting our own individual versions of a portrait of Braeden's chiseled chocolate body, but

all that was on Sharla's canvas was a blob of brown paint. Both my wine glass and my canvas were completely empty as I stared at the man in awe. Brooklyn had her phone out taking pictures of him while her mouth hung open. And on her canvas? A stick figure with a long stick-figure dick.

I felt sorry for the other models, because Braeden and his enormous, erect penis had stolen the show. All eyes were on him, and my mother could be seen in a corner near the back of the softly-lit room sporting a wide grin. She knew what the hell she was doing. Once the word got out about Braeden's ginormous peen, future versions of this event would sell out in seconds.

"I would suck the skin off that thing, be gagging and choking and grinning all at the same time. Damn, I'm hot right now. Miss Lovely is my spirit animal!" Brooklyn declared.

"It ain't that big," I lied.

"I bet he knows how to work that thang too, be having you walking sideways and shit," Sharla said, ignoring me, but then again, she was pretty much in a dick trance, so I doubted she'd heard me at all.

"Mm-hmm, and I bet it smells good, like essential oils and Shea butter," Brooklyn added.

Of course they'd agree about *this*.

When the event was finally over, I was slightly tipsy, but had to admit I'd had fun with my girls and the pleasure of viewing Braeden's blessedness. When I made it home and collapsed into bed without undressing, I was sure I'd spend my slumber dreaming about my mother's man, but instead, I

dreamt of Nathan Moore and woke up feeling hot and bothered.

## Nathan

She was off her game, something I didn't even think was possible for her. Oh, she still knew her shit, and the lecture flowed with ease. Every word that left her gorgeous mouth was compelling. But the enthusiasm in her voice wasn't reaching her eyes. Something was wrong. I'd watched her enough, observed her enough, to know that. Hell, I'd studied her like *she* was the subject of this class, pulled all-nighters, read the study guides, would ace any test she chose to give, if and when she chose to give me one. There was a magnet inside of her that had to be designed just for my attraction, and I wasn't even trying to fight it.

I glanced at Mecca, whose eyes were darting between Dr. Day and the slides being projected in front of us. She was in a trance, listening with her eyes, her alternate hearing tool, to Dr. Day expound on the extrinsic motivation given to Neo by the oracle that became a powerful intrinsic motivation. Shit, so was I, but mingled with my fascination was concern. I wanted

to know all about that pain hiding behind the good professor's eyes so I could relieve it.

Mecca's hand flew as she took notes on her tablet. You'd think she was enrolled in the class instead of me. I was happy she had the opportunity to be here with me, to gain this knowledge on a subject she loved, and as an added bonus, to see an intelligent, highly-educated black woman in action. That had to be a good motivator for her.

Once class was over, Mecca's eyes finally shifted to me. I saw excitement and euphoria and all kinds of positive stuff in them as she smiled and signed: *That was great!*

Returning her smile, I said, "I know."

Once the room had almost cleared out, I approached Dr. Day as she was packing up her stuff. Mecca was right behind me. "Um, great lecture . . . as usual," I said.

She jumped in her seat and gave me a startled expression. "Mr. Moore! Um, didn't see you standing there. Uh, thank you."

"You're welcome," I said, staring at her. She looked tired, her face, wan. Something was definitely wrong with her.

Mecca touched my back and I said, "Oh, and this is my daughter, Mecca," as Mecca stepped up beside me. Turning to my daughter, I added, "Mec, this is Dr. Day."

Dr. Day smiled a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes and proffered her hand to my daughter. "Nice to meet you, Mecca. I hope you enjoyed today's lecture. I hear you're a *Matrix* fan. So am I, obviously."

Mecca's eyes wandered our immediate area a bit before she raised her hands and turned to me, signing so fast I could barely keep up. But I managed to relay her response. "She says the lecture was great and she thanks you for letting her sit in today."

There was a pause from my teacher as my daughter's impairment, and I use that term loosely, registered in her brain. In response, she signed: *It was no problem. You're welcome in my classroom anytime.*

She knew sign language? Well, that shit made my heart race and my chest tighten, and I'll be damned if my dick didn't get a little hard. Just at the base, though.

Mecca thanked her again in sign language and then pulled out her phone, turning her back to us.

"You know sign language?" I asked, moving closer to the beautiful, reserved woman.

"Yes. I do."

"Why—how?"

"Well, when I was younger, my mother made me and my sister learn a foreign language of our choice. I chose American Sign Language."

"What'd your sister choose?"

"French. Hey, your daughter is beautiful. She looks a lot like you."

"Thanks, but like I said before, that's where the similarities end."



“No, it’s not. I can tell she’s bright, intelligent. She got that from you, too.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Um . . . I really enjoyed our dance at the benefit, and I can’t stop thinking about how good you looked and felt.”

Her eyes widened. “Mr—”

“I know, I know. Hey, are you okay? You seem a little preoccupied.”

“I’m-I’m fine. See you later, Mr. Moore.”

And then she left.

## Nadia

I sat behind the wheel of my car and stared at the building before me, trying to convince myself that coming here, *being* here, was a good idea when I knew it wasn't. But this was the only way my troubled mind would be eased, and perhaps, I could rid my brain of the preoccupation that was evident according to Mr. Nathan Moore. I was worried, concerned about what Nurse Flores had told me when I called a few days earlier about a change in the resident's condition, a negative change, and upon her urging, I was here, on the parking lot, watching nurses and doctors and family members pass in and out of the clean glass doors.

This was something I wanted to do, *needed* to do, but I was . . . I was scared. So scared. I was a damn coward, had been for years at that point. Petrified at the thought of facing my handiwork head on.

My eyes shifted from the doors to the plot of browning grass in front of the building, the beautiful potted poinsettias

flanking the door, and I nearly jumped into the back seat when the ringing of my phone filled my car. Checking the screen on my dashboard, I answered it, and the next thing I heard was my sister's voice in surround sound.

In response to my hello, she said, "So I heard you went to Mommy's paint thing and you didn't even take me!"

Rolling my eyes, I said, "I didn't even want to go. Sharla and Brooklyn basically dragged me there. Anyway, don't you have a car? You could've come."

"I couldn't drive myself because there was wine there and I would've gotten drunk!"

"Ging, did you really call me just for this?"

"No, I also wanted you to know I found my soul mate. He's gorgeous and his dick—"

"Wait, when did you meet this guy?"

"A week ago."

"And you've already had sex with him?!"

"Yeah, why?"

I sighed again. "Never mind. What's his name?"

"Jamaal . . . with three a's."

"His last name isn't Williams, is it?" I asked, hoping she'd say no.

"Yeah! How'd you know?"

*Aw, shit.* "Tall, dark-skinned, dick leans to the left?"

"Wait, you've screwed him?!"

“Hell no! But Brooklyn has. He was her boyfriend for like three years.”

“Damn . . . I knew he looked familiar! She used to bring him to your place all the time when you had that little apartment on Fir Street, back when you were in grad school.”

“Yeah, that’s him. He still working at Best Buy?”

“Yep. He’s a manager now. You think Brooklyn’s gonna be mad? I mean, she’s *your* BFF, not mine. And she’s married now anyway. She won’t care, will she?”

She’d care, especially with how unsatisfied she was in her marriage, so I said, “She’s most def gonna care, Ginger.” As irrational as that was, I knew it to be a fact.

My baby sister blew a breath into the phone. “Well, like I said, he’s my soul mate. I’m sure of that, so she’ll just have to get over it.”

“I assure you she won’t. She was really into Jamaal.”

“Well, why the hell isn’t she with him, then?!”

“She was young and stupid when they were together. You know Brooklyn. She’s always making dumb decisions, but if she had it to do over again, she wouldn’t let him go. That I know for sure.”

“Humph. That’s her bad. I ain’t letting him or his leaning tower of penis go for her.”

“Ging—”

“Oh! He’s calling me now. I’ll talk to you later, Noddy.”

“Okay, just . . . just stay away from Brooklyn.”

“I don’t hang with her anyway. Like I said, she’s your friend, not mine.”

She hung up before I could reply with another warning, and I thought to myself that I really didn’t want to have to jump in a fight between a good friend and my sister. I really, really didn’t. Then I told myself they were all grown folks and I had enough shit of my own to deal with. I didn’t have time for that foolishness. Plus, with the way Ginger’s flighty ass was, she’d probably be on to a new soul mate in an hour.

I sat in my car for another couple of minutes before turning my phone off and slipping it in my purse. A moment later, I was making unsure steps toward the building. Then I was inside, feeling anxious as my feet met the shiny linoleum floor. And then I was there, in her room, by her bed. Nurse Flores had said she’d caught a bug and lost weight. I could see the evidence of that. She looked so tiny, a shadow of the hefty, happy woman from my past. Her hair was white now and fashioned in two braids. Her eyes were glued to the television on the wall. I rested my hand on hers and she turned her head, her eyes almost instantly flickering with recognition. She’d lost the ability to speak years earlier, but her eyes spoke volumes. So did her tears. She was happy to see me. And I was happy to see her.

As long-repressed tears wet my cheeks, I hung my head and whispered, “I am so sorry. So sorry.”

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“Hello?! This you, Nod-ja?” he drawled loudly.

I pulled the phone from my ear and frowned. He was the last person I expected to hear from. Hell, he was *always* the last person I expected to hear from when I heard from him. “Dad?” I squeaked.

“Yeah!”

“Wow, um . . . what’s going on? Everything okay?”

“Something gotta be wrong for me to call my little girl?”

“No, but . . . you don’t usually call me, Dad.”

“Shit, *you* don’t call *me*!”

Why did he have to be so loud?

I rolled my eyes. “Because *you* don’t call *me*. It’s not like we have a real relationship.”

“You right, you right, and that’s my fault as much as it is your mama’s. But I’ma fix that. I wanna come see you!”

“You do?”

“Yeah! I wanna come see you, spend some time with you. I know you grown and shit, but it ain’t too late for us to get to know each other. You my only daughter.”

I sat in silence, hating myself for being happy about this bone he was throwing me. The truth of the matter was, I’d always wanted a closer relationship with my sperm donor. This conversation was a dream come true for me.

“Are you coming alone?” I asked.

“You want me to come alone?”

“Well, I’d like to finally meet my brother.”

“Then he’s coming, too. I’ll get us a hotel room so we won’t be all up in your place and shit.”

I smiled as I queried, “Okay, when are you coming?”

He gave me the details of his visit, and then we ended the call. For the rest of that day, I couldn’t stop smiling.

## Nathan

I bodied my final, so there was a little extra swag in my step when I made the trip from my seat to the front of the room to hand in my test.

When she looked up me, a smile almost instantly spread across her face and the heaviness I'd seen weighing her down over the last couple of weeks was missing. That made me smile in response to her, "Mr. Moore . . . already finished? I must've made this exam too easy."

"Nah, Dr. Day," I replied, "it wasn't easy. It's just that you're such a good teacher; the answers came to me easily."

Her smile spread all the way to her eyes. "I'm glad you think so, Mr. Moore. It was a pleasure having you in my class these few weeks."

Damn, that made my heart speed up, but I still managed to lean over the table and lower my voice, lock my eyes with hers, and say, "The pleasure will be all mine when we have



dinner, Dr. Day, and after you've gotten comfortable enough with me for me to show you exactly what I have to offer, it will *really* be my pleasure."

I held her gaze for a moment, and then I left.

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"Aye, man . . . I just wanted you to know I'm proud of you, little brother. First college graduate in the family. You doing it, Nate."

"Doing what?" I asked, as I sat on the side of my bed, staring at myself in the dresser mirror. Half the kids graduating with me were planning to wear jeans and sneakers to the ceremony, and there I was, in a suit, but this day was too special to me and my entire family to dress down.

"Everything you said you'd do: NFL, businesses, a college degree. You're doing it all."

I shrugged. "Nothing to it but to do it. Ain't that what Charlie used to say?"

"Yeah, but he didn't follow his own advice. I was too damn dumb to follow it, but you? You were always the smart one.

Just like your father. You lucked out in that department for sure.”

I scoffed as I shook my head. “Naw, man . . . mine was a deadbeat just like yours and Charlie’s. He just happened to be an educated one, but he wasn’t intelligent enough to be a father to me.”

“You ever hear from him?”

“Not since his ass showed up at that game a few years back, acting a fool trying to get to me. I wanted to curse his ass out so bad . . .”

“I thought you *did* curse him out. Didn’t you?”

“Not right then. I got his number, promised to call him, and when I did, I cursed him out and told him if I ever saw him again, I was gonna kick his ass, father or not.”

My oldest brother chuckled. “Folks don’t know you be tryna be a savage underneath that clean-cut image you done built.”

“Tryna be? And how am I clean cut with dreads?”

“The dreads are cosmetic, and you know it. That’s that hoe-pulling hair. You just using it to get women.”

I laughed. “Same old ‘Nard, huh? You stay with the jokes.”

“Got to. Otherwise, I’d lose it up in here. Look, I ain’t gon’ keep you. This is your big day. Enjoy it and tell Mama I’ll see her next weekend.”

“All right, holler at you, man.”

I ended the call and tried to forget why he was locked up this time as I hoped against hope that he was really making a

change. A real change. He was always cool and calm, and hell, *nice* when he was behind bars, but all that tended to disappear when he regained his freedom. Shit, sad as it was, I liked him better as an inmate.

## Nadia

I hated meetings.

I mean, I truly despised them, and more often than not, found them to be a total and complete waste of time during which information that would be more efficiently shared via email was disseminated. This meeting was no different, thirty minutes spent listening to the psychology department chair, Dr. Bragg, drone on about a sex abuse forum we were hosting. Yes, it was a good event and a much needed one, but was a full-on meeting really required? Plus, his tone was so monotonous, I had to fight not to fall asleep in that short amount of time.

Once we were dismissed, I rushed back to my office where I knew Clark was waiting for me, hopefully with my gown, tam, and hood in hand since I'd forgotten to bring them with me that morning for the graduation ceremony which was to be held that evening.

Nathan Moore's graduation ceremony.

Of course he wasn't the only person graduating, but he was the only person whose graduation directly impacted me—*dinner, whatever you want.*

Those words almost felt like a vow when he spoke them, a vow *and* a warning, but I had no idea why. I just knew that I wanted to have dinner with him, and the 'whatever I wanted' part? I was ashamed to admit what came to mind with those words. Despite my best efforts, my attraction to the man was completely indisputable, and to be honest, I had been looking forward to this day, the day he was no longer my student, the day pursuing something with him would cease to be taboo or pose any risks for me.

The long and short of it? I was horny, hot and bothered at the thought of him touching me in even the most innocent way.

Yeah, the asexual thing had flown all the way out the window and was now miles away.

I rushed inside my office to find not only Clark sitting opposite my desk and my gown, et al hanging beside a bookshelf, but a huge bouquet of roses on my desk in a glass vase.

Evidently, seeing the confusion in my eyes as I stared at the flowers, the young man said, "Those were delivered a few minutes ago."

"Oh?" was my response, my eyes still glued to the lavender-colored blossoms, my feet nailed to the same spot on the floor.

“Yes, and there’s a card.”

My eyes jumped to his face.

“I didn’t read it,” he said, as if I’d made the accusation verbally, but I *was* thinking it.

“Of course you didn’t. Um, thanks for bringing my gown.”

“No problem. Your keys are on your desk.”

“Great, that’ll be all.”

He stood to leave, and as he passed by me, he said, “See you later, Dr. Day.”

I shut and locked the door and rushed to my desk, snatching the card from its little holder and then falling into my chair. Taking a deep breath, I read the card:

*Today I graduate from being a student to a teacher. Can’t wait to give you your first lesson.*

*Nathan*

I read the card three times, trying to figure out what he meant. What exactly was he planning on teaching me? How to be a person I’d worked hard not to be? Well, good luck to him on that.

Sitting there for another five or six minutes, staring from the card to the roses and back, I finally shook my head and

decided to freshen up my lip gloss before donning my robe for the ceremony that was only a couple of hours away.

“Tiffany Mangrum . . . Alan Marshall . . . Marc-David Mellinger . . .”

I sat erect on the stage inside the Miller-Fitz Arena on the Romey University campus—home of the Romey Rattlers basketball team—as the fall graduates received their diplomas, clapping and smiling at the hoots and screams of family members who ignored the instructions given at the beginning of the ceremony to hold their applause until all names had been called. Happy faces in Romey royal blue caps and gowns filed across the stage, ritualistically shaking hands and posing for pictures. I was not a department chair or the school’s president, nor was I on the board of trustees, so I remained seated, having a passive role in the festivities and afforded a great on-stage view of the students seated on the arena’s floor and their family and friends who filled the bleachers.

“Morgan Middleton . . . Graham Montgomery . . . Nathan Moore . . .”

The moment his name rolled off of Dr. Benjamin’s, the Dean of the School of Business’s, tongue, I involuntarily grew hyper-attentive. I could hear a couple of people cheering for him as my eyes followed him across the stage, the blue gown hiding his body, manicured dreadlocks flowing from his cap.

He was wearing a smile as he strode to his destiny but turned his head as he shook Dr. Benjamin's hand, quickly spotted me, and smiled wider. I returned his smile, but quickly dropped it as I wondered if anyone was paying attention to our exchange. No one was, of course, because I was being overly cautious and overthinking things and assuming people cared about what I was doing when people rarely did. I was boring and predictable. Everyone knew that. Even *I* knew it.

My eyes followed him down the steps on the side of the stage, down the arena floor and to his seat where he turned and waved at someone in the bleachers before sitting down, and for the life of me, I found myself smiling again, thinking to myself that if he really wanted to teach me something, I was almost one hundred percent on board with being his student, no matter the lesson.

## Nathan

After graduation, came Christmas. After Christmas, Mecca caught the flu. After Mecca got over the flu, my Mom caught it, meaning I had little to no help with the kids or the household stuff. In the midst of all that, I didn't have the wherewithal to reach out to Dr. Day, and once my life began to settle down, I was sure I'd missed my window of opportunity with her. I'd talked all that shit and then let the ball drop, and even though my circumstances were extenuating and a part of the single dad life, I knew this woman didn't play around. Nadia Day was a woman with unflinching standards, and I was positive my radio silence had undone any leeway I'd made with her, so I decided to wait until the time was right, because it just didn't feel right yet.

In the meantime, I was bored as hell. Yes, I had businesses and partnerships, lots of passive streams of income, for the most part, but sitting around checking emails and accounts was not going to work for me, so I called Luke to see if he was okay with my silent partnership in the sports agency becoming



a vocal one. Next thing I knew, I had my own corner office at the North Sports Agency. So there I sat, going over information on a couple of stand-out SWAC football players.

Now *this*, I could get with. This would work for me and would serve to occupy my mind until my gut told me it was time to relaunch my “get Dr. Day into my life” campaign.

Closing a folder, I leaned back in my seat and smiled, then a thought hit me, and I picked up my phone, dialed the number, and waited

“Hello!”

I pulled the phone from my ear a little, and replied with, “Um, Tootie?”

“Yeah . . . who dis?”

“Nate.”

“Aw, hey Nate!”

“Hey, how you been? Still doing good?”

“I’m all right.”

I cleared my throat. “That’s good. Uh, I was wondering if you’d given anymore thought to what I asked you a while back, about Ian. I know you needed time to think and everything . . .”

“I’m still thinking, but you know what will speed up the process, don’t you?”

I sighed. “You’re serious about that? That’s really what you want, Tootie?”

“Do it sound like I’m playing? You know me better than that, Nate. You know you do. You know what I’m about!”

“Yeah, I definitely know what you’re about, and I’m willing to do that, but you’re going overboard, don’t you think?”

“Nate, I told you what it’ll take. If you want this to happen, pay me what I asked for.”

Then she hung up, and I instinctually shifted my gaze to Ian’s picture on my desk. I couldn’t believe that grimy, sorry-ass woman had given birth to him and was trying to sell off her parental rights.

I laid my phone on the desk and shook my head, then picked it up, said fuck timing and my gut, and dialed another number, making a call that I hoped would turn the frown that was now tattooed on my face into a smile.

## Nadia

It’d been nearly a month since graduation, I hadn’t heard a word from Nathan Moore, and I hated myself for knowing that. I hated the fact that not hearing from him was ruining my mood. I hated that a new semester had begun, and I kept catching myself staring at the seat in my 101 class that he once

occupied despite the fact that a new student had taken up residence in it. I despised the fact that if I closed my eyes, I could smell him. Was appalled at daydreams of threading my fingers through his hair. But more than anything, I was pissed at myself for letting my guard down and almost really letting him into my heart. If he was truly into me and eager to get to know me, it wouldn't have taken him a month to call me. He could've easily called the university and asked to be transferred to my office. If I was in class, he could've left a message. He could've come to visit my office in person, but he'd done none of that, and as I dismissed class, gathered the quizzes, and made my way to my office, I decided that was the last time I'd let myself have silly fantasies or thoughts of being with a man, any man, let alone Nathan Moore. As I stated before, I had good credit, a nice car, an excellent career, and a fabulous apartment. I didn't need a man.

Especially not *that* man.

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He called.

While I was in class, he called and left a message: "*Hey, I hope everything's good with you. I know it's been a while since*

*we last spoke. Life's been crazy, but I'd still like to have dinner with you. This is Nathan Moore, by the way. My number is 615-555-8812. You can call me back if you'd like. All right . . . bye."*

Now I hated myself even more for the relief that had flooded me at the mere fact that he called and the elation that threatened to overtake me at hearing his voice, knowing that he was still interested in me. But even with those feelings inundating me, I was still done. I was still reverting back to my original, no-man plan. So I buried myself in my work, looking over the quizzes and deciding I'd grade them myself, preparing for my next class, checking emails, and then there was a knock at my door. Sure it was Clark or some student who hadn't bothered to make an appointment—something I absolutely abhorred—I yelled “Come in!” through the closed door and didn't bother looking up from my computer screen when I heard the door ease open, filtering in the hallway noises. But then again, I didn't have to look up. His scent announced him. That, and his energy. His aura.

I was *really* sounding like Ginger now.

I first closed my eyes in an attempt to calm my thudding heart. Then I opened them and slid them towards where he'd turned to close the door behind himself, my eyes widening at the suit he wore. When he turned to face me with a serious look on his face, I took him in—gorgeous navy and dark tan plaid suit, a shirt underneath in an opposing pattern of blues, and a blue and tan tie in yet another pattern, neat goatee and mustache, dreads pulled back into a ponytail.

Damn.

My insides were melting more and more by the second, but still, I managed to swallow and say, “Mr. Moore . . . what can I do for you?” in a rather even voice.

Sliding his hands into the pockets of those slacks that hugged his muscular thighs in a most obscene way, he replied, “You get my message?”

I frowned slightly. “Yes?”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Dinner . . .”

“You came all the way to this campus and my office for that?”

“How do you know I had to come all the way here from somewhere?”

“Did you?”

“Yes, but that’s beside the point. Will you have dinner with me?”

I shifted my eyes back to my computer although I couldn’t have focused on the screen if my entire life depended on it. “Was this that urgent to you that you couldn’t wait for a return call from me?”

“You weren’t going to call me back, Dr. Day.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I know you better than you think I do,” he said, leaning against the door and crossing his long legs at the ankles. Yes, my eyes were back on him. Shit, I couldn’t help it.

I scoffed. “You don’t know me at all, Mr. Moore.”

“Okay, were you going to call me?”

“I don’t know.”

“That means no. You’re angry with me.”

“What makes you think that? What reason would I have to be angry with you?”

He pushed away from the door and crossed my small office with just two steps, stopping beside my chair and squatting. His eyes were affixed to mine as he said, “Because it took me so long to call. I’m sorry about that.”

“No need to be. It’s not like we’re a thing, Mr. Moore. You are—*were* simply my student. An exceptional student, but nothing more than that. That was our only connection, and since you are no longer a student of mine, we have absolutely no connection at all. So—”

“I wanna kiss you, Dr. Day,” he interrupted me.

“W-what? You wanna do what? I mean, what did you say?” There my brain went with that foolishness again. I knew good and hell well that man did not say what I thought I heard.

“I said, I wanna kiss you.”

“Here? Now?”

“Yeah . . . here. Now. Right now.”

“W-why?”

“Because I wanna know how your lips taste and feel. Are they as soft as they look?”

“Uh . . .”

“Can I?”

“Can you what?” I asked, as my heart leaped into my throat and fought to flee my body via my mouth. My face felt hot and flushed, and at the simple idea of him kissing me, my core had taken on the rhythm of John Legend’s *Made to Love*.

“Kiss you.”

“Uh-huh,” came from my mouth, but I don’t think I was in control of my vocal cords at that moment, so it made sense that it was said, I guess. Hell, I barely knew my own name at that point.

“Good.” He stood, spun my chair around to face him, and grasping both my arms, leaned over me, crowding my personal space with *him*—his scent, his body heat, his everything.

I held my breath and watched as his face moved closer to mine, dropped my eyes from his to his mouth when the intensity in his eyes became too much, and when his lips met mine, my eyes fluttered closed. The first kiss was feather light, almost undetectable. But the second kiss? The one where his tongue flicked out and swiped across my lips? The one where I opened my mouth and rolled out the red carpet for his tongue? The one where his tongue staked its claim on every inch of my mouth? *That* one? Well, I detected the shit out of that one, and so did my yoni. Hell, by the time his mouth left mine, I felt light-headed and my feet were tingling.

I opened my eyes to see his face hovering close to mine, his eyes glued to my face.

“Brown and green and . . . yellow?” he said.

“Huh?” I asked, unsure if I was once again imagining the words coming from his mouth.

“Your eyes.”

“Oh. Yeah, they’re weird. My mother calls them tie-dyed eyes.”

“I can see that. They’re beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

He kissed me again. No tongue, but still delicious. “You like sushi?”

All I could do was nod as I flicked my tongue out to taste him on my lips.

“Great.” He backed away from me and handed me his phone. “I need your number.”

I grabbed the phone and entered my number like he had mind control over my ass or something.

“Thank you. I’ll text you so you’ll have my number.”

“O-okay.”

“Dinner, Saturday at seven, at the Wasabi Sushi bar.”

All I could say was repeat, “Okay,” as I watched him leave my office.

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He was smiling, happy. He was always happy, always upbeat . . . until he wasn't.

And that was my fault.

“You know what I wanna do?” he asked, threading his fingers through mine.

Shaking my head, I covered our joined hands with my free one and fixed my eyes on the path before us. “No . . . what?”

“I wanna get in my van and just drive. No destination in mind. No agenda. I just want you by my side as the scenery races by us. Windows down, wind blowing through your hair, my hand between your legs, us pulling over to fuck . . .”

“You really like the word fuck, don't you?” I said through a giggle. “You use it *a lot*.”

“I do like it—the word and the action. Hey, what do you think? You down with some van life this summer?”

“Yeah, that sounds great, baby.”

“It does, right?” He stopped and turned to face me. “I love you, Noddy. You know that, right? There's nothing I won't do for you. You could probably tell me to jump off a bridge and I would. No questions asked.”

“I wouldn't ask you to do anything like that,” I said through another giggle.

“I know you wouldn't. If no one else has my best interest at heart, I know you do. Because you love me back.”

Releasing his hand and wrapping my arms around his thick neck, I smiled. “More than you will ever know, baby.”

He kissed me softly and then pulled me to his big body, squeezing me tightly. “Good.”

I closed my eyes and held onto him like he was what anchored me to the earth, because he was. Sullivan Payne was my gravity in the tangible form of a big teddy bear, and I loved the hell out of him, had loved him from the moment we connected in the twelfth grade.

Bolting upright in the bed, it only took a few seconds for me to realize I’d dreamed about that very real day in my past, a day that preceded a time of darkness that I was still trying to outrun. Glancing at the bedside clock, I sat up on the side of the bed, lost a battle with the tears that were dying to meet my cheeks, and once the waterworks had ended, I waited for the sun to rise before sending Nathan Moore a text message:  
*Sorry, I won’t be able to make it to dinner. Raincheck?*

But I knew I had no intentions of redeeming that raincheck.

## Nathan

As I made my way down the hall to her office that Monday morning, I had to ask myself what the fuck my problem was. I mean, this woman obviously wasn't interested. Okay, that was a lie, because that kiss—or her reaction to it—told me she was definitely interested in me. Hell, her nipples were damn near poking holes in her blouse by the time I left her office. She wanted me as much as I wanted her, maybe more. Was she still mad about me taking so long to contact her? Nah, that couldn't be it either, because . . . kiss, nipples, all that. It was like there was a damn block there, a wall, and I had no idea what the motherfucker was made out of, how to break through it, or at the very least, put a hole in the son of a bitch.

Shit!

Dr. Nadia Day was the most confusing, frustratingly beautiful and sexy woman I had ever met, and my dumb ass couldn't stay away from her. I couldn't catch the clue that I

needed to leave her alone. Hell, I couldn't *make* myself leave her alone, because I wanted her in the worst way.

So there I stood, looking stupid in my suit as I knocked on her door.

“Come in!” she called.

So I did, my damn heart skipping rope as she shifted her eyes from her computer to me. They widened as she opened her mouth, closed it, opened it again, and finally said, “Mr. Moore, you really are going to have to stop just popping up at my office. It disrupts my schedule and I have—”

“Why'd you back out on dinner?”

“You didn't have to put on a suit and come here to ask me that. You could've called.”

“I did call. Several times. You haven't been answering. Did that slip your mind?”

“You sound angry,” she stated the obvious.

I was mad as hell, although I hadn't intended to show it. Nevertheless, I lied. “I'm not angry. Disappointed, but not angry. And I'm also confused.”

Her eyebrows knitted together. “Confused about what?”

“About why a woman who is single and obviously attracted to me would stand me up for a date I'm one hundred percent positive she wanted to go on.”

She shrugged. “I changed my mind.”

“Why?”

Sighing, she said, “Have a seat and I’ll try to explain myself.”

I was too keyed up to sit, but still lowered myself into the chair, my eyes never leaving her. “All right. Shoot.”

“Mr. Moore—”

“Let’s cut that stuff out. I’m Nathan or Nate to you now.”

“Okay . . . Nathan, I’m not in the position to pursue a relationship with any man right now. Not even one I’m obviously attracted to, and yes, I am very attracted to you.”

“I know you are.”

She pursed her lips. “Okay . . . anyway, I don’t have any room in my life for a partner right now.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t have to believe me, but that doesn’t make it any less true, Mr.—Nathan.”

“You’re scared. Whatever happened to make you change who you were has you running scared. You want me, but you’re afraid of what being with me would mean. You’re afraid of repeating past mistakes, but here’s the thing. I ain’t him, and whatever happened back then won’t happen again, because you ain’t even the same you that you were then.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. “No—”

“Yes. That’s exactly what’s going on in that extraordinary mind of yours. You’re smart, probably the smartest woman I

have ever met. You're a thinker, you've thought your way out of giving me a chance, and to be perfectly frank with you, Dr. Day, that shit is unfair. It's unfair to me and to you. You want what you believe I can give you, and hell, I wanna give it to you, but that mind of yours just will not let it happen."

"Nathan, you—"

"Well, allow me to put your mind at ease. Whatever happened whenever it happened . . . if he hurt you or you hurt him? If things ended in the worst way possible, if your heart has been broken or torn out the damn frame—that's not us. It won't be us. I won't hurt you, Dr. Day. I won't hurt you like he did."

"I *did* hurt him," she said, her eyes now open and glistening with tears. "I hurt his whole damn family. I wasn't trying to, but I did, and I don't want to hurt anyone else. Especially not you."

"You won't."

"You don't know that."

"Actually, I do. I'm a big boy and I love the shit out of myself. I won't let you hurt me, trust and believe. Now . . . are you going to at least give me a chance?"

After a second's hesitation, she nodded, and I stood, moving around her desk to her, using the pads of my thumbs to wipe the tears that had escaped from her cheeks. "Good. Now, I'ma need your address this time. I'm not taking any chances."

Through a chuckle she said, "Okay."

# Nadia

I was nervous, and I had no idea why. Nathan Moore had been nothing but a gentleman from the moment I first met him, up to the second he knocked at my door, on the ride to the restaurant in his spotless—both inside and out—black Range Rover, to now, as we sat across from each other in the Asian fusion restaurant sharing California and spicy tuna rolls. But he was quiet, too quiet, and I wasn't exactly used to that trait in him. Plus, I kind of wanted to see a re-emergence of the assertive Nathan who took my breath away with a kiss in my office just a few days earlier.

So, after taking a sip of my water, I asked, "Is everything okay?"

His head snapped up from his plate, and his eyes quickly found mine. Then a smile spread across his face, which made me smile in return. "Yeah, yeah. This sushi is great. How about you? You liking it?"

"Yes, but I wasn't referring to the food. I was referring to your demeanor."

With raised eyebrows, he said, "My demeanor?"

“You’ve been quiet tonight. I didn’t think you were the quiet type.”

Leaning back in his chair, he swiped at his mouth with a napkin. “I’m not. Just have a lot on my mind, and I’m sorry for bringing this solitary attitude to this table tonight. Let me fix that right now. Tell me something about yourself that no one knows and would be surprised to find out.”

“Wow, I should’ve just let you keep brooding.”

He chuckled. “First of all, I was not brooding, I was thinking. Second, are you afraid to answer the question, Dr. Day?”

Tilting my head to the side, I said, “I’m not afraid of anything.”

Of course, *that* was a lie. Hell, I was afraid of *him*, or the idea of being with him, but I couldn’t stop wanting to be with him, so there I sat across from him.

He just sat there and gave me an expectant look.

“I wanted to be an actress when I was a little girl,” I divulged.

He nodded. “I can see that.”

“You can?”

“Yeah. You’re playing a role right now.”

Reclining my neck a bit, I asked, “Oh, really? You think so, huh?”

“I *know* so. See, right now, you’re playing the role of the respectable professor who is out for an innocent dinner with a



former student, sitting up straight and poised, modestly dressed, impeccable table manners . . .”

“So you think I’m faking good etiquette and respectability? Please elaborate on why you think I’d have to fake those things,” I replied, reclining in my chair, my attention no longer on the food but on him.

“You don’t *have* to do anything, but in your mind, you *need* to play this role.”

“For who?”

“For yourself and whoever you think is watching you.”

“And for you?”

“No . . . not for me. I’m not looking for good manners or etiquette, Dr. Day.”

“We’re on a date. It’d probably be more appropriate to call me Nadia.”

“Appropriate, respectable, etiquette . . . all words that have to do with appearing a certain way to other people. External motivations.”

I smiled. “Very smart, Mr. Moore.”

“Nathan.”

“No, that deserved a Mr. Moore.”

He chuckled. “Okay.”

“So you think I’m motivated by what others think of me?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I think. Am I wrong?”

“Yes, you are. I don’t care what people think of me. At all.”

Another lie.

And he knew it, as evidenced by the smile he wore as he said, “Okay.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“And the fact that it matters to you whether or not I believe you proves my point.”

I opened my mouth to protest and then closed it, because shit, he was right. After I took a moment to gather my thoughts, I asked, “What other roles do you think I play since I’m so easy to read.”

Chuckling again, he answered, “It’s not that you’re easy to read. It’s more that I’ve studied you. You fascinate me.”

I had to be blushing. “Really?”

“Mm-hmm. I see so much in you.”

“Okay, I’ll play along. What else do you see?”

“As far as roles? I see the no-nonsense professor, the obedient daughter, the strong independent woman who doesn’t need a man, the ‘I’m much more than my beauty’ scholar. Want me to keep going?”

Lifting one eyebrow, I leaned forward and queried, “You think I need a man?”

“I think you need love. Everybody needs love.”

“What about you?” I asked, instead of offering a rebuttal.

“What about me?”

“What roles do you play? I assume you’re an actor, too.”

“We all are. Everyone in this world plays roles as needed. What roles do you think I play?” He leaned forward. “Read me, Nadia.”

I sat back, folding my hands in my lap, because . . . damn! “Hmmm, smooth ladies’ man, fitness enthusiast, devoted father, gentleman, businessman, scholar, and persistent suitor.”

“You don’t like that I’m persistent?”

“I didn’t say that, but I do wonder what your end game is with me.”

Leaning forward with his eyes glued to mine, he said, “Possession.”

“Of me? I’m not a piece of property, Nathan,” I balked.

“Of your heart, your mind, and your soul. I want to watch you unfold and bloom into who you’re supposed to be.”

“And who is that? Nineteen-year-old me?”

“No, my woman.”

Thirty minutes later, after we’d finished eating and talking, he drove me home, walked me to my door, and gently kissed my lips. Then he asked, “Lunch Monday?”

With a smile, I said, “Sure.”

After he left, I thought about what he’d said, the roles he claimed I played, and wondered when I started being so

concerned with the outside view of my life.

## Nadia

“I can’t believe I am having dinner with both my girls at the same time! And you both look so good! Tell me what you two have been up to? Ginger, you can go first,” Mommy gushed.

After engulfing a heaping forkful of my mother’s vegan collard greens that I could’ve sworn had some meat hidden in them, Ginger said, “Well, sales are going really well right now. I guess there’s like this new interest in holistic yoni health, because I can’t keep the steaming herbs in stock.”

“Really? That’s great, Ginky!” Mommy shrieked.

“Yeah, you are killing the apothecary game, huh?” I said.

Pursing her lips, Ginger replied, “I prefer herbalist, and weren’t you the one who swore I was gonna end up homeless when I opened my online store?”

“No, I didn’t say that, exactly. I just wanted you to be able to take care of yourself, and I couldn’t see how being an online apothecary—*herbalist* was going to enable you to do that.”

“That’s because you can’t see past the tangible to view the possible, sis. You . . . you have no sense of vision. Everything has to be concrete with you, a sure thing. You have lost the ability to dream, to take risks . . . hell, to live!”

Well, damn . . . what the hell was going on? Why was everyone reading me for filth? “Wow, was all that really necessary, Ginger? I *do* have vision. I visualized the career I’m in right now! I worked hard and I made it happen, just like I’m sure you did with *your* career.”

“Look, Noddy . . . I meant no harm. I just call things like I see them. You know that. When’d you get so sensitive? Shit!”

“Nadia, what have you been up to? What’s new in your world?” my mother deflected while shooting my baby sister a look. Our gatherings were rare because of this, because of Ginger’s so-called bluntness, of which I was always a target. As much as I loved making my mother happy, and knew having both her girls spend time with her at the same time did just that, I was about to get the hell up out of there.

I shrugged. “Um, nothing much. My dad called. He’s coming to visit in a few weeks.”

“Oh, really?” Mommy said. Her voice had perked all the way up. She still had a thing for him although she’d never admit it. I believed she still might’ve been in love with him, and she definitely wasn’t going to admit that.

“Yes. He said he wanted to build a better relationship with me, and he’s bringing my brother to meet me, too.”

Mommy’s eyes widened and then narrowed. “Who else is he bringing with him?”

“No one.”

“Hmmm, why don’t you bring him over for dinner one night while he’s here? I’d love to see him. Haven’t seen him in a long time ...” She sounded wistful, and that disturbed me.

“Um,” I said, “I don’t think he’s vegan.”

“Oh, I can have Braeden whip something up for him . . . and you, too.”

“Where is Braeden, anyway?” Ginger chimed in. “He’s usually glued to you, which I think is super sweet.”

Mommy took a bite of cornbread. “Working,” she garbled.

“He has a job now?” I asked.

“Yeah, I thought *you* were his job,” Ginger said.

Mommy laughed. “Well, I am . . . but after the paint and sip, he started getting all these job offers, so he’s stripping tonight.”

I damn near choked to death on my greens.

Ginger asked, “You don’t mind him stripping? What if some desperate woman wants more than just a show?”

Mommy flapped her hand at Ginger. “Oh, I wouldn’t care if he screwed some other woman. It’s not like I haven’t had my fun with other men since we’ve been together, but he won’t. Believe me . . . I keep him *very* satisfied.”

“Oh my God ...” I groaned.

Ginger high-fived her. “You go, Mommy!”

“So . . . I hear you have a beau now?” Mommy directed at Ginger.

“I do! He’s so sweet and hot! Oh! Why don’t I bring him over for dinner the same night Nadia brings her dad?!”

“I didn’t say I was bringing him, Ginger,” I hissed. I had no intentions of helping my mother shoot her shot at my long-married father. None at all. It was bad enough that I was the product of him cheating on the woman with my mother.

“Yes, please bring him to meet us! It’ll be like a big family gathering! I can’t wait!” my mom said, totally ignoring my statement.

So to change the subject, I said, “I had a date last night.”

“With a guy?!” Ginger squeaked.

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, a very handsome guy. A former NFL player.”

“For real?!”

“For real.”

“Bring him, too!” Mommy insisted. “The more the merrier!”

All I could do was groan inwardly. What had just happened?

“Well, that will make my gift for you two very appropriate!” Ginger said excitedly, reaching down beside her and lifting her big tote bag onto her lap. After she’d dug into it for a moment, she unearthed two bars of soap wrapped in brown paper. “Coochie soap! All natural. Makes your thing smell so good, your man will be begging to bury his face between your legs!”



Before I groaned outwardly, Mommy yelled, “You made it?! Have you added it to your site yet?”

Ginger stood and handed a bar first to me and then to our mother. “Yep! And I tested it out on myself. It made me wanna lick my own pussy!”

“Oh, my God,” I mumbled again.

“I can’t wait to use it!” Mommy said, and then she hopped up from her chair. “Oh! Let me get you two your goody bags! Be right back.” A minute or so later, she returned with two red sacks emblazoned with the Passion Play logo—the outline of a handcuffed, naked woman—and thrust them at us.

Ginger screamed with excitement at the contents—a butt plug, a ball gag, a huge bottle of pineapple-flavored edible lube, and—

“A Spanky skirt!” Ginger trilled. “OMG! I’ve been wanting one of these!”

I held up my own “Spanky skirt,” which was essentially a latex micro-mini skirt with the butt cut out of it, and said, “Wow . . . thanks, Mommy.”

With a huge, proud grin on her face, she said, “You’re both welcome, my loves,” as she fingered that damn raccoon dick pendant.

# Nathan

“He can’t stay here, Mama.”

“Why? I thought you two were getting along good now.”

I looked up from my phone and focused on my mother, who was standing in the doorway of my bedroom. “Why don’t you sit down, Ma?”

Placing her hands on her hips, she said, “No . . . I wanna know why you don’t want your brother to stay with us. It’s just until he gets on his feet, Nathan.”

Shaking my head, I released a sigh. “That’s the problem. Bernard’s been in and out of the pen since before he graduated from high school. Hell, he got his GED while he was on the inside! There’s a pattern here that I don’t want to subject the kids to. Not this time.”

“He’s changed, Nate. He really has. You’ve been talking to him on the phone. Can’t you see it?”

“I don’t trust it, Mama. We’ve thought he’s changed in the past and he proved us wrong. He just can’t seem to act right without a cell and some guards.”

Mama sighed. “Then what do you expect him to do? Where’s he gonna go?”

“I thought he and Shonda were still together. Ain’t she been waiting for him? He can parole out to her.”

“Shonda is living in Atlanta now! I don’t want my son that far away from me.”

“Yeah, and that’s one of his problems.”

She moved closer to me. “What is that supposed to mean?! My son has been locked up for the last almost ten years! Of course I want him near me!”

“Your son is forty-something years old. He doesn’t need to be up under his mother all the time. He needs to finally learn to stand on his own two feet, Mama. You’re an enabler when it comes to ‘Nard, and you know it.”

Her mouth dropped open, and then she closed it and shook her head. “That is your brother, your only living brother. You two talk every week. He’s excited to get out and be able to spend time with you, and you just wanna desert him?!”

“I’m not deserting him. Damn! I’m gonna help him. You know I am, but he can’t stay here, and that’s final. I mean it, Mama.”

She turned and left my room, mumbling loudly as she walked down the hall.

I knew when my brother called and told me he was up for parole and his lawyer was sure he’d get it this time, that this was going to happen. He didn’t mention moving into my house to me, but I knew he’d put that idea in our mother’s head. I also knew once he did, she’d do everything in her power to make it happen, because he was her favorite son. Before him, Charles had been her favorite, but Charles was gone now—a casualty of the same streets I knew in my soul Bernard was eager to return to, the streets that I followed both of them onto before quickly realizing I didn’t belong there. No matter how many classes Bernard Wilkins had taken while in prison, or how many religions he’d subscribed to, no matter how many promises he made to Mama or to me, he was the

same Bernard he'd always been and would always be, and I didn't want that energy in my personal space.

Not ever again.

And I meant that shit.

## Nadia

She was looking at me, her eyes focused on my face as I spoke to her, telling her about my day, about my father's impending visit, everything I could think of. Well, everything except whatever I had going on with Nathan. I wasn't ready to tell her about him. Not yet.

Although she couldn't reply, making the conversation severely lopsided, this still felt like old times, like the past before everything fell apart. Back then, Ms. Linnette, as I called her, was a big boisterous woman who generously offered a listening ear to whoever needed one, including me. We'd sit on her front porch and sip some of her sweet tea, and I'd vent about any and everything, and she'd let me, even when I vented about her favorite child—her son, Sullivan. She very much became a second mother to me, a friend, a confidant, and a mentor, and she'd said I was the daughter she wished her two girls had turned out to be. We'd shared a bond, a deep connection, until I ruined it.

Until I ruined *all* of it.

But being there, sitting on that uncomfortable, straight-backed chair beside her bed talking to her did something for my soul and my heart, removed some of the weight from my shoulders and made it easier for me to sleep at night, because I could see the forgiveness in her eyes, feel the acceptance emanating from her.

I ended our little chat, bent over to kiss her cheek, then left, stopping at the nurses' station to thank Nurse Flores for the umpteenth time.

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“So you're originally from Romey? You were born here?” he asked.

Nodding, I said, “Yep. The only time I didn't live here was when I was at Tulane. Romey is and always has been home.”

“You ever thought about relocating?”

“Not really. I'm comfortable here, and I wouldn't want to wander too far away from my mother.”

“Hmm, are your parents from here, too?”

“My mom is. Her family goes back several generations in Romey.”

“Your sister's still here, too? Y'all close?”

“Yeah, we are, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“Well, she’s more like my mom than I am, so . . . like my relationship with my mom, we’re close but I can only take her in small doses.”

He laughed. “Actually, from what you told me, your sister sounds like the way you described the old you—a free spirit. An herbalist? I bet that could’ve been your path too.”

“Maybe . . . or maybe I would’ve opened a sex shop, made *Passion Play* a franchise company.”

Shaking his head, he replied, “I still can’t get over that. The professor’s mother owns a sex shop. Wow.”

“I know. If the college president wasn’t one of her best customers, I might be in trouble.”

He laughed again, took a bite of his BLT, and then just stared at me.

I slid my hand over my buzzed hair. “What?”

“I like this you. This openness, telling me about your family. It’s nice.”

“*This* me? Um, thank you, I guess?”

“No, it’s definitely a good thing. What brought this change about?” he said through a chuckle.

I shrugged and fingered the remnants of my Reuben sandwich. “I don’t know. I finally got up the nerve and did something I’ve been needing to do for a long time, and I feel lighter, freer.”

“More like the old you?” he asked with raised eyebrows.

“You know, you bring her up a lot. But you asked the *now* me out. The current me is who caught your attention. Maybe you should concentrate on her.”

“I am, but can I help it if I’m interested in all sides of you, of every bit of your soul from the courtyards to the dark corners? Can you fault me for being curious about you? I want to get to know all of you, Nadia.”

“Why?”

“Because you fascinate me. You’re beautiful, smart, and more than a little mysterious.”

“Hmm, you know what? This lunch is almost over, and you haven’t told me anything about you.”

It was his turn to shrug. “Not much to tell. You know the pertinent information. I’m black, thirty-six, a single father, a former NFL player—been retired for about five years, and I’m a new college graduate, businessman, and relentless pursuer of one Dr. Nadia Day.”

I smiled. “You are definitely relentless in that pursuit. So, are you originally from here?”

“No. I was born and raised in Crumpton. I moved here from Boston after I retired, because it’s close to home, but has a more urban vibe, and the schools are good here.”

“Crumpton? Wow! So you’re a small town boy, huh?”

“Don’t hate! Crumpton ain’t that small. We got our own Comic-Con, and don’t forget about the Wildflower Festival.”



“Yeah, biiiiiig stuff happening in Crumpton. They probably even added a couple more traffic lights, huh?”

He grinned. “I said, don’t hate.”

“I’m not! Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you about your beautiful daughter. Has she always been hearing impaired?”

“Yes, since birth. Her mom went into distress and lost her life. Mecca lost her hearing.”

“Mecca . . . did you name her?”

“No, her mom picked her name out before she was born, and I honored that. Her name is Mecca Zen Moore.”

“I love it. My mom would *really* love it.”

With a smile, he said, “I bet.”

“What’s your other child’s name again? A son, right?”

“Yes. Ian. Marshall is his middle name. I didn’t name him either.”

“I bet he’s handsome. Got a picture of him?”

“Mm-hmm. One second.”

A moment or so later, he handed me his cell phone, and I inspected the picture of a handsome young man who looked nothing like Nathan. “Very handsome.”

“Thanks.”

I handed his phone back to him. “You still got family around here, other than your mother and your kids?”

“Yeah, I have a few cousins and aunts and stuff in Crumpton whom I don’t really fool with.”

“Why, if you don’t mind me asking?”

He shrugged again. “Because I’m not fond of being treated like a bank or the attitude I’m given when I refuse to be one. See, I suffer from the ‘I’m the only person in my family who has money’ syndrome. I don’t mind helping when it’s needed, but I’m not a bottomless pit of money, you know? I can’t save or help everyone, not at the expense of ruining myself.”

“I can imagine that’s hard to deal with. It’s good you’re aware of it. Some people lose everything trying to save everyone.”

“Yeah. Why do I feel like this is a therapy session? You sitting there with that soft voice and sympathetic expression. Am I being shrunk, Nadia?”

I laughed this time. “No! We’re just having a conversation. Honestly, you’re the one who’s been analyzing me since we met. Dissecting my personality, pointing out my ‘roles’ as you put it. Hypnotizing me into going out with you. Maybe you should’ve majored in psychology instead of business. Or, you could get a master’s in it.”

Tilting his head to the side, he said, “Right now, I’m doing my best to earn a degree in Nadia Day.”

“I see . . . and how’s that going for you?”

“I’d say it’s going well seeing as I’m sitting across from you right now. Will you have lunch with me again tomorrow? Give me a lecture on what makes you smile so I can see more of it?”

Well, *that* made me smile. “Um, sure. I’d love to have lunch with you tomorrow.”

“Great,” he said, leaning across the small café table to plant a soft kiss on my lips. “And don’t forget to bring that smile with you.”

“I won’t.”

I bolted upright in the bed, heart racing, sweat drenching my body, my core thumping. I’d had a dream, a nasty dream starring Nathan Moore, not that that was something rare. At least the fantasies were contained in my dreams now and I was no longer having auditory hallucinations.

Thank God.

But still, I needed to do something about this.

*You need some dick . . . some Nathan Moore dick to be exact.*

I sighed at that very accurate thought, but shit, it was too soon . . . wasn’t it? I was out of practice, hadn’t even been around a man outside of students and colleagues in years. I had a couple of almost boyfriends-slash-booty call partners after Sullivan, but I quickly realized my mind was too tangled up to make those little hookups grow into more than that. But Nathan? I knew in my soul we could have something real, and a big part of me wanted to try, *really* try.

A bigger part of me simply wanted to strip him down to his birthday suit, a birthday suit I was sure was nothing less than a

work of art, and fuck him silly.

Yeah, that word still bothered me, but that was the only appropriate word to describe what I wanted, *needed*, to do to him. Every dream involved me licking and sucking and kissing every inch of him, repeatedly, and the things he did to me in those nightly visions? Hell, that stuff would put even the freakiest of freaks to shame.

And I liked all of it.

I nearly leapt to my feet when my cell phone chimed. Holding a hand to my chest, I reached for it, sliding it off my nightstand, and grinned as I read the text message.

Nathan: *I know it's late, but I had a dream about you. A good dream. Shit, a GREAT dream. Can't wait to see you tomorrow.*

Me: *I can't wait to see you either.*

## Nathan

Nadia: *I can't make it to lunch. Sorry. Not feeling well.*

I sat back in my chair and slid my hand down my tie as I stared at her text message, a deep frown etched onto my face.

Me: *What's wrong? Where are you? You at work?*

The three dots indicating that she was typing out her response appeared and danced for two or three minutes before her response came through.

Her: *No, I'm in my office.*

Me: *You still need to eat. I'll bring you something.*

Her: *You don't have to do that. I'll be fine.*

Me: *I want to do it. I'll bring you some soup or something like that. Be there in a few minutes.*

Those dots reappeared, this time for three or four minutes, and then finally, a response.

Her: *OK*

About thirty minutes later, I was knocking on her office door, opening it after she uttered a weak, “Come in.”

Once inside her office, I closed the door and inspected her. Her eyes were puffy, as if she’d been crying, and the expression on her face read despair. Shit, was she sick or had someone died?

Looking up at me, she managed to give me a diluted smile and nodded toward the chair on the other side of her desk. “Have a seat.”

I did and placed the paper bag of food on her desk. “Chicken noodle soup from Saban’s and apple juice.”

“Thank you,” she said unenthusiastically, but I could tell she really was grateful. “I haven’t had anything from Saban’s in a while, but like I said, you really didn’t have to do this.”

“Like *I* said, I wanted to. Nadia, what’s going on? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said, and then a single tear escaped her right eye. That tear led to a flood, and in no time, she was audibly sobbing, burying her face in her hands.

“Hey, hey,” I said, moving toward her. I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her to her feet. “Hey, what is it? You can tell me.”

Leaning into me, she buried her face in my chest and shook her head. “No, I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. Tell me, please. Maybe it’ll help if you tell me.”

She kept crying, clutching my shirt in her small fists. After a few minutes, her sobs flowed into sniffles, and then she lifted her head and fixed her stormy eyes on me. “I don’t want to burden you with this. It’s my problem.”

Cupping her wet face in my hands, I softly said, “You’re not burdening me. Tell me.”

She swiped at her nose and backed away from me, slumping back into her chair. “Okay.”

## Nadia

### *Two hours earlier . . .*

The heels of my pumps hit the linoleum with a thud as I made my way down the hallway of the Serenity Springs Nursing and Rehabilitation Center’s east wing. As had become routine for me over the past few weeks, I greeted the ladies at the nurses’ station, and a minute or so later, arrived at Room 1256, knocking lightly on the door before letting myself in. Ms. Linnette was awake, her eyes glued to a morning news show playing on the TV, but they quickly shifted to me after I approached her bed and laid my hand on her arm, rubbing my thumb over her soft, paper-thin skin.

“Good morning,” I said with a smile.

She blinked and I could see the edges of her mouth begin to lift as she tried to return my smile.

“Someone braided your hair since I was last here. It looks good, Ms. Linnette. I know how you always kept your hair laid back in the day. You always took such good care of yourself. You know, I still use vitamin E oil on my skin like you used to instead of lotion? Maybe I’ll see if it’s okay for me to bring you some. See if they can use it on your skin after they give you a bath. I didn’t see any in your bathroom when I was here the other day.”

She blinked, never turning her head from my face.

I let my eyes peruse the room and then rested them on her again. “You like it here? Everyone seems nice. This seems like a good place.”

She blinked again.

“I know I say this a lot, but I missed you. I missed our little talks. You know, I always felt like I got switched at birth. You were so much more like what I thought a mother should be than my real mother. I love her but, you know how she is.” I laughed.

“But she ain’t your got-damn mother! And you need to take your ass right on up out of her room!”

My head snatched around to face the owner of that angry voice. Antionette.

My mouth opened, but no sound came out at first, and when I was able to speak, what I said was so stupid, I wished I’d remained mute. “Antionette? W-what are you doing here?”



“Bitch, I’m here to see my mother! What the hell are *you* doing here?! Hasn’t your ass done enough damage?!”

“I-I’m sorry.” Turning to Ms. Linnette, I added, “I just . . . I needed to see her. I’m not trying to cause any trouble.”

“Yes, you are! Why else have you been sneaking your ass in here to see her when you thought me and Donna were at work. I ain’t seen you popping up in here on the weekend or after five when you know we’ll be here, but your name is sho’ on the visitor’s log, ain’t it?! Get the fuck out of here and don’t come the-fuck back! You done already killed her son, you bitch! You the reason she had this damn stroke! What you tryna do? Finish her off?!”

“What’s going on in here?” That was one of the security guards who was now just inside the door, a frown on his face as he stood behind Antionette.

“What’s going on is you need to get this woman out of my mother’s room! She’s upsetting her! Got my mama crying and shit! Put her ass out and don’t let her back in here!”

I looked down at Ms. Linnette, whose face was awash with tears now, and my own tears started to crowd my eyes. “I’m sorry. I’ll go. I’m leaving now.”

I moved toward the door, but Antionette and the guard were blocking it, so I dropped my eyes and softly said, “Excuse me.”

She put her face so close to mine, I could smell French fries, hamburgers, and cigarettes on her breath. “If you ever come around here bothering my mama again, I’ma fuck you

up. You always was a prissy lil' bitch anyway. I could whoop your ass with my eyes closed.”

Antionette was big and tall, much bigger and taller than me, just like the rest of her family. In the past, I'd seen her beat grown men's asses, so I knew her threat wasn't an empty one.

“Okay, no more threats. She's leaving. Step aside so she can go,” the guard said.

After glaring at me for what felt like an hour, she moved, and I left. As I scurried down the hall, I heard her yell, “I meant what I said, bitch!”

## Nathan

*Now . . .*

“Why does she think you killed her brother?” I asked. I’d moved my chair next to hers and was holding her trembling hand in mine.

“Because I did, in a way. I was the cause of his death, and his death was the cause of their mother’s stroke. I’m responsible for both.”

“Nadia, I have a feeling you’re shouldering blame that doesn’t belong to you.”

“That’s because you don’t know what happened.”

“Tell me.”

“I can’t. Not right now. I just . . . I can’t, Nathan.”

Hearing the desperation in her voice, I said, “Okay, you don’t have to tell me right now.” Then I let my eyes tour her

office before fixing them on her again. As she wiped her face with a tissue, I asked, “Do you have any more classes today?”

“Yes. One more. It’s in a couple of hours.”

“Cancel it and let me take you home. You’re in no condition to be teaching right now.”

“I can teach with my eyes closed, Nathan. I’ll just put myself on autopilot and I’ll be fine.”

“No, you won’t. Let me take you home. You need to rest your mind, at least for what’s left of today. You can put yourself on autopilot tomorrow.”

She sighed. “Well, let me type out a sign to put on the classroom door to let them know I’m canceling class, and I need to put one on my office door to cancel office hours, too.”

“You type and print them, and I’ll post them. Then I’m driving you home.”

“But my car ...”

“Don’t worry about that. If something happens to it while it’s here tonight, I’ll take care of fixing it.”

Sighing again, she gave me a much more potent smile.

“Thank you, Nathan.”

“You are more than welcome.”

# Nadia

My eyes popped open to darkness, familiarity, and a dull headache. I knew I was home, in my own bed, but how I got there wasn't clear to me. Not initially, anyway, but then it all came rushing back—the verbal assault handed down from Antionette, a woman whom I'd once had a decent relationship with, me running out of the nursing home and managing to hold it together until I made it to my office, me crying so hard that my throat hurt, my text to Nathan, him letting me blubber all over what I knew had to be an expensive shirt, him driving me home, encouraging me to eat, me telling him I was tired, and him walking me to my bedroom and telling me he'd let himself out.

I sighed and closed my eyes, shaking my head and feeling . . . I don't know? Embarrassed about letting my guard down like that with him. I barely knew him and had exposed a part of me that I refused to even share with my mother, sister, and friends to him. They knew what happened, but only the bare facts, because what happened to Sullivan, and consequently, his mother, was deep dark history that I'd changed my entire life to forget, but I suppose I'd tempted fate with visiting Ms. Linnette. I'd thought it was what my soul needed, but evidently, I'd thought wrong.

Rubbing my still-tired and puffy eyes, I sat up on the side of the bed—still in my work clothes—and after a quick trip to the bathroom, I dragged myself through my dark apartment to lock the deadbolt since Nathan would've only been able to lock the knob when he left, and shrieked when the light from a

lamp I had on a timer in my living room gave me a view of a figure stretched out on my couch. As my heart thumped in my chest, he sprung from the couch to his feet, his cell phone hitting the floor with a loud thud.

“Nathan? You’re still here?” I squeaked.

“Uh, yeah,” he said groggily, “I was gonna leave, but that didn’t feel right, so I decided to stay in case you needed something. I was . . . worried about you. Didn’t mean to scare you.”

With my hand glued to my chest, I said, “But you did! You scared me to death! Lord!”

“I’m sorry. Look, I’ll just go now.” He bent over and scooped up his phone, and that’s when I noticed he’d shed his dress shirt and suit coat and was wearing a tank t-shirt with his slacks. I finally had the presence of mind to turn on the overhead light and watched as he squinted and dropped his eyes to the floor. “There they are,” he said and sat on the couch to put his dress shoes on, the muscles in his arms flexing as he tied the thin brown laces.

Standing from the sofa again, he dug his hand in his pant pocket and unearthed his keys. Then he turned to me. “Um, I can pick you up in the morning and drive you to work since you don’t have your car here.”

“No, you’ve done enough, more than enough, and thank you. I can take an Uber to work.”

“Uh, okay. See you at lunch tomorrow then? I was thinking we could try that new build-a-taco place?”

Finally coming down from the adrenaline rush of finding a man on my couch, I gave him a tiny smile. “Sure.”

He nodded, stared at me for a moment, and then said, “See you tomorrow, Nadia.”

“See you tomorrow, Nathan.”

He left, and I just stood there for a moment before locking my door, his cologne still filling the air of my living room. Then I turned to see he’d left his shirt and suit coat draped on the back of the couch. My first thought was to try to catch him before he pulled off the parking lot of my complex, but I was too tired for that. I could’ve called or texted him. Yes, that would’ve been the best way to handle it, but instead, I picked up his shirt, held it to my nose, and inhaled deeply. Then I took it to my room with me, stripped out my clothes, put it on without buttoning it, and climbed back into bed.

## Nathan

*Nadia: Lunch in my office today? I really don't feel like driving anywhere.*

*Me: I can pick you up if you want.*

*Nadia: I don't feel like being around a lot of people, either.*

Me: *You trying to cancel on me? I won't let you.*

Nadia: *If I was trying to cancel, I'd say that. I want to see you, just don't want to go out.*

Me: *OK. I'll pick up something and be there in about an hour.*

Nadia: *Great. Can't wait to see you. Oh, and you left your shirt and jacket at my place, but I forgot to bring them to work with me.*

Me: *No problem. I'll get them from you whenever. See you soon.*

Nadia: *I'll be waiting.*

I set my phone on my desk and smiled. So she wanted to see me? I couldn't believe she'd admitted that. *Looks like I've put a hole in one of the walls she's erected around herself.*

“What you up in here grinning about?”

I damn near jumped out of my chair at the sound of Luke's booming voice, but managed to say, “Damn, man. Your big red ass scared the shit out of me. What you doing lurking around here, sneaking in my damn office?”

“Shit, it's *my* company. I can lurk anywhere I damn well please.”

He plopped down in the seat in front of my desk and I just stared at him while he stared at me. Then we both laughed.

“You didn't answer my question. What were you smiling about?” he asked.

“A text.”



“Ohhh, must’ve been from the lovely professor. You’re making some progress with her, huh?”

“A little. So what you in here bothering me for?”

“Wanted to run an idea by you. I was thinking of us throwing a little party here in the office and inviting a couple of the prospects I’ve been looking at.”

“Who? Those two guys from Romey U?”

“Yep. A little food, a little music, something intimate. We can invite their parents, too.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know, man. I’m not really feeling that Carter dude. He’s got talent, but I don’t think he’s ready for the league, got his mind on stupid shit from what I saw of his social media. Girls, girls, and more girls. Hell, he’s a #metoo case waiting to happen, and you know a black quarterback is a hard sell anyway.”

“True, true, but you know I’m committed to seeing more HBCU players make the league. Shit, most of these guys have more talent than any of the guys playing for the big NCAA schools. They deserve a shot.”

“I know, and I agree. I feel the same way, but we need athletes that’ll be willing to evolve and grow mentally. The types that won’t end their own careers doing stupid shit during their rookie year. The types who won’t let themselves be led by their dicks, you know what I mean?”

He leaned forward with raised eyebrows. “What man you know isn’t led by their dick, Nate, including me and you?”

“Nah, there’s a difference between being led by your dick and being led by your heart. You loved Mel, always have. And

as for me, it ain't my dick that has me pursuing Dr. Day. Believe that."

"Okay, okay, I hear you," Luke replied while giving me a slow smile. "So you wanna just say fuck it and not pursue Carter? I don't know about that."

"I'm not saying that. I'm just saying we need to proceed with caution, and not pin all our hopes on him. Maybe we can invite him to lunch and have a sit-down with him and his folks instead of going all out with a party and stuff."

He nodded slowly. "Okay, what about the other prospect, Jaden Taylor? Running back. This is his junior year, and I think we need to get him signed and into the draft. He doesn't need to play another year of college ball and risk an injury. He had a shoulder injury his freshman year, so he's vulnerable."

"Yeah, I like him. Seems level-headed. How about we do a barbecue at my place? Make it more like a family affair. I can hit the grill. You can bring Mel, and my mom and kids will be there. And instead of Carter coming, we'll invite Taylor and someone else I've been looking at."

"Oh? Who?"

"Armand Daniels."

Luke frowned and his voice had risen a couple of octaves as he said, "What?! I thought you didn't want to deal with hot heads, but you want to sign the king of hot heads?"

"Hear me out, North. Yes, he's a troublemaker, but can you name another player with his talent? We're talking legendary status."

“That’s true, but . . . the nigga keeps fighting and getting traded. What are we supposed to do with that?!”

“I don’t know. I just think we could help him. I think he’s worth the trouble.”

“But Carter isn’t? At least he’s young enough that we can excuse some of his behavior. Daniels knows better!”

“Okay, let’s compromise. You can invite Carter if I can invite Daniels. If they both sign with us, Carter will be your headache and Daniels will be mine.”

After staring at me for a moment, my old friend said, “Deal.”

## Nathan

Music blared from the speakers in my living room as sweaty bodies moved to the rhythm of Maze and Frankie Beverly's *Before I Let You Go* while holding red Solo cups of liquor. Everything was loud and crowded, and it was making my damn head hurt.

"Come on, Nathan! Get up and dance, baby boy!" my mama shouted over the music as she danced with one of my many cousins who'd invaded my home, my damn sanctuary. "You act like you done forgot how to party!"

"I'm good," I said, adjusting my body on the couch.

Then my big brother left his dance partner, some chick I'd never even seen before, and plopped down beside me with a Corona in his hand. "Come on, nigga! Shit, at least *act* like you glad I'm out! You ain't seen me in damn near ten years. Wouldn't come to visit me. I mean, I forgave you for that shit since you kept that money on my books, but hell, could you at least smile?"

I faced Bernard, who looked nothing like me or Mama but was the mirror image of his sorry-ass, abusive father. “Nard, who is that woman you were dancing with?”

“That’s Chantel. I met her at the liquor store this afternoon. Fine, ain’t she?”

I smirked. “She ain’t your type, is she? I mean, she’s kinda cute. You know you like those rough-looking chicks.”

“Fuck you, Nate.”

I chuckled. “Look man, I know this supposed to be your welcome home celebration, but all jokes aside . . . I don’t like having strangers around my kids.”

“She ain’t around them! They ain’t even down here! Ain’t they up in they rooms?”

“Yeah, matter of fact, let me go check on them.”

As I stood to leave, he shouted, “Aw, hell, Nate . . . them kids all right! Shit, I see you still a damn lame! May as well take your ass on to bed. Get it, Mama!”

Shaking my head, I navigated a path through the ocean of people and headed upstairs, first checking on Mecca, who was on her phone texting, and then Ian, who had his earphones on, watching *In Living Color*, of course. Of the two of my kids, he was the most fragile, the one I worried about the most, especially since Mecca’s grades had vastly improved since she saw Dr. Day in action. Anyway, Mecca was tough and a little cunning. Ian was innocent, and with his limitations, easily taken advantage of. He was so easily influenced that it scared me.

Looking up at me with a smile, he said, “Two snaps in a Z formation!” Then he quickly returned his attention to the TV screen.

I smiled at him and rubbed my hand over his hair, kissed his forehead, and then I left his room to return to the party. I didn’t want to, but I had to make sure my house didn’t get torn up.

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“You said he was just gonna be here for the party! What do you mean this is where he told the parole board he’d be staying?! How the fuck did they accept that without confirming it with me? It’s *my* damn house!”

“*I* confirmed it. I was there at the hearing, and I told them he was going to stay with me. This is my home, too, Nate!” my mother countered.

Scratching my forehead, I said, “Your name ain’t on the deed or one damn bill, Mama!”

“So this isn’t my home? Is that what you saying, Nathan Michael Moore?”

“No, what I’m saying is it was wrong for you to go behind my back and do this after I told you he couldn’t stay here!”

“He’s your brother, not a damn stranger! I wasn’t gonna let him be out on the street!”

“He’s a grown-ass man, and he is not my responsibility!”

“Keep your voice down!”

“Why?! He ain’t here! Didn’t Scoop take him somewhere?”

“Yeah, I think they gone to the liquor store or something, but that Chantel girl is still in the extra bedroom asleep. She might hear you.”

“She spent the night?! And how the hell they at the liquor store on a Sunday?!”

“I meant the bootlegger. You need to calm down.”

“Calm down?! How?! He’s already on that same bull he’s been on for years—drinking, partying, and fucking up! Who the hell goes to buy liquor from a bootlegger at nine on a Sunday morning less than forty-eight hours after they get sprung from prison? And one of y’all better get that strange-ass woman out of my damn house! Now!”

“No,” my mother said defiantly.

“No?” I shrieked.

“No. Bernard has been locked up for a long time. He deserves to have some female company.”

“Not in my got-damn house, he doesn’t. And I don’t know why you wanna stand up here and act like things have always been good between me and you. It took a lot of forgiveness on my part for us to get where we are today, but I swear on everything I love, you are about to tear all of that down. I love you, Mama, and I appreciate you helping me with Mec and

Ian, but if you don't fix this, you gonna be out the door right behind your son!"

"You threatening me, boy?!"

"Do you think it's a threat or a promise?"

"You need me! What you gonna do with those kids without me? Huh?"

"I got money, plenty of it. More than enough to hire someone."

We stared each other down for two or three minutes, and then the silence between us was broken by my brother's voice coming from downstairs. "Mama! Where you at?! I got your scratch-offs and your wine coolers."

Mama yelled back, "I'll be right down there!" Then she dropped her eyes and shook her head. "You wrong for this. You could at least let him stay here until he gets a job and is on his feet."

"I'll put him up in a hotel."

"But I want him here with me, Nate!"

"Mama—"

"Fine! I'll tell him he can't stay."

"When?"

"Right now."

"Good."



# Nadia

My head was tight, and I was simply exhausted from the recent events of my life, i.e.: my run-in with Sullivan's bulldog of a sister. Days had passed, and my ears still rang, my heart still hurt, and I already missed the comfort I felt just from being in Ms. Linnette's presence, but I suppose I had pushed things. I'd visited her every other day rather than once a week like I'd planned. I guess it just felt so good to talk to her, made me feel so much like the real me—the one I'd buried long ago—that it quickly became addictive. But I knew the more frequent the visits, the more likely I was to run into someone from the family, and it didn't matter who. They all blamed me for their world falling apart, for the favorite son being snatched away from them, for their mother's debilitating condition, and my guilt agreed with them. So I took Antionette's words for what they were—deserved.

Snapping out of the fog of regret, I returned my attention to the brown face fashioned in a deep frowning glare that was currently staring at me and sighed. "Mr. Ivers, I'm not sure what you expect me to say today that'll be different from what I said during the other three meetings we've had since last semester ended. You failed my class because you failed every test, including the final."

He leaned forward in the chair, his hands on the arms. “But I came to every class, did all the assignments. I even did the bonus assignment! That doesn’t count for anything?!”

“Yes, all of that counts, but none of it outweighs exams. Did you not read the syllabus? It explained that exams make up fifty percent of your grade, and the final makes up twenty percent.”

“Man, bump all that! I was supposed to graduate last semester! My mama drove all the way here from Oklahoma for nothing!”

“Mr. Ivers—”

“You coulda graded on a curve or something!”

“I did.”

His mouth dropped open.

“Mr. Ivers, I know it’s difficult to cope with your plans being derailed, but you need to take responsibility for your own actions. You didn’t put in the work to pass my class. It’s as simple as that.”

He shot to his feet with fire in his eyes. With every visit, he grew angrier and angrier. I decided right then that I would refuse any further meetings with him and refer him to the dean if he contacted me again. I’d done all I could do in this situation.

“You know what? Fuck this! Now I know why everyone talks shit about you. You ain’t got no soul! Folks told me not to take you. Told me you don’t give a shit about your students. You just come in the lecture hall like a damn robot and spit facts. You probably need some dick, because I know ain’t

nobody fucking your stiff ass! Fucking bitch!” With that, he flung my office door open so hard that the pictures on my walls rattled and stormed out of my office. A girl standing in the hall appeared startled as she turned and looked at me, so I quickly hopped up and closed the door then returned to my desk and gripped my head.

I was in the middle of typing out an email to security that I cc’d the dean on when my phone buzzed. Brooklyn.

Through a belabored sigh, I answered, “Hello?”

It was Sharla’s voice that greeted me. “Damn, girl, what’s up with you?”

“Just got cursed out by a former student.”

“Again?!” she shrieked. “Girl, you stay pissing your students off.”

“Yeah, especially this one. Anyway, y’all got me on three-way? What in the world is going on for you two to be on a call together? Can’t be anything good.”

“Ha, ha, ha. We were just trying to see if you’re going to the Mahogany Women in Motion meeting next week. If so, we can all ride together so we can gossip on the way home after it’s over,” Brooklyn informed me.

“Shit, I forgot about that meeting. Who’s hosting it this time?” I asked.

“Renee Higgs, and you know I ain’t tryna miss the opportunity to get a glimpse of that fine giant of a husband of hers. Hell, I’m getting wet just thinking about him!” Sharla said.

I shook my head. “Sharla, you’re actually planning to ogle the woman’s husband? Really?”

“Yeah, but I mean, I’m a be incognito with it.”

“Hell, if I was Renee, I’d make sure he wasn’t home,” Brooklyn interjected.

“Shiiiiit, me too! I can see why she can’t stop getting pregnant. Can just imagine what it must be like to lay up under that every night...” Sharla mused in a wistful voice.

“I imagine it quite often as a matter of fact.” That was Brooklyn’s married ass. “And have you read any of his books? The sex in them is just filthy!”

“Damn, I’ve got to read them!” Sharla declared. “I forgot he’s a writer!”

“Yeah, I’m going,” I broke in, trying to shift the conversation. My friends needed help, help my psychologist ass couldn’t even begin to be able to give them.

“You are?” Sharla asked in this shrill voice. “I can’t believe we didn’t have to twist your arm.”

“I actually *want* to go.” I needed to do all I could to take my mind off the bad parts of my life. Sure, I was enjoying spending time with Nathan, but I didn’t want to wear him out.

“Oh, okay. Good! So, who’s driving?” Brooklyn queried.

“Hell, you! You’re the one with the SUV,” Sharla said.

“Y’all make me sick,” Brooklyn mumbled.

“Whatever. So, Noddy . . . how are things with Nathan?” Sharla sang.

“Yes, do tell,” Brooklyn urged.

“Good. We’re having lunch today, and after being called soulless by my former student, I’m definitely looking forward to it,” I replied.

“Y’all been seeing each other for a minute now, right? Y’all fucked yet?” Sharla asked.

“Girl, please . . . you know she ain’t gave that man none yet. Knowing Nadia, the poor man might have to wait years,” Brooklyn said.

“She can’t be that damn crazy. That nigga is too fine to wait that long. I woulda been done fucked him if I was her!”

“Shit, me too. Married and all.”

“Um, did y’all forget I was on the phone? Damn!” I said.

“Our bad. So you gonna answer my question? You know what? Never mind. You haven’t given him any yet. I can hear it in your voice. You still sound unfucked,” Sharla assessed.

Brooklyn laughed into the phone. “Shar, you a fool!”

“I gotta go. I don’t have time for this mess right now,” I said, and then I hung up.

After that call ended, another one popped up on my screen. The number was unknown to me, I needed to be in class in twenty minutes, and I didn’t even feel like answering it, but for some reason, I did. “Hello?”

“Bitch, let me find out you brought your raggedy ass around my mama again and I’ma put my foot all the way up your bony ass! Yeah, my sister told me about you sneaking around the nursing home! What you tryna do? Kill my mama, too?!”

“D-Donna? How’d you get my n-number?”

“From that Nurse Flores bitch!”

Oh, no! I hoped I hadn’t gotten her in any trouble. “Uh . . . I told Antionette that I meant no harm. Your mom has always been special to me. You know that. I’d never do anything to hurt her. I’m sorr—”

“Fuck you! Ain’t you done enough damage?! Stay the fuck away from us!”

She hung up, and I sat there staring at my phone long enough to be late for class. Just as I was gathering my things to leave my office, Nathan texted me.

*Sorry. Can’t make lunch today. Got a lot going on.*

At that point, I really needed to see him. I needed to hear his voice. I needed—

A tear rolled down my face and I rested my head on my desk for a few minutes and then picked up my phone and texted Clark, asking him to go to the lecture hall and inform the students that class was canceled for the day.

## Nathan

I headed up the stairs to do what had become a frequent ritual for me, checking on my kids and fighting the urge to beat somebody's ass. Rather than keeping her word to me and getting Bernard out of my house, my mom had pulled her trump card, said the magic words to make me go along with Bernard living in my house until he got on his feet and all that came along with that—constant drinking and partying. My own mother was fucking blackmailing me, because, in her words, she “just couldn't tell her baby boy to leave.” At that point, I was ready to move out and give them the damn house, but that would've been bad for Ian. Plus, this was his and Mecca's home. Shit, it was *my* home where I paid the damn bills, and added to those bills was me feeding a whole bunch of niggas I'd been avoiding for years even if they were my family.

My life was a fucking mess.

I texted Mecca to let her know I was outside her door. I guess she knew I was stressed and decided to give me a break, because she promptly opened her door and signed: *Hey, Daddy.*

Me: *Hey, Mec. Everything all right in here?*

Mecca: *Yes. I'm fine. You okay?*

Me: *Yes. Text me if you need me. I'm going to check on your brother.*

She nodded and then hugged me tightly. Damn, she must've really felt sorry for my ass.

Ian was doing the usual, earphones on, eyes glued to his TV watching *In Living Color*.

A minute or so later, I found myself in the kitchen staring at a sink full of dishes and a trashcan full of beer bottles. I had a maid who came in once a week, but I didn't pay her for slave labor. This was fucking ridiculous, and that damn music was making my head throb. Who the hell could stand to listen to Kodak Black's voice twenty-four-seven?

"Heeey, Nate! Where you been? I been looking for you!" Mama slurred from behind me.

"Mama, you think you should be drinking like that with all the medicine you take for your heart and stuff?" I asked, turning to face her and trying not to sound as disgusted with her as I felt. This whole scenario was a little too familiar to me. Parties, loud music, a drunk mother. I half-expected some sorry nigga to pop up and for her to call him my "uncle." It'd been a long time since my Mama was *that* woman, and I hadn't missed her. Not at all.



Mama rolled her eyes. “You always gotta try to bring down someone’s high, don’t you? Acting like you did when you were a little boy.”

“You’re acting like you did when I was little boy, too. You want Mec and Ian to see you stumbling around the house drunk, Mama?”

She sighed, placing a hand on her hip. “They up in they rooms since you act like you’re scared for them to be around their own family members. Mecca is deaf and I know Ian got them earphones on, so they ain’t heard shit, either. You need to come on in the living room and let loose, have you some fun! You know what? Chantel brought a friend with her, a real cute girl. You need to go talk to her. She might give you some.” She started laughing that wet laugh of hers, spitting all over the place.

“Nah, I’m good.”

“No you ain’t. Shit, maybe getting you some will loosen you up and help you get that stick outta your ass!”

My response was to leave her in the kitchen and head back upstairs to my bedroom. A second after I closed the door behind me, I received a text from Nadia: *Missed seeing you today.*

Me: *Yeah, I’m sorry about that. I missed seeing you too. Wish I could see you now.*

Her: *Why can’t you? I’m certainly not stopping you.*

My eyes widened. When did she get so forward?

Me: *Got a lot going on at home. Need to stay here. Sorry.*

After a long pause, she replied with: *Oh, okay. See you tomorrow?*

I sighed, then responded with: *I don't know yet. I'll let you know.*

She didn't reply, and I knew I was messing this thing with her up *again*. She was already a hard nut to crack in the first place, and I felt like I was helping her rebuild the portion of her wall that I'd partially dismantled, but what could I do about it?

## Nadia

I couldn't sleep. My mind was too full, too active. Thoughts buzzed in my head like bees from a disturbed beehive. My bed felt so uncomfortable to me, and for some reason, cold. So I got up, meandered into my living room and just stood there, because I was too tired to watch TV or fix myself a snack, yet, too wired to sleep. Sighing, I walked over to the window that gave me a view of the parking lot. Amber lights illuminated the asphalt, but no bodies were seen. Normal folks were in dreamland. Closing my eyes, I rested my forehead on the glass of the window and took in a deep breath. *What a day*, I thought.

Donna's words hadn't penetrated me any more than Antionette's had, but they still stung, even though they merely reminded me of what I already knew. Mr. Ivers had rattled me, and that bothered me. Disgruntled students weren't a rarity when you attempted to actually impart knowledge and maintain standards, but it did kind of bother me that other students were saying things like he'd alluded to about me. Shit, I *did* need some sex but didn't think it was that obvious, and that brings me to Nathan, who, along with Ms. Linnette, were my lifelines, the two things—or people—that made it easier for me to face the day. I couldn't visit her anymore, and he was pulling away from me, but could I blame him? Hell, I knew I wasn't exactly a good time.

But I used to be.

Yeah, I used to be the life of the party, and full disclosure? I missed being her, had been looking forward to Nathan continuing to free her from the prison I'd locked her in.

*Sis, you can free yourself.*

Eyes still closed, I shook my head at that thought and whispered, "I don't know how. I buried her so deep, I've forgotten how to dig her up. Hell, I'm not even sure where her grave is anymore."

I opened my eyes and widened them at what I believed had to be a hallucination.

*Shit, now I'm seeing things instead of just hearing them?*

I closed my eyes and opened them again. He was gone. Yeah, I'd snapped, lost it, probably needed to commit myself for some treat—

I nearly jumped out of my own body at the sound of a knock at my door, glanced down at my nakedness, and shouted, “Uh . . . just a second!” then grabbed a throw from the back of my couch, wrapped it around me, took a deep breath, and hoped this wasn’t merely a very realistic dream or mirage as I walked to my door.

Easing it open, I squeaked, “Nathan?”

## Nadia

His eyes rounded the doorway before settling on my face.

“Uh, I know it’s late, and I should’ve called, but can I . . . can I come in?”

I nodded and cleared the doorway for him. “Sure. Have a seat.”

He did, falling onto my sofa and spreading his legs wide open. *Shit.*

I stood there and stared at him for a moment and then pulled my mind from between his legs long enough to see that something was wrong. Something was troubling him. “Nathan . . . are you okay?”

Shaking his head with his eyes on the floor, he muttered, “No, not really.”

“You need to . . . you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

Silence.

I adjusted the throw. “Um, what . . . how can I . . . what do you need from me?”

Finally lifting his eyes to mine, he said, “If I tell you, you’re probably going to kick me out.”

With a frown, I asked, “Well, what is it? Something illegal?”

“No. Nadia, I—shit. What the fuck am I doing here?” He stood and dragged his hand down his face. “I’m just go. This was a dumb idea. Dumb as hell.”

Trying to lighten the mood, I said, “There’s no way whatever’s in your mind is dumb, Nathan. I would never associate that word with you. *Ever*. You. . . you’re brilliant.”

He stared at me, then moved closer to me, his eyes falling to my lips before he covered them with his. Closing my eyes, I lifted my hands to his arms to steady myself as I involuntarily opened my mouth and his tongue accepted my invitation to get reacquainted with mine. We kissed for what felt like hours and a second at the same time, his hands finding the sides of my face as his tongue stroked mine. I moaned, wrapped my arms around him, and squeezed my thighs together as a relentless throbbing settled in my core.

Then he backed away from me, leaving my mouth and making me pop my eyes open. He looked almost startled, like he hadn’t expected the kiss to feel the way it felt, and my inner feelings mirrored that look. We’d kissed before, even with tongue, but this? This was different, and the only thought in my mind was of dropping that throw.

So I did.

His eyes widened as they slid down my body back up to my face, and less than a second later, he was on me again, kissing me hungrily, holding my face in those big hands, his cologne pervading my personal space and making me feel almost intoxicated. I could feel him backing me toward something or somewhere, but I didn't care. All I knew was that this felt good, his body crowding mine, his tongue invading my mouth, his moans filling my ears.

My back hit the door, or maybe the wall, and then one of his hands moved from the side of my face to the front of my neck as his mouth left mine and found my right breast. He pulled the nipple into his mouth and bit it.

“Uh!” I whined, gripping the back of his head.

He bit it again, then licked it, then sucked it. His grip on my neck a little firmer now, he kissed his way from my breast to my stomach, dipping his tongue in my navel before finally finding my core, urging me to open my legs, and I did.

Gladly.

*Eagerly.*

His tongue lapped out, flicking my clit as he eased a finger inside me.

“Mmmmm,” he hummed. “Nice and wet.”

“Ohhhh!” I moaned. It'd been a long time since a man touched me, since I'd *let* a man touch me, and even then, it didn't feel like this. Not even close.

Shit!

He kept licking me and fingering me until he licked and fingered me to the verge of my undoing, and then he stood, never moving that hand that had taken possession of my neck. Something about his gentle squeezing of it made this, *all of this*, feel more intense, more decadent, more . . . *savage*.

“I wanna be inside you when you cum,” he growled.

He wasn't going to get any arguments from me.

With his eyes on me, he moved his hand from my neck, produced a condom, and snatched his jogging pants and underwear down. I wanted to see him cover himself, but when I tried to look down, his hand returned to my neck.

“You trying to see?” he asked, in a voice I'd never heard come from him before. A commanding voice.

I liked it.

*A lot.*

I tried to nod. He tightened his hold on my neck, so I croaked, “Yes.”

Shaking his head, he narrowed his eyes at me. “You don't need to see. All you need to do is wrap your legs around me and *feel*.”

All I could think to say was, “Okay,” because if he didn't put himself inside me ASAP, I was going to lose my entire and complete mind.

With his head cocked to the side, he asked, “You sure you want it, Nadia?”

I swallowed against his hand. “Yes.”

“Good.”



Moving his hand again, he helped me wrap my legs around his waist, and then eased inside me, closing his eyes and mumbling, “Shit!”

I threw my head back, hitting it on the wall. Hell, I might’ve given myself a concussion for all I knew, but the only thing I could feel was him stretching me, and it felt like paradise. He pulled back and with his eyes on my face, plunged back in with force, making my mouth drop open.

In and out he slid as my body worked to accommodate him. He felt so good, I wondered again if this was a dream, so I dropped my head to look down between us and the hand returned to my neck.

“Didn’t I tell you that you don’t need to see?” he asked, his voice gruff, demanding.

“Y-yes ...” I whined.

He tightened his grip on my neck and kept stroking me. “Then why in the fuck are you trying to look?”

“I . . . I . . . I don’t knooooow! Nathannnn!”

He thrusted harder and deeper, gripped my neck tighter, so tight that although I could still breathe, I began to feel a little light-headed. My body was in sensory overload as the pressure he’d built in my core while licking me increased, making me feel confused and elated at the same time, and when the bubble inside of me burst, I screamed at the top of my lungs.

And he just kept going.

And going . . .

*And going . . .*

Hand on my neck, dick assaulting my pussy, until another ball of energy filled me and exploded. Then, he sped up his thrusts, removed his hand from my neck, buried his face in the side of it, and whimpered as I felt him pulsate inside of me.

Moments later, this man pulled out of me, and with my legs still around his waist, carried me to my couch. Then he stood before me as he kicked his pants and underwear from around his ankles and pulled his shirt over his head.

“You wanted to see? Now you can see.”

I stared up at him, let my eyes peruse his beautiful body from his dreads down to his erect penis, to his powerful thighs and legs, then back up to his handsome face.

“Did—didn’t you . . . finish?” I asked in a tiny voice.

He nodded.

“But you’re still . . . you’re still *hard*.”

“I know. What’re you going to do about it?”

I sat there as all kinds of nasty images played in my mind, finally chose one, and slid off my couch onto my knees on the floor. Peeling the condom off him, I licked the head of his penis, flicking my tongue back and forth, and smiled when he stumbled a little. He had definitely finished, because his shaft was wet with the evidence of it, so I took my time and used my tongue to clean him, gliding it over every inch of him repeatedly as he gripped the back of my head and filled my ears with tortured groans. Then I slid him deep into my mouth and made it my business to suck him dry.

# Nathan

I woke up on her couch, her smaller body on top of mine, and I smiled at the memory of what we'd shared the night before. I rubbed my hand up and down the soft skin of her back, became aware of the condition of my dick, and told myself not to be greedy. Shit, I didn't want to run the woman away. Not with a pussy like hers, and that mouth?

Gooooot. Damn!

I knew it, though. I knew a woman who was as pent-up as Nadia had to have some good pussy, but she wasn't pent-up last night.

She definitely wasn't pent-up.

At. All.

Damn, I wanted some more of what she had to offer.

My dick jumped at the thought of it, and that's when she moved, adjusting herself on my body. "You got any more condoms?" she asked groggily.

"Uh, yeah."

Lifting from my body to stand next to the couch, she said, "Get one."

That shit turned me completely on, but still, I said, "Taking orders isn't my thing, Nadia. Not when it comes to this."

Her eyes widened. “Oh . . . so you don’t want me again?”

I sat up and licked my lips. “I do, but on my terms.”

Tilting her head to the side, she asked, “What are your terms, then, Nathan? Because I need some more of what I had last night.”

I stood. “Bend over this couch and I’ll show you.”

She did as I said, and I took my time getting the condom and covering myself with it, knowing the anticipation would get to her. When she turned her head to see what I was doing, I barked, “What did I tell you about trying to see? When I want you to look, I’ll tell you to look.”

She turned back around and nodded, and I finally went over to her, sliding a hand over her ass and then gliding into her wetness.

“Damn, you were ready for me, huh?” I mumbled.

“Mm-hmmmm,” she whimpered.

The thing with Nadia’s pussy was, it was so good, it made it hard for me to pace myself, so although I wanted to take it nice and slow, I couldn’t, and before I knew it, I was driving into her like a damn crazy man, and then I grabbed her wrists, pulling her arms behind her and making her chest fall onto the back of the couch, the side of her face smashing against the fabric. I watched her ass vibrate as I plowed into her over and over again, and then I dropped her arms and grabbed the front of her neck, pulling her head back and squeezing her throat just enough to induce the euphoria she would probably never readily admit to feeling. Soon, I felt her shudder, her walls contracting around my dick, and that was all she wrote. That

was it. The next thing I felt was the best feeling in the world, me filling that damn condom to capacity.

“Can I . . .” I felt her swallow hard. “Can I look at you now?”

I let her neck go and bent over her back, grabbing her and spinning us around until I was sitting on the couch and she was sitting on me. “Yeah.”

She craned her neck to peer at my face behind her. “You’re still hard.”

“I know.”

“Do you . . . does that always happen? I mean, does it always stay hard like that after you . . . cum?”

“Not always, but most of the time.”

“Oh . . . do you want me to do something about it?”

“Uh-huh.”

She tried to move from my lap, but I stopped her. “I want you to ride it, baby,” I murmured.

And she did. She rode the hell out of it.

## Nathan

### *Seven hours earlier . . .*

I had been sitting on the side of my bed staring into the darkness for an hour or so, tired but not sleepy. I knew I needed to go to sleep, though, because despite the current condition of my home, I needed the rest since I had to be at work in the morning.

Scratching my forehead, I told myself that I'd check on my kids one more time and then lay it down and at least attempt to sleep, but knew it would be hard with all those foreign bodies in my home, and yeah, I was referring to the damn cousins of mine Bernard kept parading in and out of there. All of them were some fucking freeloading leeches, but I truly felt like I didn't have a choice but to let this shit ride for now, until I sorted everything out that needed to be sorted out, and when I did, Bernard wasn't the only somebody I was cutting ties with. I was going to do some much-needed housecleaning.

Sighing, I left my room, checking on my boy first. He was fast asleep with those earphones still on, his mouth hung open. I eased the earphones off his head, kissed his cheek, and covered him up before moving to Mecca's room. Her door was open, which was a rare thing. When I peeped inside and didn't see her, my heart jumped in my chest. Then I told myself she was probably in the bathroom, but a quick check of it told me that was wrong.

Was she . . .

I ran out of her room and down the stairs, yelling her name even though she couldn't hear me, but I had to do something. I made it to the living room to find it empty except for my mother, who was sprawled out on the sofa with a damn cigarette dangling from her mouth. "The hell you calling Mec for like she can hear you? I swear you do the dumbest shit sometimes, Nate."

"Where is she? You seen her?"

She sat up with a moan. "Mmmm, I think she in the kitchen. Yeah, that's where I saw her go."

"Where's everybody else? 'Nard, Scoop, Lil' Jimmy, Davis?"

"I don't know . . . oh, I think 'Nard and them went out back to shoot dice."

I sighed. Now these fools were gambling on my property? Shit.

Shaking my head, I left Mama and headed into the kitchen, trying to decide if I was going to fuss at Mecca about disobeying me and leaving her room now or later. I didn't

want her or Ian around these people, because I didn't trust them, not one of them, especially Bernard. At the very least, Bernard was a bad influence.

*At the very least.*

But, to be honest, there weren't many people on the planet I trusted around my kids. Call me overprotective and I'll proudly be that.

My eyes immediately found my daughter with some dude all up in her face, a dude I didn't recognize, a dude I'd never seen before. Without a second thought, I moved towards them, dropping my hand on the shorter man's shoulder with a loud smack. "Look, I don't know who you are or what the hell you're doing in my kitchen and I really don't care, but I'ma need you to back up off my daughter." Then my eyes met Mecca's frightened ones, and I said, "Go to your room."

She scurried out of the kitchen without protesting.

I'd turned back to finish handling this dude, and by handling him, I meant kicking his ass all the way out my front door, when Bernard and Scoop stumbled into my kitchen from the backyard, laughing loudly.

"Nate! You met Chambers here? He one of Scoop's boys," my brother informed me.

"Yeah, he's the plug, man! Got some fire-ass weed if you're in the market for some," Scoop chimed in.

"Get the fuck out of my house. All of y'all get the fuck out *now!*" I yelled, because fuck all of this!

Bernard, Scoop, and this Chambers nigga all looked startled, and then Bernard started laughing. So did Scoop.



Chambers smiled a little but dropped it when he looked at me.

“Man, you need to stop tripping, Nate. We just trying to kick it,” Bernard said.

“Ain’t gon’ be no more kicking a damn thing in my house! This dude was in my daughter’s face—”

“All I did was ask her what her name was, tried to get her number. I ain’t know she was your kid, man. I got a woman, but your daughter? Shidddd, she looked grown to me,” this fool said, and that’s when I completely lost it and punched his ass. He hit the floor, and then I felt someone, or a couple of someones, grab me.

“Get off me and get the hell out of my house!” I roared.

“Nard, tell everybody to go on home. They can come back tomorrow night when Nate done calmed down.” That was an almost sober-sounding Mama, who’d entered the kitchen and was standing somewhere behind me.

Without turning to face her, I said, “Nah, I’m over this shit. You can do whatever you feel like you got to do, Ma, but y’all gotta go.”

“*Y’all?* You tryna put me out, too?” Mama asked, her voice shrill.

“I ain’t *trying* to do nothing! I’m *telling* you to leave now! All y’all need to leave!” By that time, the rest of my unwanted guests had made their way into the kitchen from the backyard, probably drawn there by the commotion.

“No!” Mama countered.

“Okay,” I said in an even voice, leaving the kitchen, rushing up to my room, and back downstairs to find that everyone had migrated to my living room just that quickly. Music was playing, and they were standing around like they owned the damn place. Hell, they didn’t even notice me entering the room. So, sure Ian was asleep and knowing that Mecca wouldn’t hear anything, I aimed my gun at the floor and pulled the trigger while shouting, “I said, get the fuck out of my house!”

All of them, including my mother, scattered like roaches. Scoop actually dragged a woozy Chambers out of my house.

I stood there for a second before sitting on the sofa and cradling my head in my hands. I knew I’d just started a war with my mother and brother that I’d been trying to avoid, but fuck it. It was what it was.

Leaning back, I stared at the ceiling before deciding to search my house for stragglers, locking everything thing up, and then checking on my kids again, making sure Chambers hadn’t touched Mecca. Satisfied she hadn’t been physically harmed, I went to bed.

But I still couldn’t sleep, and I couldn’t settle my mind. I needed something.

I needed *someone*.

Nadia.

It was so late, though, too late. And the kids . . . I couldn’t leave them alone.

But I needed her at that moment. I needed to at least see her.

So I called Mecca's assistant and broadened her job description by asking her to come spend the night at the house while I handled an emergency and was relieved when she said yes.

After she arrived, I left, driving to Nadia's place.

*Now . . .*

That wasn't how things were supposed to go. My full intentions were to just talk to her. I just needed to be around her, that's it. Hell, I didn't really expect her to answer the door at all, but I had to try because I was just . . . drawn to her.

So her opening to door for me threw me off, and after I walked into her place, I really didn't know what to say. I didn't know what I wanted from her. Well, I knew what I wanted from her, I just knew it was too soon and she was still too closed off, or at least I thought she was. So after she asked, I couldn't tell her. If she hadn't dropped that damn blanket, I would've left. Shit, I *should've* left, because I was sure I'd just fucked everything up with her in a major way.

I choked her, went full-on dominant with her, and I knew I shouldn't have. Although she took it all like a champ, I was sure she'd had time to think about it and was done with my

ass. Maybe if I apologized, explained my state of mind at the time . . . maybe she'd give me another chance.

And some more pussy.

Maybe?

Probably not.

Nevertheless, I dialed her number and gripped my forehead as the phone rang in my ear.

## Nadia

I was going to get my ass fired if I kept cancelling classes, but I had no choice. I was tired, exhausted, and at the very least, I needed the day to regroup and figure out exactly what happened the night before, because I just wasn't sure. A part of me was convinced I'd been dreaming, that there was no way any of that could've really happened the way my mind was telling me it happened. But my body bore the evidence of its realness—the slight bruising on my neck, the soreness of my core, the tingling I felt whenever I thought about feeling Nathan inside of me, the graphic memories of the smells and sounds of our sex.

Oh, it happened.

It *definitely* happened.

Reaching up and resting a hand on my neck, I licked my lips and looked down at my body. It was almost noon and I hadn't moved from my couch, hadn't bathed or eaten. I'd just been sitting there. That was all I could bring myself to do as I tried to figure out how I felt about it all. It was so unexpected and nasty and extremely pleasurable, like nothing I'd ever experienced before. I liked it and hated myself for liking it. The rational, level-headed part of me wanted to push Nathan away, to shut him out of my life, but the most carnal part of me wanted more of him, and she wanted it just like she got it last night.

Yeah, she really, *really* wanted that.

Nasty ass.

My phone rang, and my pulse began to thrum in my neck when his name popped up on the screen.

Nathan.

Without hesitation, I answered it with a soft, "Hello?"

"Hey . . . you busy? Getting ready for class?" He sounded a little timid, much less self-assured than I was accustomed to.

"No, I took off today. I didn't get much sleep last night."

There was a moment of silence, and then he said, "That . . . that's why I was calling. I, um . . . I wanted to apologize for what—for the way I behaved last night."

"It was actually this morning."

"Yeah . . . this morning. Look, I shouldn't have done that stuff I did to you. I-I didn't even ask if you would be okay

with it. I was just . . . there's some stuff going on in my life, and I wasn't thinking straight and—”

“It's okay. I . . . I liked it.” Shit, I *loved* it, I added mentally.

“You-you did? Really?”

My core started thumping between my legs. “Mm-hmm. Nathan, are you at work?”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing for lunch?”

“Um, I don't have any plans.”

“Why don't you come over here for lunch?”

“Okay, um . . . what do you feel like having for lunch? I can bring you something.”

“The only thing I want is you. Bring yourself, and believe me, I'm okay with anything you want to do to me when you get here.”

Carnal Nadia for the win.

## Nadia

He had his hand on the side of my face, pressing it into the mattress as he slid in and out of me from behind, his other hand tightly gripping and pushing against my butt cheek. His strokes were more measured, more controlled than they'd been the night before, and it felt so good, all I could do was moan from somewhere deep inside of me.

He moved his hand from my face and bent over until his mouth touched my ear. "You got some good pussy, Nadia. It's so damn good, I don't know how long I'ma be able to stay in it."

Before I could respond, he pulled out of me, raised my hips up higher, and put his mouth on me, licking and fingering me from behind at a frenzied pace. After I'd both exploded all over his fingers and yelled like someone was killing me, he was inside me again, the measured thrusts abandoned as he drove hard and deep and fast while smacking me on the ass.

Thwack!

Thwack!

Thwack!

And with each blow, I moaned a little louder and a new orgasm intensified that much more, until I yelled again, felt his hand return to the side of my face, and then he roared as he delivered his final thrusts before collapsing onto my back.

## Nathan

She attacked me the moment I stepped in her door, and shit, I wanted her so bad, I just went with it, but as we lay in her bed, both of us trying to catch our breath, I glanced over at her and said, “You were out of order.” Then I flipped over on my side and faced her.

With a little frown, she asked, “What do you mean?”

“You initiated. That’s not how this works.”

“Why’d you let me, then?”

“Because I wanted you, but that doesn’t negate the fact that I also wanted, *needed*, to be the one to initiate it.”

She stared at me for a moment. “Tell me how it works, then. Tell me what I was supposed to do.”

“You sure you wanna know? You sure you wanna keep doing this?”



She nodded. "I'm sure I wanna keep feeling what you make me feel, so give me the rules and I'll follow them."

Well, that made my still-hard dick grow harder.

"Okay," I said, fighting a smile that was dying to show itself. Now wasn't the time for smiles. "Rule number one: I'm the dominant. I'm *always* the dominant. No exceptions. We fuck when I decide we fuck."

"What if I want or need to . . . fuck?"

"I'll know. You don't have to tell me. As your dominant, it's my job to pick up on stuff like that."

"Okay, so I'm the submissive? I studied this stuff a little, but it was never something that really interested me. Never been too deep into sexology."

I lifted an eyebrow. "So you're into kink now?"

"I'm into *your* kink. What else do you like to do besides autoerotic asphyxiation? Bondage? Whips?" Her eyes were wide with excitement.

"Not whips, but I do enjoy using handcuffs on my partner."

She licked her lips, and her eyes darted from my face. "You didn't . . . choke me this time."

"You wanted me to?"

"Aren't you supposed to already know I did?"

I smiled. "That smart mouth of yours is going to get you in trouble, Nadia, and you might not like the punishment."

"I might not like it, but I might *love* it."

“You never tried kink before while you were being nasty back in the day?”

“No. Why?”

I reached over and pinched her nipple, making her wince, and then this look of satisfaction spread over her face. “You like pain, Nadia?” I asked.

“I guess I like pain relief, but you can only have the relief after you experience the pain, so I yeah . . . I suppose I like pain, too.”

That turned me on so much, it left me speechless.

“How long have you been into this kink?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Since my college days.”

“Why?”

“Uh, to be honest, I needed something to take my mind off my fucked-up life. I needed an escape. I needed to feel in control of something.”

“You ever been a submissive?”

I nodded. “Every good dominant needs to know what it means to be a submissive.”

“Your dominant was a woman?”

“I’m not gay or bi, Nadia.”

“Okay . . . so you know what you’re doing? You know how to keep things . . . safe?”

“Does it feel like I know what I’m doing? Does it ever feel unsafe?”

“No.”

“I don’t like taking chances, so I don’t like to apply too much pressure. I wouldn’t want you to pass out . . . or worse.”

“Good, because I don’t want to pass out . . . or worse.”

“Hey, since we’re on this subject, you need to choose a safe word that you can use if you ever feel like things are going too far.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them, and said, “Stop.”

“That’s your safe word?”

She gave me a sheepish look. “It’s all I could come up with.”

I nodded, let my eyes fall to her neck, and said, “I won’t let that happen again. I got carried away.” She gave me a look of confusion. So I added, “The bruising.”

“Oh . . . I like it, and I tend to bruise easily anyway.”

I closed my eyes and tried to calm myself down, because at this point, I was ready to screw her into a damn stupor. “Hey, um . . . you know I said things at home are kind of messed up?”

She nodded. “You wanna talk about it?”

“Not really. It’s just . . . I won’t be able to spend as much time with you as I want to for a while. I need to be home with my kids more right now.”

“Oh . . .” she said softly.

I reached over and placed my hand on her soft cheek. “But I’ll make time for us. I promise. I’ll make a way to spend time with you. You’re important to me.”

“Because we’re having sex now?” she asked with narrowed eyes.

“No, Nadia. You’re important to me because I care about you and I didn’t just start caring about you last night.”

“This morning.”

I smiled again. “This morning.”

“Good, because I care about you, too, and if or when you’re ready to talk about what’s going on at home, I’ll be here to listen. I owe you a shoulder, remember?”

“Yeah. Now . . . roll over on your stomach.”

“Why?”

I just stared at her until she did as I said, and then I sexed her until we were both drenched in sweat.

## Nadia

“What color panties do you have on?”

With my phone up to my ear, I frowned as I crossed the parking lot to my car. “What?” I asked.

“What color panties do you have on?” Nathan repeated.

“Uh . . . black. I’m wearing white pants.”

“I didn’t ask about the pants, baby. Just the panties.”

“And I told you they’re black, Nathan.” I tried to lace my voice with attitude, but I was smiling. I liked this little role-playing thing we were doing, but I knew he was serious about it. Hell, I was kind of serious about it, too.

“Black is boring, Nadia. Ain’t *nothing* boring about your pussy.”

Heat swarmed my cheeks. “Um . . . so you don’t want me to wear black panties?” I’d made it to my car and had climbed in before I noticed the piece of paper tucked under my

windshield. Opening the door, I stepped out to grab it, sure it was some college party flyer of some sort.

“No, I don’t, and you know what? I’m actually glad you brought up pants. I don’t want you to wear pants anymore either.”

Climbing back in my car and tossing the paper on the passenger seat, I said, “Are you serious?”

“Do I sound serious, baby?”

I settled in my seat, and asked, “You want me to wear skirts?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, when I see you again, I’ll be wearing a skirt.”

“But you never know when you might see me again. What if I decide to surprise you?”

“So . . . you want me to wear skirts all the time?”

“Or dresses.”

I held the phone.

“Is that going to be a problem, Nadia?”

“Well, yeah. I don’t own many skirts or dresses, Nathan.”

“I’ll buy you some.”

“That’s not what I meant. I just . . . I don’t like wearing skirts or dresses.”

“You have beautiful legs, baby, and I wanna see them, so I’mma need you to start doing what I asked you to do. And red.”

“Red?”

“Red panties. Red panties only. Talk to you later, baby.”

Then he hung up, and I dialed a number.

“Hello?” Sharla answered.

“Hey! Let’s call Brooklyn. I need to go shopping.”

“Damn, girl, you start dating a rich, fine nigga and decide to buy a whole new wardrobe?” Sharla said loudly.

“Right! And she’s buying colors other than tan, dark tan, and tan tan—”

“Damn, y’all just can’t help it, can you?” I interrupted Brooklyn.

“Girl, come on! You know we’re telling the truth. The last time you bought anything even remotely as cute as this stuff is when we went shopping for the benefit. It’s him, isn’t it?” Sharla inquired, and then her mouth dropped open. “Wait, you fucked him!”

“You did?!” Brooklyn shrieked.

“First of all, could you two not yell in this store?” I took the clothes they were both holding for me and moved toward the checkout counter.

“Aw, shit! You did! Spill it, bitch!” Surprisingly, that was Brooklyn, not Sharla.

“Let me pay for my clothes first,” I hissed.

We were literally an inch out of the store when they attacked me again. So I said, “Food court. I’m hungry. If y’all feed me, I’ll tell you if we did or did not have sex.”

“Nope. You’re gonna tell us on the way to the food court,” Brooklyn said.

“Damn, you’re being real aggressive about what I did or didn’t do with my vagina,” I countered.

“Ho’, tell us what happened!” Sharla yelled.

I stopped walking, turning to look at both of them standing behind me. “Yes, we had sex. Really good sex. A lot of good sex. Nasty sex. It was the nastiest, roughest sex I’ve ever had, and I can’t wait to do it again,” I confessed, and then I turned and resumed the trek to the food court as they high-fived each other while plying me with questions that I answered mostly honestly, telling them that he had a big stick that he definitely knew how to use along with a gifted tongue and beefy fingers. What I did not tell them was the kinky part. I wasn’t ready to tell that yet.

## Nathan



“Nate, baby . . . I’m sorry. You know I’m not myself when I get drunk. Let me come back home.”

I glanced at my kids sitting at the table with me eating the dinner I’d kind of made for us. It was nowhere near as good as Mama’s cooking, but it also didn’t come with the baggage that was attached to my mother.

I sighed into the phone. “Hold on.” Leaving the dining room table, I stepped into the kitchen. “Yeah, Ma, I know what happens when you drink. It’s hard to forget that shit, but the thing is, you know what happens, too, but you still chose to do it. In my house, over your grandchildren.”

“Nate—”

“When I moved you in with us, you were sober, and do you remember what you promised me?”

“Nathan . . .”

“Do you, Mama? Do you remember how you begged me to let you back into my life, said you appreciated the money I was sending but that you wanted to rebuild our relationship? That you wanted to be the mother to my kids that you never were to me?”

“Nate, you think I don’t know I messed up?! I know I did, and all I’m asking now is for your forgiveness! Bernard is my son and I love him and he just got home and I wanted him with me, that’s all! You got kids. You should understand how I feel!”

“So that’s why you threatened me into letting him stay? Because he’s your son and you love him?”

“Yes!”

“What about, me, Mama? Am I not your son?” Damn, I felt like a kid again.

“You know I love you, too! You know that!”

“No, Mama. I don’t know that. Never really felt it, either, but I thought after all these years that Bernard was locked up and you were helping me with the kids that maybe you did love me. But now . . . I don’t think you love anyone but yourself, and you can’t even treat yourself right.”

“Nathan, please let me come home, son.”

“Where you staying, Mama? With Aunt Chris?”

“Yeah . . .”

“Nard staying there, too?”

“No, I don’t know where he’s staying. Wasn’t enough room here for him. Hell, I’m sharing a room with Chris’s grandbabies.”

“I’ll send your stuff over there.”

“Nate, please!”

I hung up and finished eating dinner with my kids.

## Nadia

“You in bed?” he asked.

“Yeah. You in bed?” I replied.

“Yeah. Did I wake you?”

“No.”

“Good. Hey, I miss you.”

“I miss you, too, and that’s crazy since we had ‘lunch’ together today.”

He chuckled into the phone. “Why you say lunch like that?”

I smiled. “Because that was one hell of a lunch.”

“It was. Hey, Nadia?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

With a frown, I asked, “For what?”

“For being the peace I need right now and for not running from me and what I am.”

“What are you other than a gorgeous, kind man who can make me feel like I’m floating on a cloud?”

I heard him sigh. “There’re things about me that I’m not ready to share yet, but . . . I don’t know. Maybe I think I’m not worthy of a woman like you—so beautiful, sexy, accepting.”

“Accepting of your kink?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t even gonna try it with you, because I was convinced you wouldn’t be into it. I still can’t believe you are.”

“Shoot, I can’t either.”

We both laughed, and then I added, “But I guess you just have an effect on me that I can’t fight. Not that I want to fight it.”

“And I’m glad you don’t.”

“But back to what you just said about maybe not being worthy of me. An unworthy dominant? Is that a thing?”

Another chuckle. “There goes that smart mouth again. I’m really going to have to punish you the next time I see you.”

“I hope it’s sooner rather than later. Um, Nathan?”

“Mm-hmm ...”

“I need to ask you something, and it’s okay if you say no.”

“Yes, I’ll marry you.”

I laughed. “No, not that. Uh, my father is coming to town in a couple of weeks, and my mom has planned this dinner for him and I told her I was seeing you and she wanted me to invite you to come. My sister and her boyfriend will be there, too. I know we haven’t been dating long and then there’s the fact that you don’t want to leave your kids right now. I mean, they could come, but my family can get really raunchy and—”

“I’d love to have dinner with you and your family, Nadia.”

“You would?”

“Of course, I would. And now, I have an invitation for you.”

“Okay ...”

“I’m hosting a barbecue at my house soon. It’s for business, for the sports agency I’m a partner in. We’re trying to woo

some guys into signing with us. I'd be honored if you'd come as my date. They'll be other folks, there, too, my friend Luke who owns the agency, his wife, and another guy who's invested in the agency and his wife."

"Okay."

"Great. Then it's a date."

"It's two dates."

"Right. So, are you still wearing those black panties?"

"I'm not wearing any panties, Nathan. I sleep in the nude."

"Well, that's one demand I won't have to make of you, then."

## Nadia

After a week of having lunches, early dinners, and late-night snacks with Nathan that involved very little food, the last thing I wanted to do was to miss seeing him for an entire day, but I suppose I had no choice. He had a business lunch meeting scheduled and I had to attend the damn sex abuse forum that evening during what had become our usual dinner date time. All that stuff I said about not wanting to wear him out? Well, that was canceled, over. I very much wanted to wear him out and let him wear me out. Hell, I wanted to be—

Another test packet landed on the pile at the edge of my table, and I was brought back to the task at hand. I was supposed to be proctoring an exam for my History of Psychology class, a task I could have handed to Clark, but for some unknown reason, I didn't. I proctored my own tests for the class Nathan was in, too, because I wanted to be around Nathan back then, even if I was trying to pretend I wasn't interested.

Yeah, I had a bad habit of lying to myself.

I lifted my eyes from the stack of tests to the scattered bodies occupying desks in the classroom, a much smaller room than the auditorium where my Psych 101 classes were held. As my eyes swept over the space, they landed on a sight that made me question my sanity. Just when I'd stopped all that crazy auditory hallucinating, my brain was trying to convince me that Nathan was sitting in the back of the classroom with his eyes on me, a serious expression on his face. Time passed as student after student turned in their test, but my eyes remained on him and his on me. I wasn't losing it. He was really there, his presence charging the air in the room with energy. I could feel my pulse thumping in my neck as my heart raced. I didn't even notice when the classroom finally cleared out, but he did. That was when he finally stood from the desk he'd been occupying and began walking toward me in a navy-blue suit that made my mouth water.

Once he was standing right in front of me, I said, "To what do I owe this surprise? You missed me since we didn't meet for lunch?"

"Mm-hmm. . . stand up, Nadia."

He was in dominant mode. I could tell from the tone of his voice. So of course I stood up, because I liked him in dominant mode.

His eyes perused me from my face, to my black blouse, down to my white pencil skirt, exposed legs, and black pumps. "Turn around," he ordered.

I did, standing there for a moment before I heard him walk away. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do at that point,

but I did turn my head to find him closing the classroom door and turning the lock on the knob.

Then his eyes swept back over to me. “There you go trying to see again. I didn’t tell you to turn around, baby.”

Facing forward, I asked. “Why’d you lock the door?”

No answer. Seconds passed, and then I felt his hands on my hips

“Nathan?”

His hands gathered the fabric of my skirt as his lips met my neck. I shut my eyes *and* my mouth.

He’d pulled my skirt up until it was bunched around my waist when he finally spoke. “Black panties.”

My eyes popped open. “I’m wearing a white skirt. I had to wear black panties.”

Finally spinning me around to face him, he shook his head. “I said no black panties and I meant *no black panties*. Take them off and give them to me.”

I blinked few times as I wondered if he was serious.

“Now,” he added.

So he *was* serious.

I slid my panties down, picked them up from the floor, and handed them to him, watched as he held them up to his nose and inhaled, and felt my core begin to throb with desire for him.

His eyes narrowed as he stuffed my panties into the inside pocket of his suit jacket, and then he was on me, his hands



cradling my face, his mouth devouring mine. I grabbed his thick arms for support, because my legs were trembling as my heartrate threatened to skid out of control.

There was something about being there in that classroom which had just moments earlier been full of students that made his touch more potent, his presence more exciting. When he ended the kiss and backed away from me, I dropped my hands and gasped for air. I was damn near hyperventilating with need for him, but that didn't make sense. I'd just had him inside me the day before.

What was this man doing to me?

And why did it feel so good?

“You disobeyed me, baby,” he said, rubbing his thumb across his bottom lip.

“I know.”

“And that means you have to be punished.”

*Sounds good to me.*

I licked my lips. “O-okay. What's my punishment?”

He gave me a slow smile. “I want you to touch yourself.”

“Touch myself? Where?”

Crossing his arms, his eyes dropped to my exposed mound. “There. I wanna watch you please yourself, baby.”

My eyes darted around the room. “Here?”

He nodded. “Right here and right now.”

“Um ...”

Stepping closer to me, he asked. “You don’t like this punishment, baby? You don’t like pleasing yourself?”

“I do, but I’ve never done it in front of someone.”

He’d moved even closer. “I know you’re not telling me you’re shy. You are definitely not shy when *I* please you.”

“Th-that’s not what I’m saying . . .”

Now, he was in my face, his mouth hovering over mine. “What are you saying, then?”

I lifted my eyes to meet his and straightened my posture. “Nothing. Where do you want me? On the table?”

He moved to the side and smiled as he swept his arm out as if to say, “Go ahead, baby.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

As I bent over to take my heels off, I heard him say, “Leave them on.”

Again, I nodded.

Taking my time, I moved the tests, my tablet, and everything else from the table to my chair, and climbed up on the table, sitting on it and opening my legs wide. With tightly shut eyes and a trembling hand, I began to touch myself. Of course, masturbating wasn’t foreign to me. I was a little out of practice, but not a total novice. I was apprehensive about doing it in front of him. However, I wasn’t ashamed. It was just that I was so excited, *too* excited. That was what Nathan Moore had quickly brought into my life—an excitement that I loved, craved, had no idea I needed, and honestly, was a little afraid of.

Spinning by body around, I lay back on the table, planted my feet on it, and let my legs fall open wide, continuing to rub my clit. My eyes were closed, but I could hear Nathan as he moved, probably to get a better view of my work. It didn't take long for my body to react to me stimulating my clit as blood flooded it and an aching anticipation began to build in my core. I sucked in a breath, lowering my hand to dip a finger inside me, then moved it back up to wet my clit with my juices. Back and forth . . . back and forth my hand moved, working my sensitive flesh as I began to rock my hips and whine softly. I raised my head and fixed my eyes on Nathan, who was staring at me intently, his hands buried in the pockets of his slacks. I couldn't read his face, but his reaction really didn't matter to me. The mere fact that he was watching me unfold was enough.

That alone was ecstasy.

I was lost in the euphoria of an impending orgasm when my hand was snatched away from my core, and almost in the same second, he was pulling me to the edge of the table. He took my mouth, and then he sank deeply into me, making me gasp. His hand met my neck, his grasp gradually tightening as he somehow managed to lay siege to my mouth while thrusting in and out of me at a frenetic pace. We filled the classroom with moans, groans, our labored breathing, and the sound of him sliding in and out of my flooded core. I'd never felt anything so frantically good in all my life, and as the ball of pleasure inside of me exploded, leaving me bathed in relief and satiation, I felt Nathan release a growl as his thrusts slowed and he finally collapsed onto my weak body. He lifted his head to kiss me gently on the lips, then my neck.

And as I dropped my head back onto the table and closed my eyes, I knew in my soul that I would do absolutely anything to keep this man in my life.

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I'd almost forgotten about our Mahogany Women in Motion meeting, would've been under Nathan's body instead had Sharla not texted me a reminder that morning. After she did, I still lay in bed with thoughts of Nathan occupying my mind. I couldn't concentrate on the concerns of my life or my past transgressions if I wanted to. Nathan had become my escape, my balm, my pastime, and very nearly . . . my purpose. Sure, I had a PhD in psychology and knew my attachment to him was unhealthy. It was wrong and maybe even a little psychologically dangerous to block out my problems with him rather than deal with them head on, as I should've long ago. But all this time, the years I'd spent crucifying myself relentlessly for offenses I committed when I was nineteen, hadn't fixed anything. I still held the guilt, and Sullivan's family still hated me. So . . . fuck it. I was going to enjoy this new obsession of mine for however long it lasted or until I screwed it up.

Sharla called to let me know they were out on my complex's parking lot just as I had finished getting ready. So I grabbed my purse, and a couple of minutes later, we were on our way to the meeting.

"I will never get over the size of this place. Damn, Renee upgraded like a mug," an awestruck Sharla declared.

"She deserved this upgrade. I will never understand why she married that damn baby troll the first time," Brooklyn said.

"I know that's right! When she used to bring him to events, I would wonder what the hell she saw in his ugly ass, but that second husband? Got dayum!" That, of course, was Sharla.

"Child, that negro is *fine* fine!" Brooklyn announced as she and Sharla high-fived each other. "Ain't that right, Noddy?"

My head snapped up from my phone, where I had been staring at a picture I'd snapped of Nathan. "Oh, yeah . . . right."

Evidently, Brooklyn had parked her car in front of the house, and now they were craning their necks to stare at me.

"What?" I asked.

Before either of them could say a word, there was a tap on the driver side window, and we all snatched our heads toward the sound to see a giant standing there with a smile, a really handsome giant.

"Who the fuck is he? Dear Sweet Baby Jesus, please let him be single. Pleeeeease," Sharla muttered.

"Girl, shut up," Brooklyn hissed, then rolled the window down and said, "Hi, valet?"

The giant nodded, that smile still on his face, and we all climbed out of the SUV.

“Shit, I don’t think I’ma be able to deal with being around two fine men simultaneously,” Brooklyn mumbled, as we climbed the front steps of the house.

“And this from you after you just told me to shut up? Really?” Sharla said.

“The damn man was gonna hear you. Anyway, he had a ring on. He’s married.”

“Shit.”

“Y’all are too much,” I chimed in, shaking my head.

“Oh, you snapped out of that trance you were in earlier? What in the world is that man putting on you? He got any brothers?” Brooklyn questioned.

Rolling my eyes, I replied, “Speaking of married folks . . .”

She’d turned to fully face me and opened her mouth for what I was sure would be a disrespectful remark about her poor husband when the front door opened without either of us having a chance to ring the bell. Her head swiveled around, and my eyes jumped from her to the big, handsome man smiling at us.

*Wow.*

I mean, it wasn’t like it was the first time I’d seen Renee Higgs’ husband, but still . . . *wow.*

“Y’all here for the meeting? Come on in, ladies,” Lorenzo Higgs said in a voice that sounded like the auditory version of silk.

I blinked hard, couldn't make out what my friends said, and managed to utter a thank you as I walked past him into the huge house.

All of our eyes were on him as he said, "Just head to the left into the living room. That's where the other ladies are."

We all nodded, and as we headed into the living room, Sharla said, "My God. My panties are ruined."

I couldn't judge her, because if I hadn't been getting regular good sex from Nathan, I might've had the same problem.

Renee Higgs, our meeting hostess, was so sweet and gracious that I really felt bad for ogling her husband. Sharla and Brooklyn weren't as repentant, because they, along with nearly every other member of our group, leered at the poor man every time he made an appearance in the room to bring refreshments or whisper something in his very lucky wife's ear. But hell, I was lucky, too, and since Nathan decided to text me: *I miss you*, in the middle of the meeting, my mind was too preoccupied with him to covet what Renee had.

Me: *I miss you, too.*

Nathan: *You at your meeting? Should you be texting me?*

Me: *Yes, I'm at my meeting and should you be texting me while I'm here?*

Nathan: *I thought you'd see it after the meeting. Didn't think you'd be looking at your phone.*

Me: *Oh.*

Nathan: *Why are you looking at your phone?*

Me: *Bored. I'd rather be with you.*

Nathan: *Oh really?*

Me: *Yes, really.*

Nathan: *Show me what you're wearing.*

I frowned slightly.

Me: *Now?*

Nathan: *Yes, baby.*

As I read the words, I could hear him saying them in my head, and I swear my clitoris jumped.

Me: *I can't. I'm in a room full of people, Nathan.*

Nathan: *You'll find a way.*

I sat there frowning at the phone for two or three minutes. He couldn't have been serious.

*You know he is,* said a voice in my head.

Nathan: *I'm waiting.*

I lifted my head and looked around the room to find Brooklyn giving me a curious look, mouthed, "I'm going to the restroom," and as she gave me a little nod, I left, hoping I remembered where Renee had said the closest one was.

Thankfully, I did remember, and once I'd locked myself inside it, I took a picture of myself in the mirror and then angled the camera to the lower half of my body so that he



could see my skirt. I sent the pictures to Nathan, and less than a minute later, he was Facetiming me.

I accepted the call with a smile, turning to volume down on my phone. “Hey, you like?”

“Mm-hmm,” he replied. “Now, you know I need to see those panties, baby.”

I bit my bottom lip, glanced at the locked door, and said, “Hold on.”

After I’d pulled my skirt up and showed him what he wanted to see, he said, “Damn, baby . . . you look good enough to eat.”

“You like them? They’re red. Blood red.”

“I *love* them. Wish I was with you so I could take them off of you.”

“Me, too. You coming over this evening?”

“I can’t, baby. Gotta help Mecca with a project. I’ll call you, though.”

“Okay. Talk to you later, then.”

“Definitely.”

When I left that bathroom, there was an extra twist in my hips.

That night, while lying in bed with my eyes on the ceiling, I thought about Renee Higgs, about the changes I'd witnessed her make in her life. Her spirit was so much brighter now in this new marriage than it had been before, and her husband? His love for her oozed from him every time he was in her presence. Their sons weren't there, but there were pictures of them all over that living room—on the walls, the mantle, bookshelves. They were too cute, tiny replicas of their father, handsome little men.

I rolled over, fixing my eyes on the digital bedside clock, and my mind shifted to the conversation I'd just had with Nathan and how he was so sweet and devoted when it came to his kids. I wondered if things went far enough for us to have children together, what that would be like. We'd be a blended family. Would I get along with his children? Hell, I wasn't even sure if I liked or wanted kids, hadn't thought about being a mother in forever. But I couldn't help thinking about my future with Nathan in it, and since his future included his kids, I hoped they'd like me and I'd like them.

## Nathan

“What are you thinking about?” she asked, as I pulled her closer to me in the bed.

“Life,” I replied, kissing the top of her head.

“The good of life or the bad of life?”

I shrugged. “A little of both, I guess.”

“I’m part of the good?” she asked in a light voice.

“Yeah, baby. You don’t know that? You can’t tell from the way I can’t stay away from you?”

“I think you like being with me, and I have a pretty good idea that you enjoy having sex with me . . .”

“And those are good things, baby.”

“But . . . never mind.”

With a wrinkled brow, I looked down at her. “But what?”

“Um . . . but, like you said, you were thinking about both the good and the bad, right?”

“Yeah . . .”

“Well, you can talk to me, Nathan. You can share the bad with me, too. You let me cry on your shoulder before we even became intimate. I know we haven’t been—shit, forget it.”

“No, what were you going to say?”

“It was nothing, really.”

“Naw, if there’s one thing I know about you, it’s that you don’t speak unless you have something to say . . . or I’m making you scream my name.”

“Wow, you’re an arrogant one, aren’t you?”

“It’s not like you don’t have the same effect on me, baby.”

“I can’t believe the dominant one is admitting that.”

“The fact that I like being in control doesn’t make me a liar, Nadia. No sense in me denying the undeniable.”

“True.”

“So what were you saying?”

She sighed, and after a moment of hesitation, softly said, “I was going to say something about how I know we haven’t been together long but that I want you to feel like you can confide in me, and then I realized I was making a huge assumption by saying we’re together at all.”

“Do all psychologists overthink stuff?” I asked, rubbing a hand up and down her arm.

She sat up, her breasts bouncing from the sudden movement. “I’m not overthinking. I . . . I don’t know what this

is between us. I'm not sure how to define it or what to name it."

I stared up at her pretty face for a moment, watched her gnaw on her bottom lip, and finally said, "How would you like for it to be defined, Nadia?"

"You're the one who likes control. You tell me."

"I do like control," I said, moving my arm behind my head. "But I don't control *you* or your life or your expectations, baby. Shit, the fact that you're intelligent and independent is what drew me to you. You know that, right?"

She sighed. "Yes. Look, what I'm trying to say is that this is either a relationship where we're building something we hope will last, or it's casual sex that's not going to lead anywhere. Which one is it to you?"

"Hmmm, let me think about it for moment."

Her face folded a little, and I instantly regretted playing about a subject that was obviously the source of some anxiety for her, and I didn't know why. I didn't understand how she could be so oblivious to the fact that she was desirable, beautiful, and everything any man could want in the world, especially me.

"Um, okay. I need to use the bathroom anyway. Take all the time you need," she mumbled.

Before she could leave the bed, I grabbed her wrist. "I don't need to think about it, baby. I was just messing with you, but I see now that I shouldn't have. So sit there and let me tell you my intention when it comes to me and you."

Her response was to sit still with her eyes glued to me.

“Nadia, from the first time I saw you in that auditorium and quickly learned you were just as smart as you were beautiful, I wanted you in my life. Is our sex good? Hell yeah, but that’s not all you are to me. I want us to grow closer, spend as much time together as we possibly can getting to know each other, and eventually, fall in love. I wanna take care of you, baby, be your rock, erase your past and be your future. And as far as how I’d define what we have? You’re my woman, and there’s nothing I won’t do for you. So that makes me your man. Okay?”

She gave me a gorgeous smile. “Okay.”

“And understand this, you are a very good thing, Nadia. The best thing I have in my life along with my kids.”

“I’d like to meet them, Nathan.”

“And you will, at the barbecue . . . remember?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I guess I really do need to get out of my head.”

“Nah, you’re good, baby, and . . . I’m a open up to you about the fucked-up parts of my life. I promise. It’s just that it’s a lot, and right now, I don’t want to think about it. Give me some time, and I’ll tell you everything. I really will.”

After she’d leaned in and kissed me, she said, “When you’re ready, I’ll be here for you.”

“Thank you, baby. You don’t know how much that means to me.”

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When I was a kid, my mother ran through men like it was a damn hobby for her. Some she moved in with us, but for the most part, she'd leave us at home alone—Bernard, Charles, and me—while she went off and did whatever with whoever her flavor of the minute was. She was so pretty back then. Tall, slim, dark brown skin. Men loved Mama and she loved them right back. I guess she loved her kids, too; it was just hard to tell since she never spent much time with us. Unlike most kids, I didn't have memories of her sacrificing to make life better for me. Yeah, she worked and kept a roof over our heads and food in the kitchen, but she was never there. She never came to my ball games, never helped me with my homework, never took me to the park, never watched TV with me or read me bedtime stories or tucked me into bed. Neither did my father, but from what I know of him, he was little more than a one-night stand, and me? I was an unpleasant surprise. My mother had actually told me that was how she saw me.

Anyway, when I got a college scholarship to play ball, neither of my parents seemed to care. When I was drafted into the NFL, that changed. They both tried and tried to get my attention, and since I had a piece of a relationship with my mother, I did agree to help her but kept her at an arm's length for years before I decided to put in a little work, forgive her, and let her back into my life. I thought I was ready. I mean, I'd

done the work with the therapist the league made me see when they thought I was being a little too aggressive on the field. I believed I'd worked through the anger and bitterness of not having even one viable parent, of having to figure shit out by myself, of spending my childhood surviving rather than thriving. *I thought I was ready*, and I felt even more secure in my decision to let her back in because she was clean. She'd given up the drinking that I realized fueled her past irresponsible behavior. Her hard living had aged her, and she still smoked, but agreed not to in my house or around my kids, and she became someone I depended on.

Someone I thought I could trust.

But like she had done so many times in the past, she let me down, put someone else before me, and to be honest, she broke my fucking heart. And the shit was hard to deal with.

A tap on my shoulder made me back out of my thoughts and lift my eyes from my plate to find Mecca standing next to me.

Once she saw she had my attention, she signed: *Are you okay, Daddy?*

I faked a smile for her, nodded, signed: *Yes*, and set my fork on my plate.

Mecca: *You can't cook like Granny.*

I chuckled, because that was definitely a true statement.

Me: *You think I need to hire a cook?*

Mecca frowned as she signed: *Granny's not coming back home?*



Shit. I wasn't ready for this. I slid my eyes to Ian, relieved that he was too preoccupied with eating his dinner to notice my exchange with Mecca.

Me: *Do you want her to come back?*

Mecca seemed to think about her answer before replying: *I don't know. I miss her, but I don't miss Uncle Bernard. Maybe she can come back without him.*

She shrugged her shoulders.

Me: *I don't know. We'll see. Okay?*

Mecca nodded and hugged my neck.

Me: *Thanks.*

Mecca: *You're welcome. When can me and Ian meet your new girlfriend?*

Oh, hell. I *really* wasn't ready for that!

My mouth dropped open, and as I sat there looking crazy, she decided to forgo sign language and verbally said, "Don't lie. We know."

I was caught between the shock of where this conversation was going to the pride I felt at hearing her use her voice. She'd been speaking more lately. "Why do you think I have a girlfriend?" I countered, aware of Ian's attention on us now.

"Because you keep sneaking out at night or right before dinner." That was Ian.

I decided I just wouldn't address that truth at all, and replied with, "If I do have a girlfriend, how would you two feel about it?"

“I feel like it took you long enough!” Mecca declared.

Ian shrugged and went back to eating his dinner.

“Is it the professor?” Mecca asked, making me whip my head back around to face her.

“What?” was all I could manage to say.

“The *Matrix* professor? I saw how you looked at her. It’s her, isn’t it?”

I sighed, nodded, and signed, *Yes*.

“Good. I like her.” And with that, she picked up her plate and mine, leaving for the kitchen.

All I could do was sit there and shake my head with a smile on my face.

## Nadia

I was a nervous wreck as I paced my living room floor, my arms crossed over my chest as thoughts swirled in my brain. My father was on his way to see me. I would be in the same room with him for the first time in more than twenty years. I had an old picture of him and my mother that was taken before I was born, but when I saw him a couple of times when I was a little girl, he'd looked different to me. How would he look now? How well had he aged? And my brother . . . I'd never even seen a picture of him, had no idea what he looked like. Would he look like his mother, my father's wife? Was she as pretty as my mother?

Sighing, I collapsed onto my sofa and jumped at the sound of my cell phone ringing, stared at it for a full minute before I recognized the name on the screen as Nathan's, and finally answered it with a timid, "Hello?"

"Hey, baby . . . you okay?"

I shook my head and choked back a sob. “Not really. I’m . . . I’m nervous.”

“About what? You are beautiful and successful and smart. You have a damn PhD! He should be the one who’s nervous. You have nothing to be anxious about.”

“Thank you. I wish you were here right now.”

“I want to be there, Nadia. You told me not to come, said you needed to see him alone, but I can come. I’ll leave right now.”

“No, no, I *do* need to do this alone . . . I think.” A knock sounded at the door, and I actually shrieked, then babbled into the phone, “I gotta go. Bye!”

Ending the call, I sprung from the sofa and kind of just stood there staring at the door, my hands trembling at the sides of my body. The sound of another knock, a louder one, filled the space of my living room and seemed to aid me in ungluing my feet from the floor. I was at the door in seconds, my hand on the deadbolt lock. On autopilot, I turned the lock and the doorknob, opened the door, and lifted my eyes to his face.

He was just as handsome as I remembered. Tall, handsome, but with a beer gut added on. And his smile? As bright as the midday sun.

He yanked me into his arms, warming me with a hug, so much taller than me that all I could do was bury my face in his chest. He smelled so good. His arms felt good, and for the first time in a long time, I felt . . . whole.

“Daughter! Girl, you so pretty it don’t make no sense!” His thick southern accent floated over my head.

Closing my eyes, I said, “I’m so glad you came to see me.” Then a thought occurred to me, and I reluctantly backed out of his arms. Peeking around my father, I smiled at the big man standing behind him. “Hi,” I greeted my older brother.

“Aw, shit, let me introduce y’all. Son, this your sister, Nod-ja. Nod-ja, this is your brother, Steven.”

Steven gave me a smile, and when I offered him a hand, took it, pulling me into a hug. In a deep voice, he said, “Everybody calls me Lunch Meat.”

I watched and listened to my father, Lee Chester Amerson, talk about the flight from Houston to Memphis and the drive from Memphis to Romey. Evidently, Lunch Meat was a speed demon, or as my dad put it, he had a lead foot. My brother took it all in stride, probably accustomed to our father’s boisterous personality. I wondered if I’d ever get used to it. Then again, my mother wasn’t exactly a shrinking violet. How those two ever managed to get a word in edgewise to each other was a real mystery to me.

“I’m glad to see you, Nod-ja! Just as pretty as I knew you’d grow up to be. You look like me, you know that?”

I smiled and nodded. “We have the same eyes and nose.”

“Mm-hmm, but you got your mama’s skin color, not quite as dark as mine. How she doing?” he asked, cutting his eyes at

my brother. “I ain’t talked to her since you was little.”

“She’s great,” I replied. “She’s excited about having you two over for dinner tomorrow night.”

“Shiiit, she better cook a lot! Lunch Meat ain’t this damn big for nothing, and I can eat, too!” my dad nearly shouted.

“Her boyfriend is actually doing the cooking, but he’s a great cook.” I glanced at my brother, who raised his eyebrows. I hoped he wouldn’t be uncomfortable around my mother since she was once our father’s side chick.

“Daughter, where’s your throne room? I need to drain the swamp,” Dad said.

I frowned. “What?”

“I need to squeeze the monkey, skip some rocks, juggle the kitty.”

I just sat there in utter befuddlement.

“Damn, ain’t you a doctor? I gotta pee pee!”

“Oh! The bathroom is right this way.”

After I showed him where he could relieve himself, I made my way back to the living room and reclaimed my seat across from my brother. “Um, I’m glad you came. I’ve been wanting to meet you for a while,” I said.

“Yeah, me too. Thanks for inviting me.”

“Of course! Uh . . . are you okay with having dinner with my mother?”

He shrugged. “What happened was a long time ago. I’m cool with it.”

And then we both fell silent. My brother might have been big in a teddy bear way, but he was also quiet. And handsome. Very handsome. He closely resembled our father and had not only inherited his almond tie-dyed eyes and thick lips, like me, but also his rich chocolate skin, thick hair, and tall frame. Evidently, height ran in the family but bypassed me.

“Daughter, this a nice place you got here! You making that long money, ain’t you?!” our father announced himself as he returned.

“I do all right,” I replied as I watched him fall onto the sofa next to Lunch Meat with a grunt.

“Shiiiiidd, you doing better than all right! This place reminds me of that apartment your cousin Leland used to have down in Miami. It ain’t as big, but it’s just as nice. Don’t it remind you of Leland’s old place, Meat?”

Before my brother could agree with him, there was a knock at my door. Frowning, I stood and mumbled, “Let me see who that is.”

After checking the peephole, I swung the door open.  
“Nathan?!”

# Nathan

“I know you said you didn’t want or need me to come, but I had to. You okay? Everything all right?” I asked, as I grasped her arms and inspected her face.

Her shocked expression was replaced with a wide smile. “Yeah, things are going well.” She lowered her voice. “You were worried about me?”

“I’m your man. It’s my job to be worried about you, baby.”

“Nate the Gate?! Daughter, how you know him?!” The voice was loud, and well, country as hell, and in addition to making Nadia jump, it startled the shit out of me.

She spun around and faced a man who had to be her father. Same eyes. “Dad, this is my . . . boyfriend, Nathan.” She sounded unsure about that. I was going to have to do something to reassure her, make her clearly understand what she meant to me.

I extended my hand past Nadia to him. “Nathan Moore.”

“Negro, I know you! I’m from Houston, so you know I’m a Texans fan! Always have been, and I never missed seeing you play when you was on the team! Lee Chester Amerson, Nodja’s daddy! And this here is her brother.”

A man who was both bigger and taller than Nadia’s father—and he was taller than me too—stepped into the already crowded entryway of her apartment and proffered his hand to me. “Lunch Meat.”

“Good to meet you both,” I said with a smile.



“Daughter! You going with The Gate?! Well, I’ll be damned! Shit, I need to call Tick and tell him about this! He’s a fan, too.”

“Tick?” Nadia asked.

“One of your cousins. You know him as Big South—Everett.”

“*The* Big South?” I asked.

“Uh-huh, his mama was my sister,” her father confirmed.

Big South was her cousin? He was hands-down my all-time favorite rapper!

Nadia nodded. “Oh, yeah . . . I keep forgetting I have these famous relatives I have never met. You mentioned Leland earlier, too. I’ve known about them for a while, but it still hasn’t sunk in that we’re related.”

Leland? That was right! Big South’s brother was in the NBA. Daaaamn! These were Nadia’s folks?

“You gonna get to meet them. I promise you that. Hey, Gate, come on in here and have a seat. Man, I can’t believe this! My daughter and Nate the Gate. I’ll be a puppy full of shit!” her father declared.

I shot Nadia a confused look as we all filed into the living room.

She gave me a shrug and whispered, “I don’t understand half of what he says, but I love it. He makes me smile.”

I had to agree. Something about her father made me happy she was finally able to connect with him. She needed his brand of lightness in her life. Nadia was too damn stoic for her own

good. Well, except in the bedroom. She was a whole different woman in the bedroom.

And I liked that shit.

We'd all taken our seats in Nadia's living room, everyone except for her looking like giants on the dainty furniture, when her father jumped. "Aw, hell! Meat, this ain't nobody but yo' mama!"

Lunch Meat shrugged.

I frowned.

Nadia's father tapped a button on a Bluetooth earpiece I'd noticed but swore I was imagining, and shouted, "What-up-there-now?!"

Nadia looked at me with wide eyes and I dropped mine, because my ass was about to bust out laughing, and I didn't want to disrespect the man.

"Shit! What you want?! I just talked to you in the damn car!"

With lifted eyebrows, I looked at Nadia's brother, who had his face buried in his phone like it was a regular day at the park hearing his father talk to his mother like that.

"Well, hell! We over here talking to Nod-ja! Shit, that's why we came here! Huh? Goooooot damn! I'm in Tennessee! The hell I'm supposed to do?! Shit, call the satellite folks, Lou! Huh? What? I'ma call you back. Take a nerve pill or something." He shook his head and nudged his son sitting next to him. Once he had his attention, he said, "Your mama upset because they done moved the MeTV station to another channel and she can't find it. The hell I'm supposed to do?"

“Must be time for *Mama’s Family*,” Lunch Meat mused.

“Hell, yeah!” Mr. Amerson agreed. Then he shifted his attention to me. “Gate! Tell me how you met my daughter!”

I smiled, glancing at the woman who had stolen my heart. “I was finishing up my degree and she was one of my professors.”

“You going to school to be a doctor, too? What kind? A vaginis doctor? I always said if I had been a doctor, I woulda been a vaginis doctor,” he said.

Vaginis?

Shit, I was going to *have* to laugh. There was no way around it.

Nadia looked completely confused now.

“No, Daddy. You said she got a PhD, not an MD,” Lunch Meat corrected him.

“Shit, ain’t that the same thing?!” Mr. Amerson asked.

“No!” Lunch Meat and Nadia said in unison.

“Nate the Gate?” Nadia said as we walked back into her apartment. Her father and brother were on their way to their hotel. We’d gone out to have dinner with them, and my side was hurting from her father’s shenanigans. That man got everything wrong, but he was nothing if not entertaining. He

still swore Nadia was a medical doctor, and she finally just let it go, tired of trying to correct him.

“Yes, that was my nickname when I was in the NFL. You like it?”

“Well, it’s different. How’d you get it?”

“I was bigger when I played, much more bulked up, and I was a fullback, so I did a lot of blocking.”

She stopped and lifted her eyebrows, giving me a look that said, “A who, who did what?”

“Not a football fan, huh?”

“Not at all.”

I chuckled. “A fullback does a couple of things, including running interference to protect the ball carrier, i.e.: blocking. I got the nickname because I was good at it. A sports announcer once said trying to get past me was like trying to bust through a locked gate, so I became Nate the Gate. I hadn’t heard that nickname in a while.”

“Hmmm. How’d you play football with all that hair? It hangs past your butt.”

“I know.”

She gave me a smirk.

“I played very well with all this hair, made a lot of money.”

“Obviously.”

“That’s right, *Nod-ja*.”

“Don’t be making fun of my father. He’s too much. He really is, but I love being around him.”

“Who wouldn’t?”

“And my brother? He’s so nice to me! I half-expected him to hate me since I’m the product of an affair.”

“Nah, your brother is too laid back to hate people. Laid back and quiet, but I guess he can’t help but be quiet growing up with your dad.”

“Right! And judging from all the phone calls from his mother my father argued his way through over dinner, she’s a talker too.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, definitely. Uh . . . you gonna take me with you to that reunion he mentioned?”

“Why? Because you want to meet my famous cousins? I saw the look on your face when he mentioned Big South.”

“Nawww, baby. I just wanna be there for you.”

“Yeah, right.”

We both laughed, and as she began walking to her bedroom, I grabbed her and pulled her to me. “Hey, I’m glad things went so well with you and your dad.”

She grinned up at me. “I am, too, and thanks so much for coming over. You made both his and my day.”

“I told you I wanna take care of you, and that’s all me coming over here today was . . . me taking care of you.”

“I appreciate that, but now I think it’s time for me to take care of you.”

“Oh, really?”

She raised up on her toes and licked my lips. “Yes, really.”

## Nathan

“How bad could it possibly be? I’ve already met your father, and I like him. Shit, he’s a fan of mine. Your mother might be a fan, too.”

“She doesn’t watch football, but I can guarantee she’ll be a fan, with her oversexed ass.”

I chuckled. “Don’t think I’ve ever heard you say something like that before. It sounded so . . . black and sexy.”

She shot me a look. “Nathan, seriously . . . promise you won’t dump me after tonight.”

“Nadia, do you really think I’d dump you because you have an unconventional family? If you think that’s grounds for a break-up, then you’re definitely gonna quit my ass when you meet my people.”

“Promise!”

I reached across my SUV to grasp her hand. “I promise I will not dump you or your remarkably resplendent and

delicious pussy under any circumstances.”

“Woooooow.”

I shrugged.

After she’d heaved a heavy sigh, she said, “Okay. I think I’m ready—shit.”

I assumed the “shit” was in response to the ringing of her cell phone.

“Is it your dad? He lost?” I asked.

Shaking her head, she answered her phone with, “Hey, Brooklyn. I can’t talk now. About to have dinner with my mom. Will call you back later.”

I watched her end the call, and said, “Damn, did you even give her a chance to respond to you?”

“I don’t have time to sit here and listen to Brooklyn whine about her good husband, knowing I’m about to go in here and involuntarily lose my own good man.”

She reached for the door handle, but I grabbed her arm to stop her. “First of all, you know I got that door for you. Second, it would take a damn tsunami to drag me away from you, and even then, I’d fight to my last breath to get back to you. I’m not going anywhere, Nadia. I don’t want to go anywhere. I told you . . . *my* family is fucked up. Yours can’t be worse than mine. And shit, you’re making me doubt my dick skills. After what I put on you before we left your place, you should be too exhausted to be this wound up about this dinner.”

“You didn’t choke me, so ...”

“Baby, you bruise too easily for that. Did you really wanna have dinner with both your parents with my handprint on your neck?”

“I could’ve tied a scarf around my neck like I do for work, and *please*, if my mother knew about the stuff you do to me, she’d have balloons and streamers and a damn cover band present for a celebration.”

I grinned. “You need to stop.”

“I’m serious! Me being a freak is a dream come true for her.”

“You gonna tell her, then?”

“Hell no!”

I had to laugh. “Look, if you calm down and enjoy yourself and your family tonight, I promise I will choke the shit out of you after we leave.”

“I’mma hold you to that. Come open my door so we can go on in there.”

I shook my head as I climbed out of the car and walked around it, thinking how I had no idea what I was getting into getting involved with this woman. But shit, I loved her freakiness. She had to be the freakiest woman I’d ever known. It was like she was made for me.

*Just for me.*

Her mother lived in a small, cottage-style house, and it felt like I had stepped into a bohemian paradise once I’d crossed the threshold, with all the live plants around and bold tapestries hanging on the walls. The energy was so peaceful as



my nose was greeted by a mixture of what I was sure were the aromas of our dinner, jasmine, marijuana, sage, *and* Palo Santo wood. Her mother wasn't playing about the energy in her home.

Speaking of her mother . . . she was gorgeous. Petite and pretty, too youthful looking to have a daughter Nadia's age, standing there in a tie-dyed flowing dress and bare feet, a huge afro hiding the top of her face. Nadia resembled her father the most, but her smile when she decided to share it with me? That was all her mother, as was her smooth brown skin tone. Her father was darker skinned.

"Hey, my love!" was how she greeted her daughter, pulling her into a hug. I couldn't help but smile at how Nadia melted into her mother's arms. She might've been a little embarrassed by her mother, but she loved her. That was clear.

"Hey, Mommy," Nadia said as she backed out of her mother's embrace. Then my beautiful lady turned to me, and added, "This is—"

"Nathan?" her mother interrupted, stepping around her daughter to me, her round eyes drinking me in from head to toe and making me feel like a piece of meat.

So, yeah . . . Nadia didn't lie about that.

Nevertheless, I offered her a smile and my hand. "Ms. Day, it's great to finally meet you."

"Oh, I don't shake hands, I hug," she said, and then the little woman jerked me into a hug, rubbing her hands up and down my back as I looked at Nadia with wide eyes.

"Um, we brought vegan wine," I said for no reason at all.

“That’s nice,” her mother murmured. “Mmm, I just love a man with a solid body, and you smell so good . . .”

“Uh . . .” was my response as I stood there with my arms limp at my sides, my eyes stapled to Nadia, who was holding her forehead.

“Mommy, I don’t think—”

Her mom kept rubbing my back. “Nadia, my love . . . you sure you can handle all this?”

“Mommy—”

I jumped back from her and patted my pocket. “My phone’s buzzing. It might be about my kids,” I lied, stepping closer to the door. With my back to them, I couldn’t make out the conversation and was still standing there staring at the dark screen of my phone when someone I hoped was Nadia tapped me on the back, because . . . shit!

“Hey, you okay?” It *was* Nadia, thank God.

Turning around, I nodded, looked into her worried eyes, and then noticed we were alone. “Yeah. You okay?”

“No, but while you were checking your phone, I made her promise to behave.”

“What’d she say?”

“That she *is* behaving.”

“Oh . . .”

“Yeah, so how are your kids?”

“Huh? Oh! They’re fine.”

“Good. You wanna go?”

*Hell yeah.* “No, baby. I wanna meet your sister and . . . stepfather?”

“Something like that.”

“Why you still out here in the living room. We’re already at the—gooooot dayum! This is your man?” a tiny woman who looked like a younger version of Nadia’s mother said as she entered the room in baggy red pants and a white short top. Her hair was in thick dreadlocks and there was a gold stud in her nose. She was pretty, but not as pretty as Nadia.

Shit, no one was as beautiful as her.

“Ginger, this is Nathan,” Nadia said. “Nathan, this is my sister, Ginger.”

“Well, helllllloooo! Wow!” Ginger gushed, taking my proffered hand and flashing me her best smile. Damn, they really were oversexed. It must’ve been hell for someone as conservative as Nadia to be around them.

“Um . . . glad to meet you,” I managed to say, my eyes on an obviously embarrassed Nadia.

“Shit, not as glad as I am to meet you! Sis! Girl, this man is fine as hell!”

Damn, I was standing right there.

Nadia groaned, and all I could do was move closer to her and wrap my arm around her shoulder.

“You better choke me *and* spank me later on,” she mumbled to me. “At the same damn time.”

This was going to be a loooong night.

# Nadia

After my mother and sister practically molested my man right in front of me, we all moved to the dining room where I introduced Nathan to Braeden and leaning-dick-Jamaal, who acted like he'd never met me before. But if I remembered correctly, Jamaal was once a heavy drinker, so his ass might really have had a little amnesia.

By the time my father arrived, I was a second from grabbing Nathan's hand and dragging him out of my mother's house. I wasn't sure if I could stomach watching my mom fawn over my father and my boyfriend at the same time. Well, at least Ginger was too preoccupied with Jamaal when in his presence to ogle my damn man.

The doorbell rang, and Mommy hopped up from her seat like she'd just sat on a tack. "That must be Lee!" And then she shot out of the dining room.

"Damn, Mommy is really excited about seeing your dad, Noddy. Remember that time we ran into my dad at the movies when we were kids? She was rolling her eyes at him and started cursing and stuff. She must've really liked Lee," Ginger mused.

I had opened my mouth to answer her when my mother's giddy voice drowned me out. "Look who made it! Now we can eat!"

I walked my father in his signature tight slacks and t-shirt, followed by my brother, who my mother had looped arms with. She rubbed the captive arm, and said, "I know you already met your brother and you know your father, Nadia, and you, too, Nathan. But Ginger, Braeden, Ginger's friend, this is Lee and Steven."

I swear Ginger drooled as she said, "Hi, Steven," in this weird-ass husky voice.

My big brother locked eyes with my little sister and in a voice I'd never heard from him said, "Everybody calls me Lunch Meat."

"Mmm," Ginger hummed. "I wonder why."

My brother flashed her a smile, and *I* had to wonder *What the hell?* Was Lunch Meat supposed to be a sexy nickname? And if so, how?

Jamaal eyed Lunch Meat and wrapped an arm around Ginger's shoulder. Ginger shot him a look, and as my father and brother took their seats at the table, I noticed my mother's eyes were not on my father as I'd expected. No, she had her sights set on my brother, too.

“The factory I worked at in Houston had just opened a plant here in Romey, and they offered big money for some of us to come help train folks. Well, I hadn’t long got married and Meat was little. Shit, the extra money sounded good to me. So I came here. They put us up in hotels and that’s where I met Lovely. She was working the front desk at the hotel they put me up in. Pretty little thing. Younger than me, and I ain’t have no business messing with her, but I was young, reckless I guess ...” my father said.

I shifted my gaze to Lunch Meat, but his eyes were on Ginger. I doubted he’d heard a word our father said.

“So, you two had a fling while you were here, and Nadia was the product?” Ginger asked.

“Lee had a fling. I was in love, but who could blame me? He was so tall and handsome. He still is!” my mom declared. “But I should’ve respected his marriage. I was young, too, though. Young and silly, and I just saw something I wanted and went for it. I’m so sorry, Lunch Meat.”

My brother’s eyes shot from Ginger to my mother. “Huh? Oh, it’s all good.”

“Yeah, I promised my Lou I would never do no shit like that again, and I didn’t. So, you and Grady here married, Lovely?”

“Grady? Oh, Braeden! No. I still don’t believe in marriage, Lee.”

“Hmm, that’s right. So Nod-ja say you got sex shop now?” my dad asked, a toothpick he’d actually brought with him

bouncing up and down in his mouth as he spoke. “What you sell in there? Some of them billboes?”

“Bilbo as in Bilbo Baggins? You’re a *Lord of the Rings* fan?” Braeden piped up. Braeden was an odd mixture of a bohemian geek.

“No, *billboes*. You know . . . them dicks with batteries in them.”

Lunch Meat whispered something in his ear, to which he answered, “Naw, I’m saying it right. Billboes!”

To the left of me, I heard Nathan snort and reached under the table to pinch his hard thigh.

“You mean dildos?” my mother asked with a deep frown on her face.

“That’s what I said!” my father virtually shouted.

“Well, what you actually described was vibrators, but yes, I sell those.”

“How ‘bout them conch rings?”

“Huh?”

Poor Mommy.

“Conch rings! Them things you put on your Johnson to keep it hard. My buddy Earl was talking about them.”

“Oh! Yes, I sell those, too, and handcuffs, whips, ropes, duct tape, you name it.”

“Folks really be buying all that freaky-deaky shit, Lovely?”

“Mm-hmm. You’d be surprised at how good business is.”

“Damn, it don’t take all that. All you need is a few groceries and some Al Green to have a good time in the bedroom. Ha-haaaa!”

Groceries?

Nathan reached down and squeezed my hand, but I refused to look at him. He was not going to have me laughing at my own father.

“Lunch Meat, are you into any . . . freaky stuff?” Ginger asked, and Jamaal gave her a clear *what the fuck* look.

Lunch Meat shrugged and dropped his eyes shyly.

“Go on and tell her what I told you about the groceries, boy!” my father said. “I done taught this boy everything I know. Shiit, he know all about the jeep spot.”

I shook my head, and Nathan whispered. “I fucking love your dad.”

I closed my eyes after I fastened my seatbelt, heard rustling, and opened them to see Nathan sitting behind the steering wheel digging in the gift bag my mother had handed him right before we left her house. I could only imagine the embarrassing horrors inside it.

“Um, you gotta look in there now? Can we at least leave my mother’s driveway first?” I asked or maybe pleaded, because I couldn’t take much more cringing.



“No, I love opening gifts. I didn’t get to open many as a kid.” He stopped moving his hand as if just realizing what he’d let slip out, and then he set the bag on the floor by his leg and started his car.

“I didn’t mean to be party pooper. Open it,” I said.

“Nah, it’s okay.”

Reaching over to place my hand on his hard arm, I urged, “Open it, Nathan.”

He gave me a tiny smile and nodded, picked the bag up, and dug back inside, quickly unearthing a pair of pouchless briefs. “Wow,” he said. “Your mom is ...”

“I know.”

“The coolest mother in the world!”

I sighed. “Well, what else is in there?”

“Edible body paint. Man, it’s nice to get gifts I can actually use.”

“You think I’m going to let you eat paint off my body?”

“Uh, shit, you let me choke you, so ...”

“Good point.”

“What’d you get?”

I shrugged. “Probably another vibrator or bullet or something.”

“Damn, you got a collection?”

“Basically.”

“Well, let’s see.”

Blowing out a breath, I lifted my own little red *Passion Play* gift bag from the floorboard and dug inside. “Oh, look! Another Spanky skirt! A red one to go with my black one. And nipple clamps. How nice!” I was really laying on the fake enthusiasm, but when I looked at Nathan, he was damn near drooling.

“You have two of those skirts? Your mom gave both of them to you?”

I nodded. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“Damn, I love your mother, too! You have the best family ever, baby!”

## Nathan

“You ain’t shit, you know that! Who the fuck puts they own mama out they house?! You the damn devil, Nate! You gon’ get yours, you little bitch! Always was a bitch!”

The only reason I answered the phone was because I didn’t recognize the number, which was actually a reason *not* to answer it. But now that I knew it was my brother spouting bullshit, I ended the call and blocked whoever’s government-issued, limited data phone he’d used to call me. I knew Mama had put him up to it, and I knew why. I sent her a check to my aunt’s when she first left, enough money to last her for damn near a year, and she’d evidently blown through it. I’d been ignoring her texts asking for more, and I guess she was having a hard time supporting herself, Bernard, and their combined habits, but that shit was not my problem.

Not anymore.

I lifted my eyes from my phone and let them round my office, picked my phone up and texted Nadia: *Hey, miss you. Lunch?*

Nadia: *Yeah, are we actually eating or having sex?*

I smiled.

Me: *Shit, how about both?*

Nadia: *Perfect.*

## Nadia

I laid on my car's horn, because who stops at a yellow light? Was whoever this was trying to make me later than I already was? Dammit!

Blowing out a frustrated breath, I told myself that I had no one to blame but myself. I mean, I was the one up screwing Nathan into the wee hours of the night virtually every night of the week. I could say no sometimes.

*But I don't want toooo.*

Yes, my thoughts were whining.

This had to be an addiction, and addictions were unhealthy. I knew that to be a scientific fact, but I couldn't stop myself

from being with him or wanting to be with him. Hell, that was the very nature of being an addict, wasn't it?

As I navigated the streets from my place to my job, I tried to shake off thoughts of Nathan and my insatiable desire for him. I needed to get my head right for this meeting with my dean and try to formulate a believable reason for being late to said meeting. This was not a good look since I was sure this meeting was probably about the classes I'd canceled lately or what was becoming a chronic tardiness. I was making it very easy for Dean Childress to throw the proverbial book at me, and what was wild about all this was that I didn't care as much as I should've, because I had a life. I finally had a life besides my job, and that felt good.

As I pulled into the parking lot of Opal Hall, my phone rang with a call from Brooklyn. I ignored it instead of answering, because I still didn't have time for her foolishness. After I'd parked, I closed my eyes and took a quick deep breath, jumping when my text alert dinged and smiling when I read the message from Nathan: *I hope your meeting goes well. Call me when you get out of it.*

I replied, *ok*, climbed out of my car, and walked into the building.

“. . . and since I know how you love the classroom, you can still teach a class or two if you'd like. That would be up to

you,” Dean Childress finished, running a hand through her shoulder-length silver hair.

I sat there and blinked, feeling completely blindsided.

“You don’t have to teach undergrads. It can be grad classes,” she amended. I guess she thought I was hesitating to speak because of that. No, it was just that I was in shock.

Utter and complete shock.

Nevertheless, I managed to say, “No, that’s not it. I’m just . . . I don’t know what to say.”

“About my retirement this summer or you being interim dean?”

“Both! I honestly thought they’d have to roll you out of here on your death bed. You’re . . . you’re the soul of Romey’s School of Behavioral and Health Sciences.”

A smile spread across her smooth caramel face. “Well, I don’t know if I’d take it that far, but I can say I’ve done my best and given all I can to this school and this university as a whole. I have loved working here, but now it’s time to do more than work. I’ve got grandbabies and a good man who would love more of my attention, and I’m going to give it to them. I’m past my work being my life.”

I nodded. “I totally understand.”

“Good, because this is a demanding job, even in its interim form. I know that from experience. So, I want you to enter into this with a better frame of mind than me. Whoever keeps making you late for work and has you cancelling classes in addition to being responsible for that glow I see on your face

and your gorgeous new wardrobe? Keep them close. You'll need them. You'll need the balance."

My mouth fell open.

Her smile widened. "Anyway, keep this under your hat. It still needs to be approved by President Khan, but I'm sure she won't have any objections."

"Wow, all I can say is thank you. I'll be an interim dean? At my age? I never imagined . . . wait, I've never even been a department chair before. Do you think . . . can I do this?"

"Oh, as ambitious as you are? You've definitely imagined this. And of course you can do it. It's interim, remember, until a permanent dean is chosen. That could be one of the department chairs, or it could be you. As far as I'm concerned, no one is any more qualified in all the ways that matter than you."

I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything.

"And Dr. Day?"

"Yes?"

"Be sure to curtail the lateness and canceled classes from now on. I can guarantee you'll be watched closely until the decision is officially made."

"I will take care of that. I promise."

“Dean?! Baby, that’s great! You’re gonna be the youngest one in Romey U’s history, right?”

I nodded against his hard chest. “I think so. This is crazy. Here I was thinking I was about to get some disciplinary action and she offered me interim dean of the department. I’ve never even been a department chair! Life is crazy.”

“Yeah, it is. The mere fact that I’m here right now, in your bed, holding you in my arms in the middle of the day is proof of that.”

“Mm-hmm.” I closed my eyes and smiled.

“Nadia?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry for putting you in a position where you thought you were gonna get disciplinary action.”

“It’s not your fault. I could’ve gotten to work on time, and canceling class in order to have sex with you was just plain irresponsible . . . but I’d do it again,” I said, and it was the honest truth.

“No, that’s all on me. You deserve better than late night and early afternoon visits and lunchtime sex. You’re my woman, not my side chick.”

“You have a side chick?” I asked, with a little more attitude than I’d intended.

“Of course not. What I’m trying to say is that I’ve handled us all wrong. You’ve been kind enough to deal with some shit you should’ve never had to deal with. I . . . have dinner with me and the kids tonight.”



I sat up and gazed down at him. “But I thought you wanted to wait and let me meet them at your barbecue. That’s next week.”

“I know, but it doesn’t make any sense to wait. I don’t want to wait. I want you to meet them so we can spend time together at my house. I don’t want you to have to be inconvenienced because my life is screwed up right now.”

I didn’t reply, because I couldn’t.

“What is it? You . . . you don’t wanna meet my kids?” His voice sounded so small that I instantly regretted my silence.

“No, I want to meet them. I’m excited that you want to share them with me, but . . . what if they don’t like me?”

“Nah, baby, Mecca likes you for sure, and Ian? Ian is good with whatever.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

I gave him a weak smile. “Okay, dinner tonight at your place.”

## Nathan

Nadia was nervous as hell, her eyes darting all over the place as I opened my front door for her.

“Hey,” I said, giving her a smile that I hoped would relax her.

“Hey ...” She bit her bottom lip and her eyes lit up. Holding up a paper sack, she added, “I brought some garlic bread. We’re having spaghetti, right?”

“Yeah, since that’s all I can cook decently. But you didn’t have to bring anything. You’re our guest, baby.” I took the sack from her.

“Oh, *you* cooked?”

“I tried. I’ll let you tell me if I succeeded.”

That made her smile.

“Your house is so nice . . . and huge. Beautiful,” I heard her say as she followed me from the foyer into the living room.

“Gorgeous.”

“Yeah, I love it. It’s my dream home. Eight thousand square feet sitting on twenty acres. My version of heaven.”

“It looks kind of like a rich person’s farmhouse. You got a barn?”

I smiled. “Yep, and three horses.”

“You really are a country boy, huh?”

“Guilty.”

“You know, you stay really close to a friend of mine. Well, not a close friend, but we’re both members of an organization together. Renee Higgs? You know her?”

“Yeah, I know her husband. He’s a business partner of mine. They’ll be at my barbecue, too.”

“Really? Small world.”

“Yeah, Renee and Zo are good people.”

“I know.”

We’d made our way through the formal living and family rooms into the dining room where Mecca was setting the table. I tapped her on the shoulder and watched as her head shot up. A smile spread across her face when she saw Nadia.

Mec’s eyes searched the room for a second, and then she spoke. “Hi, Professor Day.”

Nadia returned her smile even though there was a mildly shocked expression on her face. “Hi! Glad to see you again, Mecca, and you can just call me Nadia.”

“Okay,” Mecca replied.

“Dad, I need more filtered water for the glasses.” That was Ian, who was peeping his little head out the kitchen door into the dining room.

“Okay . . . hey, come meet my . . . friend,” I said.

Ian wore the same expression he always wore, one that was a cross between him being disinterested and mildly amused, and stepped into the dining room, proffered a hand to Nadia, and sounding like a grown man in a miniature body, greeted her. “Hi, I’m Ian. I am very pleased to meet you, Dr. Day.” He did it just like I’d rehearsed with him, made me proud.

Smiling down at him, Nadia took his hand and nodded. “The pleasure is all mine, Ian. You are quite the gentleman, aren’t you? You must get that from your dad.”

He blinked, was quiet for a moment, and then began to shake her hand. “Are you moving in? Mecca says when men and women like each other, they live together and sleep in the same bed a lot. Is that true? Are you going to sleep in my dad’s bed? He has a big bed, so you’ll have plenty of room.” Before anyone could get a word in, he turned to his sister and continued with, “She’s pretty just like you said, Mecca.”

Mecca shot me an embarrassed look. She knew better than to say stuff like that to her brother, because he took everything so literally. If you told him something, it was law to him.

“Shit,” I mumbled. “Uh, Ian . . . let me go help you with the water.”

“Okay, but you just said shit, Dad.”

“I know. Nadia, go ahead and take a seat at the table.”

“Any seat in particular?” she asked as I ushered Ian back into the kitchen.

“No. Doesn’t matter.”

As I closed the kitchen door behind me, I heard her ask Mecca where she should sit, and I shook my head. Nadia was truly an over-thinker.

“Mecca never missed one of my games after she was born. I think she knows more about football than I do,” I said, grinning at my daughter.

Mecca said, “I didn’t have a choice.”

Nadia reached over and tapped Mecca’s arm, gaining her attention and her eyes. “Do you still watch football?”

Mecca shook her head. “No, I don’t care about it since Daddy’s not playing anymore. I was a big fan of his, though, and I loved watching him play.” Her phone vibrated on the table, and seeing her empty plate, I knew what was coming next. That damn phone of hers was like some kind of attention-stealing beacon or something.

As she did when she wanted to quickly get a point across, she looked at me and signed: *Can I go to my room?*

I nodded, signed: *Yes, but be sure to put your dishes in the sink.*

Mecca: *OK.*

And then she was gone, and my attention shifted to Ian, who was eating naked pasta separate from his meatballs and sauce—he used a fork for the meatballs and pasta and a spoon for the sauce. He hadn't touched his salad or bread.

“Hey, Ian . . . take a couple of bites of salad for me, buddy.”

Ian looked up at me and then dropped his eyes to his plate, seemingly in deep thought. “Do I have to swallow?”

“I'd appreciate it if you didn't spit it out in front of our guest. Just take a couple of tiny bites, okay?”

“And then I can go to my room?”

“If you take two bites of salad and two bites of bread, you can go to your room.”

“Okay, you've got a deal.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nadia smiling at him. She probably recognized him mimicking a game show he watched from time to time.

Ian took two microscopic bites of garlic bread and two slightly larger bites of salad, and declared, “Allllll done!” mimicking one of his favorite commercials. He left the dining room with his plate in hand. I didn't have to remind him to put his dishes in the sink, because Ian never forgot an instruction after receiving it the first time. His brain was truly remarkable.

And then, it was just me and the woman I could see spending every second of the rest of my life with. “You enjoy

your dinner?" I asked.

"I cleaned the plate. What do you think?"

"I think I must have cooked the shit outta that spaghetti and salad."

"You didn't cook the salad, Nathan."

"I opened the bag and put it in a bowl. Same thing."

She shook her head and chuckled. "I love this, you know?"

"What? Eating dinner with me?"

"Seeing you in action as a father. It's . . . it's beautiful. You're so patient with your kids."

"I wasn't always this patient, but when you have special needs kids, you quickly learn that being frustrated won't do anything but make things worse."

"Yeah . . . Ian has food aversions?"

"Uh-huh, he's not a big fan of bread or leafy green vegetables. If he had it his way, he'd never eat anything other than grilled chicken breasts and mashed potatoes. It's a part of his spectrum disorder."

"I see."

"He's not my biological son."

"Oh?" Her voice had risen an octave. "He's not?"

"No. He's my brother's son, his and an old girlfriend of his. My brother . . . he was, um . . . he was arrested shortly after Ian was born, and I was still in the league, raising Mecca with the help of a full-time nanny." I couldn't believe I was saying all this to her. Had no idea why I was sharing it, either. "So,

after a game, I get a call from Bernard, my brother, asking if I could go to the police station here in Romey and pick his baby up and take him to our mom in Crumpton. Ian's mom had gotten arrested for some shit, drugs I think, and they were gonna put him in foster care. Bernard got the word somehow and called me. I asked him why our mom couldn't just pick him up. Shit, that made more sense than me flying from fucking Toronto and having to send Mecca and her nanny to Texas without me."

"What'd he say?"

"That he'd called her first and she'd tried to get him, but that she was drunk and ended up getting arrested herself for acting a damn fool when they wouldn't give Ian to her."

She frowned. "So, how were you supposed to take him to her?"

"That's what I asked. See, we're on the same page here!"

She slid her plate aside and rested an elbow on the table, cupping her chin in her hand. "So what did your brother say?"

"This fool said I should get the baby, bail our mom out, and take both of them to her house. She was living in my grandmother's old-ass house at the time."

"And you said—"

"Hell naw! And then I asked him if he'd lost his mind and told him I wasn't getting in any of that shit."

"But you changed your mind?"

I sighed. "I kept thinking about how messed up the situation was. Tootie, Ian's mom? Her whole family was jacked up off



some crazy shit that'd just happened, so I understood why they weren't an option, and my family wasn't much better off."

"With the exception of you."

"I guess . . . but I was so busy, and I already had the full responsibility of Mecca and always felt like I wasn't spending enough time with her. I wasn't sure I could take on any more kids. And honestly," I lowered my voice, although I was sure Ian was up in his room, earphones on. "I never wanted kids in the first place. Mecca was a surprise. But . . . I kept thinking about Ian being innocent in all that mess that was going on around him, so I decided to at least try, picked him up, took him home to Texas, and fell in love with him. He's as much mine as Mecca is now."

"That's beautiful, Nathan . . . and very noble."

I shrugged. "I guess it is."

"When did you find out he was on the spectrum?"

"When he was like three. The nanny noticed it before I did. Some of his development was delayed, he had issues with food, and his pain threshold was way too high. I thought he was just different, and well, he was. But he's so smart, so sweet. I wouldn't change a thing about him."

She gave me a pensive look. "You are just determined to make me fall in love with you, aren't you?"

"Oh, so my evil plan is working? I was wondering . . ."

She laughed. "I guess I should go, huh? I'm probably disrupting you all's nighttime routine. I know how important stability and predictability must be for Ian." She stood from

the table and so did I, quickly making my way to where she'd been sitting on the opposite end from my seat.

"I was hoping you'd spend the night with me," I said.

"Here? In your house?"

I nodded.

Her brow furrowed as she looked up at me. "But . . . your kids. Won't they know I'm spending the night?"

"Yeah. You heard Ian. Evidently, they've discussed it and are expecting it."

"Will we . . . are we going to have sex here in your house?"

I moved closer to her, inhaling her scent. "God, I hope so, because I want the hell out of you right now."

"Uh . . ."

"They won't come in my room. I have strict rules about that. They know to knock and wait for me to open the door. They respect my space like I try to respect theirs."

"Try?"

"Sometimes I have reason to bust in on them. Daddy privileges."

That statement didn't have the desired effect. She didn't even crack a smile. "Um, what . . . what if they hear you?"

"I'm not the loud one."

She smirked. "Whatever."

"They won't. Their rooms are down the hall from mine."

She shook her head. "I don't know . . ."

“Look, if you feel that uncomfortable about having sex with my kids in the house, fine. Just . . . just stay, let me sleep with you in my arms tonight.”

After a moment of hesitation, she nodded.

My eyes popped open in the darkness of my bedroom because of a sensation shooting through my dick to the pit of my stomach. Her mouth was on me, and although it felt undeniably good, it confused the hell out of me. For a second, I forgot it was Nadia in my bed but had no idea who else it could be.

The covers were off of me and I could feel the heat of her body on my inner thighs as she kneeled between them, slurping softly, her hand gliding up and down me. I craned my neck trying to gain sight of her, but couldn't. Still, my hand found the back of her head, and as I rested it there, I moaned, “Nadia . . .”

“Hmmm?” she replied.

“Baby . . . damn . . . shit!”

Her mouth left me, and then her face was hovering over mine. “Who's not the loud one?”

I swallowed and reached up to rest a hand on her cheek. “What are you doing? You know you got shit all backwards,

right?”

I felt her nod. “I know, but I’m just so thankful for you opening up to me about Ian and your family. I wanted to show my appreciation.”

“Thank you, but—”

“You gotta punish me for initiating again? Go ahead.” She sounded like that was her plan all along.

Nadia was a damn freak if I ever saw one.

“Okay.” I clasped my hand to the front of her neck, and she gasped. Then I kissed her and said, “Get on your knees.”

She didn’t move. This was part of her game. She knew open defiance made the punishment more intense, the *sex* more intense.

“Did you hear me?” I asked, sliding my other hand up her bare back to grab the back of her neck and snatch her head back. “On your knees. NOW.”

“You’ll have to let my neck go.”

“You telling me what I have to do?”

“Can you . . . please let my neck go?”

I did, and she quickly obeyed me. I moved behind her, grabbing a handful of her ass and squeezing hard, smiling when she released a soft whimper. Then I fucked the shit out of her.

# Nadia

I woke up before Nathan did, lying there in his arms in his bed thinking about how good it felt to be there with him, how special it made me feel for him to finally open up to me a little and want me to meet and spend time with his kids. They were so nice to me, too, and I liked them, so I couldn't help but wonder if I'd gotten too loud during our really, really, *really* good sex last night. Had they heard me? I'd tried to be quiet, but Nathan had done all kinds of nasty stuff to me that made it hard *not* to scream his name.

Damn, damn, damn!

Yeah, he was going to make me fall in love with him. That was for sure.

“You hungry?” Nathan's gravelly morning voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

“Yeah, you sexed all the nutrition out of my body.”

“You started it.”

“And I paid for starting it.”

“So you got a problem with your punishment? I choked you and everything, just how you like it.”

“No, my punishment was superb, as usual. Um, I think I should just go before your kids get up.”

He tightened his arm around me. “First of all, those kids have probably been up for a while now, because they rise with the damn sun. Second, you are not sneaking out of here like you are anything less than my woman. No more sneaking around like we aren’t two grown people who have the right to spend time together. My kids are fine with this, and if they aren’t, they’ll learn to be. I want you in my life, for real, Nadia. And I also want to have breakfast with you, so get up and put your clothes on and let’s go eat.”

Well, what could I do other than agree?

By the time we made it to the kitchen, Mecca and Ian were already busy with what seemed to be their regular morning routine of setting the table for breakfast, and as I sat in the same chair in the dining room that I’d occupied on the previous evening with what had to be a sheepish look on my face, Mecca smiled at me and signed *Good morning*, which I quickly signed back to her, and Ian said, “Gooood morning!” sounding like a commercial than ran on the local channels. “Here’s your orange juice, Nadia.”

After glancing up at Nathan, who gave me a smile and a nod, I said, “Thank you, Ian.”

## Nathan

*Good night, Daddy, Good night, Nadia,* Mecca signed, giving both of us a hug.

*Good night, Mecca,* Nadia signed back. Ian had already wished us goodnight.

I kissed Mecca's forehead and watched her leave my bedroom, closing the door behind her.

Nadia's phone buzzed, and I watched her check it, smile, and then type something out.

"Who is that?" I asked.

"Nosy much?" she replied.

I smiled. "Oh, that must be your other boyfriend."

"No, he only texts me when I'm a work."

"Nadia, you're playing, but don't make me have to hurt somebody."

She laughed. “If you must know, Mecca just texted me a *Matrix* meme. See?”

She held her phone close to my face. The meme was funny, so I laughed and said, “She should be in bed. How she gonna text you two seconds after wishing us goodnight? Let me go take that phone.”

“You better not. What? Are you jealous?”

“No, but how long has she had your phone number?”

“I gave it to her today.”

“She really likes you.”

“I like her, too, and I like Ian. I would’ve thought you’d be glad we’re getting along so well.”

“I am ...”

“But you’re jealous?”

“Put your phone down and come to bed, baby.”

“You’re changing the subject, and I’m already in bed.”

“You’re way over there on the other side and you’re sitting up. Lie down close to me.”

“Wow, are you whining?”

“No.”

With a huge grin on her face, she turned the lamp on her bedside table off and scooted close to me. “This bed really is massive, Nathan.”

“I’m a big man, baby.”

“Oh, I know.”



I chuckled and pulled her as close to me as I could, and then a comfortable silence fell over us for several minutes until I broke it. “I’ma take you out tomorrow night,” I said into the darkness of my bedroom.

“Really? That’d be nice. Where we going?” Nadia asked groggily.

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll surprise you.”

“Well, I’ll need to know what to wear—dressy or casual,” she said through a yawn.

“Hmm, casual. I wanna do something laid back.”

“Okay. I’ll head to my place after work and get changed.”

“Or . . . you could grab your clothes and get dressed here. Better yet, you could move all your clothes in here.”

“Are you . . . are you asking me to move in with you, Nathan?”

“I think I am.”

“You’re not sure you are? Well, *I’m* not sure how I feel about a tentative invitation to move in with you.”

“If I was sure, would you do it? Would you move in with me? I mean, I know my situation is unique. I got two kids, two special needs kids that you’ll be sharing space with, not to mention me. I ain’t perfect.”

“I beg to differ, Mr. Moore. You’ve shown me nothing but perfection at all times except when you whine and act like a jealous baby.”

I sighed. “Here you go with that again.”

“And I already told you that I like your kids. They make me smile.”

“And you know they like you, too. That’s why they’ve been on their best behavior around you and haven’t shown you their dark sides. Neither have I.”

“You have a side that’s darker than you choking, spanking, and manhandling me during sex? Hell, I’m not sure I wanna meet that Nathan.”

I laughed. “You really don’t. That Nathan is an asshole. Moody, brooding, selfish. Dominant Nathan is a damn kitten compared to him.”

“Well, I’m not perfect, either, you know?”

“Oh, I’ve met your dark side. I call her Malevolent Professor Day.”

“Wow.”

“I’m just saying, the first time I met you, you were mean as hell, unflinchingly blunt and cold. That shit turned me on, though.”

“So you like Malevolent Professor Day, huh? Maybe I need to bring her back out around you, see how she and Dominant Nathan get along.”

“That’d be some shit, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

A phone buzzed, interrupting our conversation, and Nadia damn near jumped out of my arms. “That’s probably mine,” she said, sitting up and reaching over on the night table for it. “It is,” she confirmed.

“Is it Mecca again? I’m gonna go take that phone, and I don’t care what you have to say about it.”

“It’s not her. It’s not a text. It’s a call from my friend, Sharla.”

“You gonna answer it?”

“Yes. Something must be wrong. She never calls at this time of night.” Then, with only the screen of her phone illuminating the room, she answered the call. “Hello? Huh? What’s going—what?! Okay, I’ll be right there.”

I turned the lamp next to my side of the bed on and sat up. “What’s going on?”

“Something’s going on with Brooklyn. I need to go.”

“I’ll drive you.”

“You can’t leave your kids alone. I’m fine to drive. I’ll be okay,” she said as she began dressing.

“You sure? I can call the nanny to come stay with them.”

“I’m positive.” Having dressed in record time, she walked around the bed and kissed me. “I’ll call you later.”

As I walked her to the front door, I wanted to ask if she was coming back, but figured her saying she would call later meant she wasn’t.

“Bye,” she said, giving me another kiss.

“Bye, baby.”

# Nadia

“He . . . he left? Isaac left you?” I croaked. I couldn’t believe it, but judging from the condition of my dear friend, it was definitely true.

Brooklyn lifted her swollen eyes to me. “Yes, he left.”

“When?” I asked.

“I already told Sharla everything since she actually answers her phone. I can’t believe she hasn’t told you already.”

“First of all, don’t be acting like I just tell folks’ business like that, and second, she ain’t been answering my calls either,” Sharla said.

“You could’ve come by my office and told me, Sharla. We work on the same campus.”

“Um, it’s midterms and I’ve been busy. I don’t have a TA like you do.”

“Because you keep firing them. You expect too much of them.”

“Damn, my life is in shambles right now, and you two wanna argue about your fucking jobs?” Brooklyn shrieked. “I knew I should’ve never broken up with Jamaal and his dick. He was so good to me, but I just couldn’t get past him being broke. I’m gonna call him and—”

“Not a good idea. Evidently, he’s Ginger’s soulmate for now,” I advised, and waited for her to call my little sister

everything but a child of God.

“Figures. Even *he* betrayed me,” she said through a snuffle.

“How could he betray you when you are married with a child—wait, where is Bailey?” Sharla said.

With a frown, I echoed her. “Yeah, where is she?”

“With my mom. I’ve been staying there for the past week or so,” Brooklyn answered.

“Why? *He* left *you*, right? Is there some clause in your prenup that says you can’t stay in the house if he’s not there?” Sharla asked.

Brooklyn wiped her moist eyes with a tissue and twisted her mouth. “I didn’t tell you the exact truth about what happened, Shar.”

“Well, I guess it’s good I couldn’t get in touch with you, Nadia. What part was untrue, Brook?” Sharla asked.

Brooklyn sighed. “So, here’s the thing: I’ve never been sexually satisfied with Isaac. He’s a good provider, but he’s super boring in the bedroom.”

“Oh, Lord . . . what did you do, Brooklyn?” Sharla whined.

“I’ve been screwing Jamaal this whole time I’ve been married,” she confessed, and then squeezed her eyes shut. “Not like every day, but like, two or three times a month. Anyway, Isaac found out about it. Evidently, he had some suspicions and hired a private investigator who followed me to Jamaal’s place. He confronted me and kicked me out, tried to make me leave Bailey with him, but I wouldn’t.”

“What?!” both Sharla and I shrieked.

“Look, before you judge me, just know that I did it for my marriage. I was trying to make it work!”

“By fucking another man?!” Sharla yelled. “Really, Brooklyn? I mean, I know we’ve always had our differences. We just think differently, and I have always accepted that, but this is foul! Isaac is a good guy, and I’m sure you knew what you were getting into sexually before you married him. You should’ve left him alone and went on with Jamaal!”

“Jamaal couldn’t give me the life I wanted and you know that!”

“Girl, what century does your mind reside in? Anything your ass wanted, you could’ve made that shit happen for yourself just like me and Nadia have. You’re beautiful and you can sing, remember that? And you have a damn college degree! You could’ve had a career, Brooklyn. This just doesn’t make any sense and there are no words in the English language that you can use to make this shit sound right. You can’t defend shit like this!” Sharla yelled.

Brooklyn shook her head. “You have no right to judge me until you’ve walked in my shoes and lived my life.”

“Then tell us what we need to know to understand this, Brooklyn, because as of right now, I have to agree with Shar. This is messed up!” I said.

Brooklyn sighed. “See, this is why I didn’t tell y’all about Jamaal. I knew y’all would judge me! You both know how I grew up, what I went through. Shit, I have poverty PTSD. I don’t wanna live like that ever again. Can’t you get that?!”

“And didn’t you hear a word I said about you getting shit for yourself? Huh?!” Sharla had stood from her seat beside Brooklyn and was now standing over her. “I wish I had a man as good as Isaac. Hell, I wish I had a man, *period* and not just fuck buddies who only want to be fuck buddies! You’ve got one, and this is how you treat him all because your ass needs some fucking therapy?!”

Brooklyn hopped up, now standing toe-to-toe with Sharla. “Fuck this! I’m leaving!”

“Please do, with your trifling ass! I don’t wanna look at you right now, anyway; you’re disgusting!” Sharla shot back.

“Whoa, whoa! Let’s all just calm down,” I said. “Let’s calm down, take a minute to breathe, and talk this out like the mature, intelligent women we are.”

“Nah, fuck that. She needs to leave my house,” Sharla said.

Brooklyn snatched her keys and purse up from Sharla’s coffee table. “Oh, I’m leaving, and you don’t have to worry about me calling your lonely, desperate ass ever again, around here fucking anything with a pulse because don’t nobody worth a damn want your ass! Consider this friendship over!” She turned to leave and stopped, glaring at me. “And *you*. When I needed you, you were too busy sucking that too-fine-to-wanna-be-with-you football player’s dick to answer my calls, giving me a lame excuse about your mother. Well, when he gets tired of your boring ass and moves on, you won’t have me to cry to!”

Then she left, and I just stood there in utter shock as Sharla shook her head and said, “I never liked that bitch anyway.”

What the hell had just happened?



## Nathan

“You just gonna sit there and stare at me, huh?” I asked, as I wrapped a towel around my waist.

“Well, your body does command one’s attention, you know?”

I smiled. “Is that right? What you tryna say?”

“That you are some kind of fine.”

“So are you, baby. The finest of fine. Have you thought any more about my offer to move in?”

“Mm-hmmm ...”

“And?”

“I’m still thinking.”

“Okay. No rush.”

“I appreciate your patience.”

“Of course, baby.”

“So, are you ready for today? This barbecue is a big deal, right?”

Leaning over to kiss her, I said, “Yeah, if we can get these three guys to sign with us, that’d be a big win for the North Agency.”

“Hmmm, well, I’ll have all of my fingers and toes crossed for you today.”

“You’ll be here with me. That’s all the luck I need, baby.”

With that grin still on her face, she left the bed, stepping into my arms. “Mmm, I wish we had time to play around a little, but I know we have to get everything ready and you just took a shower. I need to get in the shower myself.”

“I tell you what . . . you get in that shower, and I’ll come in there and help you get clean.”

Without a word, she turned and walked her sexy ass into the bathroom.

I handed Armand Daniels a beer. “Hey, man . . . glad you could make it. I know the season is winding down, but y’all are still working so this was a real sacrifice for you.”

Taking the beer, he said, “Thanks. Yeah, it wasn’t easy to fit this in, but I liked what you said on the phone, and I do need a change in representation. My agent ain’t about shit. I should be making more money with everything I bring to the table.”

I nodded, eyeing the young man as I took a seat in the lawn chair directly in front of his in my sprawling back yard. He was talented, but definitely troubled, and he'd come to my house with not one, but two dates. He definitely needed a lot of grooming if he was going to take advantage of what his talent could bring him. "Yeah, you do bring a lot to the table. Your stats are off the charts."

"But?"

"Why does there have to be a but?"

He shrugged, his eyes on his beer. "Because there always is when it comes to me."

"Why do you think that is?"

He turned his beer up and shrugged again. "That's just the way things are for me."

Armand Daniels was a fucked-up dude. The world knew that, but I understood it. Armand was me years ago, a young man so full of pain that it only came out as anger. I got past it thanks to lots of therapy, and ended up with a good, long football career. Otherwise, I might've just ended up as an abbreviated footnote in the NFL annals. Daniels was headed in that direction with his career and I knew only I could help him turn things around, so that's what I told him. I shared my upbringing with him along with my anger and my victories in life.

When I was done, he sat there deep in thought before giving me a nod, and saying, "I like what I'm hearing. I like it a lot."

We were wrapping up our conversation when Nadia approached us.

“Baby, have you met Armand?” I asked, as she stood next to the chair I was occupying.

She leaned against me and nodded. “Yes, I have. I hope you’re enjoying yourself so far, Armand.”

“I am. Thank you,” he replied, sizing my woman up. When he noticed me noticing his appraisal of her, he quickly fixed his eyes on his empty beer bottle.

Good, because I would’ve hated to have to mess him up.

But I would’ve.

In a damn heartbeat.

Seeing her keys in her hand, I asked, “Where you going? You leaving?”

“No, I left my iPad in my car and I’m afraid it’s gonna fry out here. It’s pretty warm today.”

“I’ll get it. Hey, you can grab another beer or whatever you want, Armand. I’ll talk to you more a little later.”

“Bet. Let me go see what my dates are up to,” he said, giving me a wink. As I headed to the driveway from where we were all gathered in the backyard, I hoped Armand wouldn’t get himself in any trouble before I got him signed.

## Nadia

I'd never seen Nathan like this before, being a businessman. Businessman Nathan closely resembled Dominant Nathan—commanding, assertive, and sexy as hell. I liked this version of him as much as I liked the others. But then again, Nathan could become a clown, put on a big orange afro wig and a rainbow suit and I'd probably like that, too, because I just couldn't help it.

I didn't want to help it, either.

A small smile crept upon my face as I watched him talk to one of the Romey U players they were courting, then I let my eyes shift to Mecca, who had her face glued to her phone. Ian was sharing an iPad with the Higgs boys. Well, he was actually just watching something on it and the boys were sitting with him and watching, too. There wasn't actually any real interaction going on between them that I could see. I supposed they were watching cartoons and hoped it wasn't *In Living Color* instead. I knew that was his favorite show, but I didn't think the Higgs boys were old enough to watch it.

“So you're the professor?” Melanie asked. She'd been introduced to me as the wife of Nathan's business partner, the North in the North Agency—Luke North. She was cute, petite, and her husband? A big, tall, light-skinned Adonis, almost as fine as my Nathan.

With a creased brow, I gave her my attention. “What?”

“You're the professor that Nate was crushing on. I tried to fix him up with my big sister and he wasn't having it. Evidently, he was saving himself for you.”

“Oh?” I said, adjusting myself on the plush outdoor loveseat. Melanie was occupying the adjacent sofa along with

Renee Higgs. The mother of one of the college recruits had been sitting and chatting with us, but had left our immediate area, so I guessed Melanie felt like this was a good time to get personal.

“Mm-hmm, Luke said he kept talking about you, about how pretty and smart you are. I can see he was telling the truth.”

“Well, thanks. He told me that you and your husband were great people. I see he didn’t exaggerate about that, either.”

“Nate’s a sweetheart. Kind almost to a fault. That’s one of the reasons I was trying to reel him in for my sister.” She laughed. “But, you two seem like a good match, so I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks,” I replied. “So, I hear you and Luke are newlyweds. Nathan told me your story is one for the books.”

She sighed. “I guess it is. We broke up because of poor communication basically, along with us both being young and dumb, stayed apart for ten years, and reconciled because I followed my sister to a Ying Yang Twins concert where I happened to bump into the only man I’d ever loved. The next thing I knew, I was planning my own wedding. I plan little intimate events for couples, by the way. Holler at me if you need to plan something sweet and sexy for you and Nate.”

“I will!” I said.

“Anyway, me and Light-skinned Luke have been married for two years now, and I’m still not over Renee missing it.” She shot a look at Renee Higgs.

“First of all, I will never get over that being his nickname, but it fits,” Renee said through a giggle.

“It really does,” I agreed, laughing with her.

“Right? And second, I was pregnant, Mel! Believe me, you didn’t want me there in that condition, and I would’ve ruined the ambiance tipping out of the sanctuary to pee every two seconds,” Renee said, bouncing a little chocolate chubby baby boy in her lap.

We all laughed, and then Melanie said, “I honestly can’t believe you’re not pregnant right now. Little Angelo is what? Seven months old now? Your husband usually doesn’t let you get this close to a year without being pregnant.”

Renee’s eyes rounded the backyard as she lowered her voice, “I finally convinced Zo to get fixed. He got a vasectomy.”

“Really?! Wow! Girl, I know you’re glad.”

“I am! Five stair-steps is enough! My uterus was about to go on strike!”

More laughter.

“Your boys are so cute! All little replicas of your husband. What are their names?” I asked. “I can’t remember them all.”

With a proud smile on her face, Renee said, “Thank you! From oldest to youngest, they’re Lorenzo Jr., Clarence, Tyrell, Darnell, and Angelo.”

“Nice. Hey, I know you from Mahogany Women in Motion, Renee, but how did the two of you become friends?” I inquired.

“Through our husbands. Zo is a silent partner in the North Agency, and he and Luke also co-own a Strickland Motors

franchise,” Melanie informed me.

“Strickland Motors is your dad’s company, right, Renee?” I quizzed.

Renee nodded. “Yep. He and my Zo are super close, so when he decided to expand the company more than he already had, Zo hopped on board. The lot he and Luke co-own is in Chicago.”

“Oh, that’s cool,” I responded.

“And you just get ready. You’re a part of our crew now, our little wives club. We’ll be hanging out more since you’re with Nate. Our guys are always getting together,” Melanie said.

“Yeah, and I’m glad. I’ve always liked you and wanted to get to know you better. A woman your age with a PhD? You’re the kind of lady I need in my immediate friend circle,” Renee chimed in.

“Well, thank you, ladies, for the warm welcome, but I’m not Nathan’s wife. Are you sure I belong in your circle?” I asked.

“Girl, give him some time. He’s gonna ask. I know him well enough to know that. I can see that coming from a mile away,” Melanie stated.

Before I could answer, one of Armand Daniels’ two dates was asking me where the closest bathroom was. As I left to show her, I heard Renee mention getting some more ribs. I hoped there would be some left, because in addition to all the other things Nathan was good at, he could grill the hell out of some ribs.



“I like the way Mecca and Ian disappeared now that it’s time to clean up,” Nathan observed, as we cleaned the kitchen later that evening. “For the first time in history, they actually *wanted* to go to bed early.”

I chuckled. “You got some smart kids, Mr. Moore.”

“Too damn smart, and speaking of cleaning up, I couldn’t help but notice that paper shrine you have in your car.”

“Huh?”

“When I got your iPad for you? There are papers everywhere, Nadia. *Everywhere.*”

“Oh, those are fliers and stuff. You know that no windshield is safe on campus.”

“Okay, so are you saving them because you’re planning to attend a fraternity ‘freak-a-leak’ party or something? Tryna replace me with some youngin’?”

“Maybe ...”

“Maybe?!”

I laughed. “You can’t possibly feel threatened. How in the world could I ever replace you?”

“Shit, you can’t.”

“Woow, anyway, at the barbecue earlier, Melanie was telling me how you had a crush on me before we got together.”

“She said that? That I had a crush on you?” he asked as he slid a container of leftovers into the refrigerator.

“Not in those words, but that’s what I got from what she told me.”

“Hmm.”

“Hmm, what? Is it not the truth?”

“It’s the truth. So, how do you feel about it?”

“Flattered.”

“Good.”

“Nathan, about the whole me moving in with you thing ...”

He turned from where he was wrapping up the two or three ribs that were left and looked at me. “Yeah?”

I placed the cover over the bakery-cooked chocolate cake and smiled. “I—” The doorbell rang and I sighed. “That’s probably Melanie coming back for her dish. I’ll let her in.”

“Hurry back so we can finish this conversation. You’re smiling, so I’m expecting good news.”

Grinning wider, I trotted through the huge house’s first floor to the front door, checked the peep hole, and frowned.

Opening it, I said, “Hi, can I help you?”

“Who the hell are you?” asked the older lady with a deep smoker’s voice. Well, she actually kind of shouted the words. It startled the hell out of me for that voice to come out of that skinny little body. Whoever this woman was, she’d lived a rough life—bags under her eyes, dark lips, yellow sclera. She looked like a strong case of cirrhosis of the liver.

“Um, I’m Nadia.”

“You working for Nate now? Where is he? Nate! You here?!”

I was frowning now, because who the hell was this woman?

“Mama?” It was Nathan’s voice that startled me this time. He was standing behind me in the foyer, and all I could think was, *this is his mother?*

I had to have heard him wrong. This couldn’t possibly be his mother.

“Yeah, it’s me. I’m surprised you still know what I look like!” she shouted.

“What are you doing here, Mama? You need to leave.”

I took that as a cue for *me* to leave, because whatever was going on had nothing to do with me. Hell, Nathan hadn’t even mentioned his mother to me since before we became a we. I had wondered what happened to her since he’d told me she lived with him and helped with the kids and that was obviously no longer the case, but I was giving him the time he’d requested to tell me.

As I backed away from them, she said, “Yeah, go on somewhere! Ain’t got no business listening to us anyway. What kind of folks you hiring to try to replace me? I bet she can’t even cook!”

“First of all, don’t talk to her. Second, did you drive here drunk?”

“You always think somebody is drunk! I ain’t drunk!”

“Yeah, you are. I’m an expert at knowing when you’re drunk, remember? Did you drive? I’ll call you an Uber, but you gotta go.”

“I ain’t drive, and I ain’t going nowhere until you let me in to see my grandbabies! It’s one thing for you to put me out, but you can’t keep me from my grandbabies.”

He sighed and shook his head, then turned and looked at me. “I’ll be right back. Would you go check on the kids for me, make sure they’re in bed?”

I nodded and watched him step outside, shutting the door behind them.

## Nathan

“Where’s your ride?” I asked, not seeing any vehicles in my driveway.

“Huh?” she turned around. “I told that nigga to wait! Shit!” Facing me again, she added, “Guess I’ma have to stay.”

I shook my head, knowing she’d planned this shit. “Nah, I’ma call you an Uber like I said.”

She grabbed my arm as I turned to go back in the house to get my phone. “Nate, baby boy . . . I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I

shouldn't have done the stuff I did. I'm sorry I upset you. I'm sorry I . . . Bernard done got arrested again.”

I sighed. Well, that was expected. I was just surprised it took so long. “Ma—”

“Please forgive me and let me come back home. I won't do nothing like that again. I was wrong. This is your house, and if you didn't want Bernard here, I should've respected that. I should've respected you. I'ma do better with that.”

“Mama, you can't come back here.”

“But why? I apologized! Damn!”

“Because you're drinking again, and I can't trust you no more. If Bernard gets out on bail, you'll be right back to your old self again. I'm not putting the kids through that. They don't deserve it any more than I did.”

“Why you bringing up the past again?! Why can't you just let that shit go?!”

“Because you keep digging it back up! Look, let me go get my phone and call you a ride, and I'ma need my keys, Mama.”

“Hell, I don't know where they at! If I did, I'da just let myself in!”

So much for respecting me and my wishes.

I went back in my house, shutting the door behind me. Nadia was still standing in the foyer, and I suddenly wished she wasn't there, that she hadn't witnessed my mother in that condition. I knew she had questions. I saw them in her eyes, but I was in no mood or condition to answer them.

“Everything okay?” she asked, as I breezed past her in search of my phone. Shit, my mind was so tangled up that I had no idea where it was.

“Yeah,” I said, more brusquely than I’d intended. “Did you check on the kids?”

“Yes, Ian’s knocked out. Mecca’s in the bed with her phone.”

“Good. Thanks.” I kept walking, leaving her in the foyer.

I’d done a quick search of downstairs and finally found my phone in the living room, was pulling up the Uber app when I heard Nadia scream, “Nathan! Nathan, come here!”

I rushed back to the foyer, my heart galloping in my chest in response to the desperation in Nadia’s voice, and almost passed the fuck out when I saw my mother lying on the cold marble floor.

## Nathan

Sitting in the waiting area of the emergency room, there was a damn torrential downpour of thoughts crowding my mind. My mother was still unresponsive when the ambulance drove her away from my house, and I wasn't sure how I felt about it. Of course I was worried, because shit, I wasn't a monster, but I probably wasn't as worried as I should've been considering she was my biological mother. I was just . . . hell, I was fucking exhausted. Tired as hell. I didn't want to have to deal with this shit. I just wanted to live my life, and as callous as that might have sounded, I believed I had a right to feel that way. My damn family had taken enough of my life and happiness from me over the years to last three lifetimes.

I felt a hand grasp mine.

Nadia.

She'd insisted on coming with me, even called the nanny for me and had her come over and stay with the kids. She hadn't pried, and I was thankful for that although I owed her

some type of explanation. She had a right to know why my mother was not allowed in my house, especially since she witnessed her busting in the door and passing the fuck out at her feet, but I couldn't talk about it. I couldn't formulate the words. All I could do was sit there in that uncomfortable chair and stare at the shiny floor and try not to feel like a six-year-old who was hungry and couldn't wake his passed-out mother up. Yeah, this whole situation was causing a lot of déjà vu for me. Too much.

“You need anything? Something to drink maybe?” Nadia softly asked.

With my eyes still on the floor, I shook my head. “You should go home, baby. You don't have to be here.”

“I want to be here for you, Nathan, so let me be here for you.”

I looked up at her and was going to insist she leave because I needed to be alone when I heard a voice say, “Tribble family?!”

Hopping up, I moved in the direction of the voice, which belonged to a short blond nurse, and I instinctively knew Nadia was right behind me. “I'm Sammy Tribble's son,” I said.

“Can you come with me?” the nurse asked.

I froze, my eyes glued to her sympathetic ones. “She's dead?”

“Uh . . . you really should speak with the doctor. If you'll come right this way—”



“*Is she dead?* I don’t need to go talk to a doctor. Just tell me!”

I felt a hand on my shoulder, heard Nadia gently say, “Nathan, let’s just go with her and—”

“Nah, she can tell me right here and now. Just tell me if my fucking mother is dead! Tell me now! Tell me!”

From the corner of my eye, I saw a security guard approaching us, could feel other eyes on me, and still I screamed, “Fucking tell me if my mother died!”

The damn nurse just stood there with a scared look on her face. When the doors to the ER rooms opened and someone walked out, I bum-rushed them, running past them into the space, screaming my mother’s name, my eyes checking the board in front of the nurses station as people I didn’t know tried to grab me. They couldn’t stop me, though. I was too big and upset to be stopped. Spotting my mom’s name on the board, I took note of her trauma room number and rushed inside it to find her lying on the bed.

She was gone.

*She was gone.*

And when that reality hit me, I released a wail that sounded like it came from someone else.

# Nadia

I wasn't sure what to do or how to help him. After he broke down in the hospital, it took almost an hour for him to calm down, and even then, he refused to leave his mother's side until they told him they needed to take her to the morgue. After that, he sat in the ER lobby and stared into space. The sun was rising when I was finally able to coax him into letting me drive him home, and now we were in the car on the hospital's parking deck.

“Nathan . . . I—”

He was on me so fast; I wasn't sure if it was really happening. He kissed me savagely, his big hand on the back of my head, smashing my face against his and making the kiss morph from intense to painful, and of course I liked that. So there went my panties, in total ruination. The condition of my panties didn't improve when he moved one hand to my neck, snaked the other one under my sundress, and simultaneously kissed, choked, and stroked me. Tears sprung to my closed eyes as I was inundated with pleasure, my yoni pulsating as every cell in my body worked to gather energy in my core. His mouth left mine, but his hands remained in place, assaulting and pleasing me all at once. My eyes popped open and scanned the parking garage, my face in a tortured frown as my eyes finally landed on his handsome face. He looked so . . . determined, and I felt so good and confused and concerned. What was he doing, and why was he doing it right here and right now, after his mother—

“Why are your eyes open? What the fuck are you trying to see? Always tryna see some shit!” he barked, filling the inside of the vehicle with his deep voice. His hand moved faster and faster as his thumb caressed my bud while two of his big fingers slid in and out of me.

“N-Nathan! Ohhhh, shit! Wait!”

“Wait? You want me to stop?”

“No! But—shit! Baby!”

“Hmmm? Baby, what?”

I couldn't answer him, because I unraveled right there in the driver's seat of his car, my heart hammering in my chest as ragged breaths rushed from my mouth. With a heaving chest, I watched as he pulled his hand from under my dress, licked his fingers, and then adjusted in his seat, staring straight ahead. A few moments later, I began to drive him home, my legs trembling.

As I pulled his car into his driveway and killed the engine, I reached over and rested my hand on his, which were clenched tightly in his lap. His eyes were downcast, his shoulders, slumped.

“Hey, we're home. You ready to go inside?” I asked.

“Go home,” was how he answered me.

“Nathan—”

“Go home, Nadia. I’m no good to you right now.” He still hadn’t raised his eyes.

“It’s all right. Like I said . . . I wanna be here for you. We don’t have to talk. We don’t have to do anything. Just let me —”

“Nadia, just fucking go home! Now!”

His voice boomed, making me jump. Then he snatched his keys out of my hand, yanked the door open, and stalked into his house.

With tears in my eyes, I grabbed my purse and left, driving my car to my apartment.

## Nadia

Of all the places I thought I'd end up when I needed to feel, I don't know . . . *wanted*, I never thought I'd end up there, but there I was, sinking into the big comfortable bright orange chaise in my mommy's living room. There was a mug of green tea in my hands, a vegan cookie sat in a little saucer on the small table next to me, and jasmine incense mixed with the fading aroma of marijuana filled my nose. My mommy was lying on the sofa adjacent to the chaise in a thin caftan, watching an episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. This was home, and I felt that even deeper since witnessing the death of Nathan's mother. It took that for me to realize how fortunate I was to still have mine and to have been raised by such a loving woman, a loving woman whose main goal was to teach her girls to be free. I'd grown embarrassed by her unabashed authenticity and awareness of herself as I chased validation through higher education and academic status. Nathan was right, I had grown too concerned with what others thought about me. And now, I just didn't care. I wanted to be

enveloped by the warmth and love I could only find in my mother's home, engulfed by her sense of freedom.

Brooklyn hadn't called me, and shit, I was afraid to call her. My ego had taken enough blows as of late. I didn't think I could stomach another dose of her sharp tongue. Sharla was dodging my calls, so there was that, and I missed Nathan.

I missed him so, so much.

It'd been two weeks since his mother passed, two weeks of him ignoring my texts and phone calls, two weeks of him not contacting me, and that hurt, but the psychologist in me understood. Grieving took time and was a huge assault to the psyche. Losing a loved one was devastating and changed one's life forever. I really got it. Hell, my dissertation was centered around the psychology of grieving, because I had a deeply personal experience with the process after I lost Sullivan. I knew people processed grief in different forms. Sullivan's mother had a stroke as a result of her grieving, and his sisters became angry. I lost myself, became someone else, but Nathan had done a good job of unearthing the old me.

I sighed, took a sip of my tea, and told myself to give him more time, to give him all the time he needed. Well, that's what the logical side of myself said. The hopelessly, madly in love and lust with him side was much more fatal. She was telling me to hop in my car and drive over to that white frame farmhouse palace of his and *make* him talk to me. Logical me won as I pulled the soft yellow throw up under my chin.

"You ladies need anything?" Braeden's voice startled me a bit.

I looked up at him and shook my head, gave him a tiny smile, and said, “No, thank you. I’m good.”

“No, baby. We don’t need anything,” Mommy stated.

“Okay, well . . . I’m gonna head on out to the shop, then.” He leaned over and kissed my mom’s forehead, and added, “I love you.”

“Love you, too,” she replied, and a few seconds after we heard him leave, she announced, “We’re getting married.”

I almost dropped my mug. “What? You’re what?!”

“I’m going to marry Braeden.”

“How? Why? I mean, I thought you didn’t believe in marriage!”

“I didn’t, and now I do. People are allowed to change, my love. You don’t have to be the same person you were fifteen minutes ago if you don’t want to. Life is all about evolution. I have evolved into a woman who wants to be the wife of the man she loves. I . . . I respect marriage now.”

“Wow . . . uh, does this have anything to do with my father’s visit?”

She sat up, running a hand through her untamed hair. “It might. You know what? I think it actually has a lot to do with seeing him again. I loved that man, Nadia. I really did. He’s always been so funny, so outspoken, so *fine*.”

“Ew!”

She chuckled. “He is! Beer gut and all! You have to admit that your father is an attractive man, Nadia.”

“No I don’t!”

“Okay, okay . . . anyway, I never felt like I did with him until Braeden.”

“Not even with Ginger’s father?”

“No. Ginger is a gift, but her father? Not so much. Anyway, I think I realized how fortunate I was to find that feeling again, so I’m going to marry him. I love him that much.”

“That’s beautiful, Mommy.”

“When are you going to marry Nathan?”

Blowing out a breath, I shook my head. “I’m not sure that will ever happen.”

“Why? Because he’s in mourning?”

My mouth dropped open. I hadn’t told my mother about his mother’s passing. I’d just showed up at her doorstep looking like a lost puppy. “How did you—”

“We follow each other on Instagram. I saw a post he made in tribute to his mother. She looked nice in the picture. It was one of him and her when he was a little boy.”

“Oh.”

“So, you think it’s over because he suffered a loss?”

“No, not that. He . . . he’s shut me out, and a part of me is afraid he won’t ever let me back in. I mean, I know I need to give him time to work through what he’s feeling, but . . . I miss and need him, and I honestly believe he needs me right now.”

She nodded. “I agree. He does, and he’ll figure that out and reach out to you. He doesn’t give me the impression that he’s a dumb man. He knows what he has in you.”



“What? An educated basket case?” I quipped. “A psychologist who runs from her own issues rather than working through them?”

“A woman. A flesh and blood woman with insecurities and flaws and a big heart full of love. You dealt with that Sullivan situation the best way you knew how at the time.”

“I lost myself, though, Mommy. I . . . I don’t wanna be this Nadia anymore.”

“Then don’t be.”

I shook my head as I wiped tears from my cheeks. “I don’t know how to stop being her. I . . . I’m afraid to stop being her.”

Mommy stood from the sofa and took a seat at the foot of the chaise. With her hand resting on my leg, she softly said, “The Nadia you created to protect your heart and mind from that tragedy was never the real you anyway. All you have to do is relax and be you, my love. That’s all. Be the free, loving, confident woman you’re meant to be. Being the real you is easy; pretending is hard. All you have to do is just . . . be.”

Then she gave me the best hug I’d ever had.

“Who the hell died?” Ginger’s voice ripped through the contented silence in my mother’s home. Neither of us had heard her enter the house.

Mommy released me and walked over to Ginger, pulling her into a hug in the living room doorway. “Hey, my love! I didn’t know you were coming over today.”

“Neither did I. I was in the area and decided to pop in and give you some of this.” Ginger held up a vial of oil.

“What’s that?” I asked, as she bent down to hug me.

“I call it my Magic Pussy Oil. I made it during the last full moon, and it’s been selling out since I put it on my site.”

There she went with that moon shit again.

“Well, what does it do?” Mommy asked as Ginger left me, taking a seat on the couch next to her.

After she’d handed the vial to Mommy, she replied, “If you rub it on your yoni and on his magic stick, it lowers inhibitions, heightens sensations. It’s like a fireball of desire in oil form. You can save it for your honeymoon, Mommy.”

“You knew she was getting married? Wow,” I said, sounding correctly like a whiny kid.

“Oh, I just told her on the phone this morning. I was going to call and tell you, but you came by, so I told you in person,” Mommy said. “Thank you, Ginger!”

“Anytime, Mommy. You want some, Noddy?”

I wanted to say no, but instead said, “Yes. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, even though you haven’t called me in forever.”

“You haven’t called me, either!”

“But I’m the little sister! You’re supposed to keep tabs on me.”

“Is that even possible, Ginger?”

“No, but it’s the thought that counts.”

I shook my head.

A couple of minutes later, I was staring at the bottle as I said, “Um, Ginger . . . I need to tell you something about Jamaal—”

“Wait!” Ginger trilled dramatically. “I need to get something off my chest.”

I frowned, glanced at Mommy, who just shrugged, and said, “Okay . . . what?”

“I’m in love with Steven.”

“Who?” my mother asked.

“Lunch Meat?!” I queried.

“Who is Lunch Meat?” My mother was truly confused.

“My brother!” I informed her. “She’s saying she’s in love with my brother.” Okay, so it wasn’t like I didn’t see it coming, but still . . . *what?*

“Oh! That *is* his name! I haven’t really thought about that big piece of fine-ness. Whew! He is gorgeous! Reminds me of his daddy back in the day!”

Ginger slapped her hand to her chest, making her enviably huge breasts bounce. She never wore a bra. Neither did Mommy. “Oh, God! Isn’t he beautiful? So big and wide and —”

“Wait, what about Jamaal? I thought he was your soul mate.”

“False alarm. I dumped him.”

Thank goodness! “Oh, okay.”

“Soooo, I know your dad mentioned some kind of family gathering he wants you to attend, right?”

“Ginger, I’m not taking you with me so you can hit on my damn brother.”

“You are such a damn hater!” Ginger declared.

“And a cock blocker,” Mommy cosigned.

“Mommy!” I shrieked.

“Well, it looks to me like you’re blocking cock . . .” she doubled down. “But I still love you, sweetie.”

“Wow,” I said, shaking my head. “Just . . . wow.”

## Nathan

We buried my mom the weekend following her death, after a short funeral home service full of my relatives, all wailing and screaming. I’d bailed my brother out of jail so he could be there, and he cried the whole time, actually tried to climb into the casket with her. I suppose his grief was genuine since Mama had always been his cheerleader. He couldn’t fuck up enough times to make her turn her back on him. Me, on the other hand? She’d never really been that much of a mother to me.

As soon as that thought hit my mind, I felt like shit for thinking it at her funeral, and then I told myself that her being dead didn't erase all the stuff I went through as a kid. Then I remembered how good it'd been to have her around helping with the kids all those years, being the mother to them I'd always wanted her to be to me.

Shit, I was confused and conflicted as hell.

Anyway, all that acting out everyone was doing scared the hell out of Ian and Mecca, made me regret taking them to the funeral at all, and I was so fucked up in the head that I offered little to no comfort to them. And now, sitting at the dining room table, three weeks after losing my mother, I felt no different. I was still confused and conflicted, and no good to anyone, including myself. I hadn't been to work, was ignoring everyone's calls, and I didn't know what to do to fix myself. I probably needed to get back into counselling, but I was paralyzed, too fucked up to make a decision that sound.

When the doorbell rang, Mecca hopped up and said she'd get it. My ass was perplexed for a second, but then I remembered the flashing light system that was connected to the doorbell and present in every room of the house. Shit, now I was forgetting stuff, too?

It took a couple of minutes for it to occur to me that maybe I shouldn't have let my sixteen-year-old deaf daughter answer the damn door alone. Then I realized that whoever it was had to have known the gate code to make it as far as to the door. I was processing all that when Mecca returned to the dining room with Luke trailing in behind her.

“Hey, man,” he said, trying to sound normal, but I knew I had to be looking crazy.

“Hey,” I said as I watched Mecca grab Ian’s hand and lead him out of the dining room amid protests from him. He had this thing where he *had* to finish his food when it was chicken breasts and mashed potatoes. “Uh, wanna go in the living room?” I asked my friend.

“Yeah, if you’re finished eating. Doesn’t look like you touched your food, man.”

I glanced down at my full plate, and said, “I’m done.” A little later, we were in the living room, him on my sofa, me in my recliner. “So, Mecca texted you? Told you how fucked up I’ve been?”

“More or less, yeah,” Luke admitted.

“I’m . . . I’m doing my best, man. This shit is just . . . I don’t know how to deal with this.”

Luke nodded. “From what you’ve told me about your relationship with your mom, you’ve gotta be conflicted as hell right now.”

“I am. Hey, thanks for coming over and being concerned and stuff, but I can’t—”

“Moore, how long we been knowing each other?”

“Forever. Started out in the NFL together.”

“Yeah, and you were one of the few guys who kept in touch with me after I got hurt and had to stop playing. You were there for me when I lost Mel, didn’t judge me for making the huge mistake of marrying my first wife.”

“Yeah, you really fucked up when you married her,” I muttered.

“Shit, don’t I know it? You knew it then, and what did you say?”

“I said it couldn’t be me marrying her, but that it was your life and I had your back either way.”

“Right, and I’m here now with the same offer to you. I know you’re having a hard time processing this shit, and the default reaction is to push everyone away, but I’m here for you, man, I got your back.”

I gave him a smirk. “What? You need me at the office or something?”

“Hell, naw! I don’t need your black ass for shit!”

“Spoken like a true light-skinned hater. Nigga, I’m only a shade darker than you.”

We both laughed.

“Armand Daniels did call asking to speak to you. You might’ve been on to something with him,” Luke informed me.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I get why you wanted to take him on now. He reminds you of yourself, huh? Young, dumb, talented, and angry as hell.”

“Yeah . . . therapy saved my ass. He could be a good dude with some help like what I got.”

Luke was silent, but I could tell what he was thinking. I’d known him long enough to be able to damn near read his mind. “I’m a get with a therapist, man,” I said.

“Good, and call your woman.”

“How you know I ain’t been talking to her?”

A second passed, and we both said, “Mecca.”

Then I chuckled. “That girl needs to get up out of my business.”

“No, she doesn’t. If you won’t take care of yourself, someone needs to. Anyway, fix things with Nadia, because if you don’t, Mel is gonna have a fit. She was excited about adding her to her circle of friends and she feels weird about contacting her with you two being on the outs.”

“So you want me to fix things for your wife’s sake?”

“And for yours. You need her. She makes you better.”

I smiled. “Yeah, she does, but shit, I might have fucked things up with her so bad that she won’t want me now.”

“How?” he asked with a frown.

“Man, I lost my mind right after my mom died, got rougher with her than I should’ve ...”

He raised his eyebrows. “Look, regardless of what you did or think you did, Mecca said she’s been calling you, but you’ve been ignoring her.”

“That’s true ...” I shook my head. “Look, I ain’t ready to talk to her yet. Gotta get myself together first.”

“I hear you. Just don’t wait too long and mess this up like I almost did with Mel.”

“Almost?”



He grinned. “Whatever. I fixed that shit though, didn’t I? I got my woman back.”

“Yeah, you did that, man. You did that in a big way.”

As he stood to leave, Luke said, “Hey, whatever you’re feeling about losing your mom, whether it’s anger or sorrow, let yourself feel it. It’s normal, man.”

“What if . . . what if I’m still angry at her about the past?” I asked, my eyes on the floor.

“Let yourself feel that, too, because you have a right to.”

I nodded as I stood and gripped him up. “Thanks, man.”

“Anytime, bro.”

## Nadia

“Nod-ja! I’m just calling to check on you. I told you I was gon’ do better.”

I smiled as my father’s voice filled my ear. “I’m fine. I’m glad you called.”

“You don’t sound right. What’s wrong, daughter? Gate fucking up?”

“No . . . his mom died.”

“Oh, shit. He all right? They done had the funeral yet?”

“They have.”

“Umph. Well, shit. How he taking it? Your mama dying is some shit you don’t never really get over, you just kind of get used to it.”

“He’s . . . I don’t know, Dad. He won’t talk to me.”

“Yeah, I can understand that.”

“Well, I don’t. I’m trying to, but . . .”

“Because you ain’t a man. A man don’t like looking weak around his woman, and when you hurting like I know he’s hurting, you be weak as hell. Give him some time. One thing I know is he ain’t playing when it comes to you. I saw that when I was there.”

“Thank you, Dad.”

“You welcome. Lunch Meat told me to tell you hi.”

“Tell him I said hi back.”

“I will. Now, let me tell you about our reunion. You still coming, right?”

I smiled. “Yes, I am.”

I stumbled through my front door, groceries in hand and my laptop bag and purse swung over my shoulder. I’d just placed the plastic grocery bags on the kitchen counter when my phone began to ring. By the time I’d dug my phone out of my purse, I’d missed the call from Sharla and quickly called her back. Collapsing onto my new sofa, I smiled when I heard her voice.

“Hey,” she said timidly.

“Hey. You’re not mad at me anymore?” I asked, although I wasn’t sure why she was mad at me in the first place. I’d thought her beef was with Brooklyn, not me.

“I wasn’t mad at you,” she confirmed.

“I can’t tell.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I was so pissed at Brooklyn. Shit, I still am.”

“So am I.”

“But more than anything, I was mad at myself, because she was right. My reaction to her cheating on Isaac was more about me than him or her. Noddy, I’m tired of being alone, and I know what you’re thinking, that I keep dick on deck, but all that random screwing ain’t getting me nowhere. I’m lonely as hell.”

“I feel you, Shar. I really do.”

“How, when you got that fine-ass man of yours?”

I held the phone.

“Oh, shit . . . I’m sorry, sweetie. What happened?”

I sighed. “Well—”

I was interrupted by a knock at my door and since my first thought was that it was Nathan, I quickly told Sharla I’d call her back and hopped up, sliding a hand down the front of my pencil skirt as I walked to the door. Afraid of being disappointed, I skipped checking the peephole and pulled the door open, finding myself face to face with one Sullivan Payne.

# Nathan

I sat in my damn car for so long; I was sure someone had to be on the verge of calling the police on me if they hadn't already, because I knew I looked sketchy as hell sitting in that parking lot at that time of night. I needed to have my ass at home asleep, but I couldn't sleep. Nadia was on my mind heavy. Some of the fog that had settled in my brain when my mom died had lifted, and with that sense of clarity came a burning desire to be with her again, but a month had passed, and if I was her, I'd be done with my ass. Still, I missed her. I needed her.

I loved her.

So, I climbed my miserable ass out of my car and walked up to her apartment, feeling like I was walking to the electric chair. Bracing myself for the rejection I knew I deserved, I knocked on her door, hoped she wasn't too deep into sleep to hear me, and simultaneously hoped she was. Yeah, I was still confused as hell about everything except my feelings for her and my love for my kids. All of that was crystal clear.

Her door eased open to reveal her in a robe, a look of dread on her face quickly morphing into a look of surprise. "Nathan?" she said, her voice surprisingly not groggy although it was after midnight.

"Yeah, sorry for coming here so late."

"Where are the kids?"

"With the nanny. She's been staying with us a lot lately. She's been a lot of help."

“Good. You wanna come in?”

I nodded. “Yes. Thank you.”

I entered her apartment as she closed the door and turned on the overhead light. My eyes took in the space that had changed a lot in the time we were apart. She had a bright new pink couch and accent chair, new multicolored curtains. The muted beige-toned look of her place was gone. This place looked like it belonged to the Nadia of the past she’d told me about. “You redecorated. It’s nice,” I offered.

When she didn’t respond, I turned around to face her and almost fell when she pounced on me, kissing me hungrily while wrapping her legs around me. When I was finally able to come up for air, I chuckled and murmured, “I missed you, too, baby.”

She ducked her head, fastening her mouth to my neck and sucking my flesh, then lifted her head and with narrowed eyes said, “I know you don’t like when I initiate things, but—”

I cut her off with a kiss, squeezing both of her ass cheeks as our tongues sparred. She wrapped her arms around me, moaning. I was moaning, too. She felt so good that I was afraid it was all a dream, afraid that I’d fallen asleep in my damn car or something. But when I felt her move her mouth back down to my neck and bite it, I knew this was real. My stiff dick was further confirmation. She bit me again, and shit, something inside of me awakened. I grabbed her neck, kissed her, and carried her into her bedroom where I laid her on the bed and just stared down at her. Her chest was heaving as she reached for me.

“You are the most beautiful woman in the world, baby.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ve missed you. I’ve missed you so much. I’m . . . I’m sorry for not answering your calls and for not—”

She rose up on her knees and grabbed the collar of my shirt. “I don’t care. It doesn’t matter. You’re here now. You’re with me now.”

“Yeah . . .” I snatched my shirt off and watched as she did the same with her robe. That was all she wore. A robe. I was still wearing my jogging pants as she lay on the bed naked. “Damn, I really, *really* missed you, baby.”

“Then why do you still have your pants on, Nathan?”

I smiled, snatched those motherfuckers down along with my underwear, and was in the bed with her in seconds, my body over hers, my tongue in her mouth, hand on her neck, and quicker than I had planned, I was deep inside of her with a long groan. She closed her eyes, her brow wrinkled, as she squeezed her arms around me.

“Nathan . . . Nathan . . .” she whimpered.

“I love you, Nadia. I love you so much,” I moaned, as I slid in and out of her, tightening my grip on her neck and watching her gasp with pleasure.

“I love you, too.”

“And I’ll never let you go again. Ever.”

“Promise?” she whined.

“Yeah, I promise, baby.” Pulling out of her, I slid down her body and kissed her lower lips, dipping a couple of fingers inside of her as I lapped at her clit, making her wiggle and

whimper and grip my head. I winced and smiled when she grabbed a handful of my dreads and tugged hard, and after I felt her core rhythmically squeeze around my fingers, I slid back up her body, eased inside her, and thrust until I'd bathed her with my sweat and hit the best damn peak of my life.

An hour later, we lay in her bed. Her head was on my chest. She'd let her hair grow out some and it was soft against my skin. I squeezed her to me and felt her try to snuggle closer, but we were already skin to skin.

"I'm so glad you're here," she murmured, lifting her head to kiss my chest.

"It was a heart attack," I responded.

I could feel her eyes on me in the darkness of her bedroom. "What?"

"My mother died of a heart attack. They say she was dead before the ambulance came. They did all they could, but they couldn't bring her back. It was a massive heart attack. They call them widowmakers."

"I'm . . . I'm so sorry, Nathan."

"It was her lifestyle. The smoking, the food she loved to eat, the drinking. She was a heavy drinker when I was a kid. I can't tell you how many times I'd come home from school to



find her passed out on the living room sofa. Sometimes it'd be just her. Other times, there'd be one of her friends or some dude she was messing with there with her. There were these parties she'd throw. Our little apartment would be full of drunk people. Sometimes there'd be fights. I'd be in bed and I could hear shit breaking, people yelling. One time, someone got shot right in our living room. Mama just covered the blood on the floor with a big towel."

"Nathan—"

"I'm not telling you this because I want you to feel sorry for me. I'm trying to . . . I want you to understand me better. I want you to know that I didn't pull away from you because I don't want you or need you. There're layers to me that I can get buried under sometimes without even trying."

"Okay," she said just above a whisper. "What else do you want me to know?"

I told her everything I could think of, about how I had to share a room and a bed with my brothers, how I spent most of my childhood afraid and alone, how my mother favored my brothers over me, how my father was never there, and how the men in and out of my mother's life served as poor excuses for his replacement. Then I took a deep breath, released it, and said, "My brother Bernard used to abuse me."

I heard a soft gasp, but before she could speak, I said, "Not sexually. He just . . . he was mean. He'd hit me, tease me, eat up the food from me. One time, he locked me in a closet for days. And he'd do that stuff around our mom. On the off occasions when she was sober, she'd laugh and egg him on. She got a kick out of seeing him make me cry, and I was little

when he started that shit, like five or six. He tortured me for years, and it was hard to cope with, because my dumb ass looked up to him. I looked up to Charlie, too, but Charlie was too busy running the streets most of the time to care about me or what was going on at home. Bernard terrorized me. So, when he got locked up the first time for stealing from some store, I was relieved as hell. I was like twelve, and then he became a damn career criminal just like his father. He's been in and out of the pen ever since he was a teenager.”

“You have different dads like me and Ginger?”

“All three of us had different fathers. Anyway, his last bid in prison was for ten years. He was in for some drug charges and robbery too, I think. During that time, Mama cleaned herself up and reached out to me, and I let her back into my life, but as soon as Bernard got out, she insisted on throwing him a party. The party led to him staying with us, and him being around led to her going back to her old ways. I tried to put my foot down, told her to put him out, and after promising me that she would, she came to me talking about how she wanted him to stay and if I didn't go along with it, she . . . she said she'd persuade Ian's mom not to finally relinquish her parental rights, and that shit scared me. I've been trying to officially make him my son for years. See, I know how the state likes to try and reconcile biological families and shit. Hell, they took me from my mom a couple of times and sent me right back to her. And I knew Ian's mom was easily influenced. You can give her a hundred dollars and get her to do anything. So anyway, I let Bernard stay there for a minute, but I knew I was going to have to put him out sooner rather than later.”

“And you ended up putting him *and* your mom out?”

“Yeah . . .”

“And then she died, and you felt guilty about it.”

“I did, and I felt guilty about still being angry with her about my childhood.”

“You have a right to be angry about that, Nathan. It takes time to work through stuff like that.”

“I know, *Dr. Day*. I just thought I’d had enough therapy in the past to be able to cope with her death better than I did. I thought wrong.”

“Nathan, you’d never lost your mother before. There was no way you could’ve known how it would affect you.”

“Yeah, but . . . I’m sorry, Nadia. I really am sorry for shutting you out right after doing what I did in that parking garage. That had to upset you.”

“I liked what you did in that parking garage, Nathan. I liked it a lot.”

“I figured that, but still, I was too rough and—”

“It’s okay. It really is. I’m just glad you let me back in.”

“No, I’m glad you let *me* back in.” I reached down and smacked her on the booty.

She giggled, and a moment or two later, asked, “Where is your brother now? Still in jail?”

“No, I don’t think so. I bailed him out so he could go to the funeral.”

“That was nice of you.”

“It’s the last nice thing I’ll ever do for him. I’m cutting him loose. I mean, as long as his ass is locked up, I can deal with him. Shit, we get along good when he’s behind bars, but I’m done this time. Whether he’s out here free or on the inside, I gotta let him go. He’s on his own.”

“If that’s what you need to do for your own sanity, I’m with you one hundred percent. Sometimes, you have to let the people you love fall. That’s the only way they’ll learn they can stand on their own.”

“Look at you, spouting that PhD knowledge.”

She laughed. “I guess my little education is good for something, huh? But that’s just common sense I learned from my mother. I learned a lot from her that I suppressed over the years. I’m working hard to recall it all, to get back to the real *me*. No more roles.”

“Hmm, I like the sound of that.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Hey, I really do love you, Nadia. I wasn’t just saying that because of the sex.”

“Good, because I meant it when I said it, too. I love you, Nathan Moore. I love you more than I can say.”

“Well, that’s a relief. Wouldn’t want this to be a one-sided thing, but uh . . . don’t think just because I let you initiate that I’m not going to punish you for it.”

“I wore pants to work today, too,” she said in a husky voice. “And black panties.”

“You did? Now, why would you do that?”

She reclaimed her spot against my body, resting her head on my chest. “I thought maybe I’d lost you forever. Didn’t think I had a reason to wear a skirt or red panties anymore.”

“Nadia—”

“It’s all right. Like I said, you’re here now and that’s all that matters.”

“Thank you, baby.”

Silence fell between us, and just when I thought she’d drifted off to sleep, she asked, “You’re not going to punish me?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “You sure you want me to punish you?”

“Positive. I’m ready to take whatever punishment you want to give me.”

“Hmmm, I tell you what . . . you can choose your own punishment this time.”

She was quiet for a moment, and then I heard her say, “Okay.”

She moved and a second later, the bedside lamp popped on. Nadia grabbed a little bottle of something from beside the lamp, poured what looked like oil into the palm of her hand, and standing from the bed, propped one foot up on it, licked her lips, and rubbed that oil all over her pussy. Her eyes were on mine as she kept rubbing that oil on herself, dipping a finger inside her to lubricate that part of her, too. And then, she closed her eyes, stroking herself, moaning while a pretty little frown formed on her face. I watched her unravel herself, making herself pant and whimper with heightened intensity,

and when my dick had grown so hard it became painful, I left the bed, bent her over, and drove into her from the back, sliding my hand to her neck and then her chin, pulling her head back and making her release a grunt. Then I slid my hand back to her neck and squeezed gently as I held her hip with my other hand and plowed into her over and over again.

She felt so damn good, even better than before. I'd never, *ever* felt anything like it in all my days. Her pussy was so hot and wet and . . . spicy? Tingly? Shit, I couldn't really describe it, but it seemed I couldn't get enough of it. Every time I slid out of her, I was anxious to slide back in, and before I knew it, we were in the midst of the most frenzied sex I'd ever experienced, breathing loud, sweaty, intoxicated. I knew before we finished that I'd want more.

And more.

*And more.*

Got damn!

## Nadia

It didn't feel right for me to tell Nathan about Sullivan popping up at my door mere hours before we reconciled, and to be totally transparent, I didn't know how to tell him that a man who was presumed dead for more than ten years was, in fact, alive. Alive and well, and he looked . . . good. Gone was the teddy bear, replaced with a lean version of the man I once loved. There were other changes I saw in him, including a deep sadness that now resided in his eyes even when he smiled, and he seemed less assured of himself, meeker. Nevertheless, I was glad to see him. It was honestly a relief to know that he wasn't dead, that I hadn't caused his demise after all, and a part of me wanted to shout it from the rooftops, to call Nathan and gush about how I wasn't an indirect murderess after all, but the timing was off. It could wait.

Plus, I needed time to process the revelation and the visit. I needed time to understand the combination of elation and trepidation I felt being near Sullivan again after so many years. Elation, trepidation, confusion, and well, fear, fear that maybe

I'd imagined him and was losing my mind. So no, I couldn't tell Nathan any of that right now, not with what he'd just shared with me, not when he was just finding his way out of the thicket of sorrow. Now was not the time to burden him with this. But I *could* tell Sharla, so I did. Over a lunch of Thai food she had delivered, I told her everything while sitting in a chair in her office, which made mine look like a jail cell in comparison. Yeah, I had a lot of improving to do now that I'd decided to stop suppressing my true self.

After taking a sip of her water, Sharla reclined in the chair behind her desk and gave me a pensive look before saying, "So, Sullivan has been alive all this time? Didn't he leave a suicide note and wasn't his car found on a bridge?"

"Yeah, and they never found him, so he was presumed dead. All this time, I thought he was dead. Everyone did."

"And all this time, all these years, you felt guilty over it, and his crazy-ass family blamed you."

"Well, if he'd really been dead, it would've been my fault, Sharla, so they were justified in feeling the way they did."

"No, they weren't. You know that! You can't control what another person does, no matter what. People make their own decisions. Didn't Miss Lovely teach you that?"

"She taught me a lot of stuff I didn't adhere to, to my own detriment. Oh, and she's getting married to Braeden. Did I tell you that?"

"No, but after seeing that damn dick of his, I don't blame her! I woulda married him on sight! On sight of that dick, that is!"



I shook my head. “You’re so crazy.”

“Am I lying? You saw it!”

“I told you I didn’t think it was all that big.”

“And you’re a lying ass.”

“I know.”

We both laughed.

“All jokes aside, Noddy, what he pulled on you was emotional blackmail. And now we know this negro faked his death and let that shit go on for ten years! Look what he did to his poor mother! Worried her into a stroke. No, dear . . . you made the right decision about him back in the day. Sullivan is a damn sociopath. Did he tell you where the hell he’s been all this time?”

“Traveling the world. Doing odd jobs.”

“He’s crazy, Nadia. To take things this far. He’s crazy, and yes, I know that’s not a clinical term.”

“It’s definitely not a clinical term. So, what do you think I should do?”

“First of all, what does Sullivan want from you? Is he expecting a reconciliation?”

“I have no idea. We didn’t talk all that long, but I did tell him I was involved with someone, and after that his phone rang, and he said he had to leave. He left about twenty minutes after he got there, but hell, it doesn’t matter what he wants anyway. I’m in love with Nathan.”

“I definitely don’t blame you for that, because dayum!”

“Sharla, come on. I’m being serious and don’t say so are you.”

“But I am.”

“Sharla!”

“Okay! You said things are good with you and Nathan now, right?”

“Yes. He’s still working through his grief, but we’re together again. Things are good. I just don’t want to upset him.”

“I know, but you have to tell him about Sullivan, and you need to give him the whole story. You don’t want Sullivan’s wacko ass, so as long as you make that clear to Nathan, things should be fine. But you already know that’s what you need to do, don’t you? You just needed to hear someone else say it.”

“Maybe ...”

“Mm-hmm. Nadia, you are the smartest woman I know, always have been, and although I worried about how you handled things when everyone thought Sullivan was dead, I trusted you to do what was best for you, what would keep you sane. And that’s what you did. If you love Nathan, truly love him, I trust you to do what needs to be done to save that relationship. You just need to trust yourself. You don’t need my opinion or anyone else’s.”

“I guess . . . maybe I’m afraid to introduce any more of my past than I already have into our present. Don’t wanna end up like Brooklyn. She let her past ruin her entire marriage.”

“Your situation is nothing like hers, and you ain’t Brooklyn. Not by a long shot.”

“I know . . . hey, I’ve missed you. It’s good to talk to you about anything, even this jacked up life of mine.”

“I’ve missed you, too, sis, and speaking of Brooklyn, have you talked to her?”

I sighed, mirroring Sharla’s posture in my own chair. “No. Hell, girl, I wasn’t tryna to get talked crazy to while I was going through all this with Nathan, and to be honest, I still don’t feel like her taking her anger at a situation she created out on me.”

“Like I did, huh? I really am sorry. I was just . . . I don’t know. It’s hard enough being single when what you really want is to be boo’d up. She didn’t have to throw the shit in my face.”

“I know. Sharla, I get the feeling that maybe we’ve lost her as a friend for good, and that makes me sad.”

Sharla picked up her fork and started moving what was left of her food around in its foil container. “I’m not. To be perfectly frank with you, I don’t miss Brooklyn. She’s selfish and I’ve never liked selfish people. I just tolerated her all this time because you liked her.”

“Huh?”

She nodded. “It’s the truth. I tried to understand her, but I just don’t get it. I had a fucked-up childhood, too, but I don’t use people like she does.”

“Shar—”

“Look, I know you’re a psychologist and you like to help people. I remember you used to talk about opening your own practice and being a clinical psychologist, but people’s

motives and underlying issues don't fascinate me. They never did. So, even if she comes to herself and apologizes, I'm done with Brooklyn. At this point, it's not good for me to be around her. I gotta think about my own damn psyche. It's enough of a struggle for me to get my own shit together right now. I don't need her or her mouth setting me back."

I blinked a few times and nodded. "I get that, and I understand. You've gotta do what's best for you."

"What? You're not going to try and persuade me to give her another chance?"

"No, I'm not. If being her friend makes you unhappy, then I fully support you letting her go."

"Wow, thank you."

"But, *we're* good, right?"

"Of course, we are! You've always been a true friend to me, and I love you for it. Even when I say or do stupid shit, you don't judge me."

"Like calling me boring?"

"Yeah, about that—"

"No, no, you were right, and I'm determined to really live from now on, to bring the old, vibrant Nadia Day back."

"Good! Bring her back and carry her into being Nadia Moore."

"Girl, whatever. Anyway, I need your help."

"With what? You know I got you, whatever it is."

“I’ve decided to spruce some things up. I’ve already bought new furniture for my apartment and I’m working on getting new décor. I want to redo my office here on campus, too. You think you could help me with that?”

“Sure! Or we could wait until you move into the dean’s office.”

“With all that’s been going on, I forgot about that. I wonder if they’ll let me redecorate it since I’ll just be interim?”

“You’ll just have to ask. Hey, I’m glad we did this today. We have to do this more often, because I’m now on a real mission to get me a man, and you need to give me tips on how you bagged that fine-ass Nathan.”

“Girl, I don’t even know how I did it, but I’m glad I did.”

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I was preoccupied, mentally weighing my dinner options—take-out soul food or take-out Italian—as I walked across the parking lot to my car. Approaching my car, I hit the button on my key fob, watched the lights blink, and jumped when I heard a voice say, “Hi.”

Spinning around, I stretched my eyes wide and said, “Hi? Um, Sullivan?”

He smiled and nodded. “Surprised to see me?”

“Yeah, how did you . . . did I tell you I worked here?”

“Saw the parking sticker on your car when I came to visit you.”

“Oh . . . how’d you know my car?”

His eyes darted around a bit before he finally said, “Lucky guess.”

“Oh . . .”

“You busy? Want to have dinner with me?”

“Uh . . . I actually already have plans for this evening, Sullivan,” I lied, because what was this?

“Oh, okay.”

“See you later,” I said, quickly sliding into my car.

“Yeah, later.”

He sounded a little let down, but this was just . . . weird, or maybe I was hypersensitive at the moment. Either way, I watched him stand there for a moment and then walk away, and I drove myself home.

“Come over and spend the night with me. I miss you.”

I smiled as I sunk deeper into my couch. “I miss you, too, and I want to come over, but I’ve already undressed.”

“Shit, that’s perfect. Throw on a trench and come see me, baby.”

We’d been back at it for a little over a week, and things were going well, but I hadn’t been back to his house. I wasn’t sure I was ready for that yet. I didn’t want to bring up his mother’s death, but I was still coping with the fact that she’d basically dropped dead at my feet. I’d never witnessed anything like that in my life and I never wanted to again.

“Raincheck. Not tonight. I don’t feel like driving, but you’re welcome to come over here if you have someone who can watch the kids,” I offered.

“Honestly, I’m thinking maybe Mecca can handle it. She’s sixteen, and the house is secure. Maybe I’ve been being a little overly paranoid since Bernard got out of the pen. I changed the gate code a couple of weeks ago, and besides, I haven’t heard from him since Mama’s funeral. Probably got his ass locked up again.”

“Hmm, I think it’s good you’re trusting Mecca with more responsibility. After all, she’ll be going off to college in a couple of years, and the whole house is adapted to fit her needs from the doorbell to the smoke alarms.”

“Yeah, but could you do me a favor and not remind me about the whole college thing coming up? Hell, I think I’ll try to convince her to go to Romey U.”

“First of all, from what I know of her, you won’t be able to convince her to do anything she doesn’t want to do.”

“Shit, I know.”

I chuckled. “And second, don’t hold her back, Nathan. It’s not fair to her.”

“Don’t psychologize me, Nadia.”

I laughed. “Where’d you learn that word, Mr. Moore?”

“Shit, it’s a real word? I thought I made it up.”

Laughing harder, I said, “No, it’s a real word and you used it correctly. You really are the smartest man I’ve ever met.”

“I’m glad you think so. Hey, be honest with me. Are you avoiding my house because of what happened to my mom?”

I held the phone, in shock.

“Yeah, that’s it, isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry, Nathan.”

“No, I’ve been so wrapped up in my own feelings that I neglected to consider how seeing that might have affected you. *I’m* sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“I really want you here, though, and the kids miss you, even though Mecca finally admitted to being in touch with you via text message. She gave you updates on me?”

I smiled. “A few, and don’t be mad at her, because she was the main reason I didn’t completely give up on us when it was hard not to.”

“Then I’m definitely not mad. Look, you can come in through the back door. You don’t even have to look at the foyer if you don’t want to. Just come be with me. *Please.*”



I closed my eyes, and said, “Tell me again how much you love me.”

“More than I can ever show you, baby.”

“I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Good. Can’t wait.”

I hurriedly showered and dressed, grabbed my purse and keys, and on my way out the door, bumped right into Sullivan Payne.

“It’s later,” he said with a smile.

## Nathan

About an hour and a half later, Nadia still hadn’t made it to my place. She wasn’t answering my calls, and shit, I wasn’t one hundred percent back to my old self yet, so I kind of panicked, told Mecca she was in charge until I made it back home. Then I left, driving so fast that I was sure my ass was going to get stopped and was glad I didn’t. When I made it to her apartment complex to see that her car was still there, my damn heart threatened to bust through my ribcage. I knew something was wrong, could feel it in my soul, and that feeling made my

feet move at a hectic pace as I damn near ran up the stairs to her door, beating on it. She didn't answer and that made me want to kick it in. Then I called her again—straight to voicemail.

Shit.

“Nadia! You in there? Open the door!” I shouted and banged on the door again. Still, no answer.

The door across the hall from hers opened, and an older lady I'd seen enough to know she lived there said, “Honey, she's not there. She left about an hour ago.”

I frowned. “But her car is on the lot. She's got to be here,” I said. Yeah, black Lexuses were common in Romey, but I knew hers, and it was parked in her regular spot. It *had* to be hers.

“Oh, she left with some guy. Tall, thin.”

“She-she did?”

“Uh-huh, so please stop beating on her door and yelling. I gotta be at work in a couple of hours and I'm trying to get some sleep.”

“Yeah . . . sorry about that.”

She closed her door, and I turned back to Nadia's, stood and stared at it for five or six minutes, and then went back to my car and waited for her to come back, my damn heart breaking with every second. She was with another man? Why and who? Was this someone she was seeing? I didn't think to ask if she'd started seeing anyone else while I was trying to deal with all my shit, but maybe she had. Damn, maybe she'd been screwing another man the whole time we were apart.

Fuck!

But she'd attacked me when I came back to her. She'd acted like she hadn't had sex since she'd last been with me. What the hell was going on?

I sat there, my brain in turmoil. I couldn't leave until I knew she was okay, so I decided to wait for her. Before I realized it, I had drifted off to sleep right there behind my steering wheel.

An hour or so later, a car door shutting woke me out of a deeper sleep than I should've let myself slip into. The first thing I did was to check my phone to see if Nadia or Mecca had called me. Nothing from either of them. The next thing I did was check my surroundings in time to see a white car pull off the lot. Just as my eyes traveled up to Nadia's living room window, a light popped on inside her apartment, and I rushed from my car back to her door, knocked, and yelled, "Nadia! You in there?!" because fuck her neighbor.

When it opened, a tearful Nadia fell into my arms.

"Baby, what's wrong?" I asked. "What happened?"

## Nadia

### *Three hours earlier . . .*

“Sullivan? Um, I was just on my way out. You’ll have to . . . do you have a phone? If you give me your number, I can call you when I get back home.”

He didn’t respond or move from in front of my apartment, and he was crowding me inside my doorway, keeping me from closing my door, and something about his nearness in that moment was unnerving. Something was . . . off. The trepidation was back ten-fold. His eyes never left mine as he stood there, and the sadness in them was almost tangible.

“Um . . . Sullivan, did you hear me? I’m on my way out. I can call you later if you need to talk to me.”

He moved forward, nudging me backward with his body but still didn’t speak.

I frowned, and my heart jumped in my chest. “Sull—”

That's when he actually used his hands to push me inside, making me stumble and almost fall. Then he closed and locked my door and fell onto one knee. "Marry me."

What the hell?

With wide eyes, I gulped, feeling a sense of déjà vu, my mind reverting back to me at nineteen and him at twenty, asking for my hand in marriage . . .

*"I'm too young to be thinking about marriage, Sullivan," I said, my eyes shifting from the ring he held out to me to his face.*

*His shoulders fell, and the smile he wore faltered. "What? Don't you love me?"*

*"I do, but I can't marry you. I told you, I don't even believe in marriage. It wouldn't benefit me to marry you or anyone else. Marriage is just a social construct."*

*"What? But . . . but we spent all that time in the van together this summer, sleeping, making love, living . . . you told me that was the best time of your life, baby."*

*"It was, and I want to experience more of that. I want to travel the world, party on every continent, experience love and sex with other men."*

*"So, you don't want to marry me because you want to be some whore?!"*

*"No, I just . . . I want and need to be free, Sullivan. Marriage is not freedom."*

Back in the present, I looked my first love in the eye, and said, “Uh, Sullivan, I’m in a relationship. Remember, I told you that when we talked the other week.”

“Yeah, I remember, but he’s not me. He doesn’t love you like I do. There’s no way he could. Oh! I forgot something.”

I was hoping he needed to leave to get whatever he forgot, but no. Instead, he stood, dug a ring box out of his jeans pocket, and lowered himself back onto his knee. Opening the box, he thrust it toward me.

I quickly recapped that one real conversation we’d had since he resurfaced, trying to figure out if I’d said anything to lead him to believe me marrying him was a possibility. I hadn’t. I definitely hadn’t. I’m sure it was evident to him that I was glad to see him, glad he was alive, but that was just a normal human reaction, wasn’t it?

“Sullivan, it’s a beautiful ring. It really is, but—”

“Don’t say no again. If you say no this time, I really am going to kill myself. My mom . . . my mom is half-dead; my sisters are crazy, so I have nothing left but you. If you reject me this time, I won’t chicken out and just run away. I will shoot myself right now in front of you. Hell, I might shoot you first.”

I backed away from him, bumping into my sofa and falling onto it. “Shoot? What are you talking about?”

He reached behind him and pulled a gun from somewhere. The waist of his jeans? My keys fell from my hand, and my heart tripled in rate. I needed to get the fuck out of there or find a way to get *him* the fuck out of there or call the police. I

needed to do *something*. Damn, Brooklyn was right. He *was* insane. I mean, him popping up at my job was odd and the whole fake suicide thing was troubling, but this? I wasn't sure what word would describe this.

“Sullivan—”

With the gun still in his hand, he took the ring from the box and held it up to me. His eyes were on it as he spoke. “I traveled the world trying to forget you. I've tried to forget how you broke my fucking heart, but I couldn't. No matter where I went or who I was with, my heart still longed for you. Oh, I cheated on you while I was gone, baby. You think you can forgive me for that?”

Since I didn't want to die, I said, “Um, yes.”

He smiled brightly. “Thank you! I knew you'd understand. I got lonely.”

“Then . . . then why'd you stay gone for so long?” I asked, as I let my purse strap slip from my shoulder.

He shrugged. “Well, for a while there, I hoped I'd run into you partying on another continent or something. Then, the longer I was gone, the more I thought you'd probably moved on, maybe even changed your mind and married some nigga who didn't deserve you and had his kids and shit. That shit would've devastated me and I couldn't come back here on the off chance that something like that had happened. But I just couldn't take it anymore. I had to at least see you, find you. So I looked you up, saw that you were still living here and a professor. Yeah, I lied about the decal on your car. I didn't want you to think I was a weirdo or something. Anyway, I checked out your social media and didn't see a man in any of

your pictures, and then I came back here, was here for a couple of weeks before I contacted my family or you. I followed you around, and all you did was go to work and come back home. You were alone, and that's when I knew you'd been waiting for me all this time. And then Donna told me about you visiting my mom in the nursing home, and that was all the confirmation I needed that you were still mine, that you regretted rejecting me all those years ago, so I'm here to give you another chance."

I tightly shut my eyes as I slipped my hand into my purse. He'd been following me during the time that Nathan had shut me out, so yeah, it did look like I didn't have a man, but shit, I told him that I did!

"And don't bring up that fake boyfriend again. I know you're just pretending to have one, but you don't have to lie to me about that anymore. I know the truth," he added.

Opening my eyes, I said, "Sullivan, um ..."

He was smiling triumphantly as he said, "Um, what?"

"Um, I don't know what to say." My hand was on my phone. All I had to do was figure out how to blindly dial nine-one-one. But then it started ringing.

He frowned, his eyes shifting from mine to my purse.

"I probably should answer that. It might be my-my mom. She'll be worried," I stated.

He gave me a smirk. "Your mom? Worried? She must've really changed over the years, then. If my memory serves me correctly, your mother was never a real mother. She was kind of selfish, wasn't she? Fed you all that anti-marriage shit that



made you break my heart,” he hissed. “I fucking hate her for that.”

“Sullivan, that wasn’t her fault. I just wasn’t ready for marriage to anyone at that point. I was only nineteen.”

“Anyone? There was someone else?!” His voice had risen three or four octaves.

“No, no. That’s not what I meant.”

“Did you love me back then, Nadia? Or were you just playing with me?”

“I loved you, Sullivan. I really did, but I was still trying to figure life out. There was so much I wanted to do, so much I wanted to explore.”

He smiled again. “And me going away gave you time to do that. See? So, now you’re ready to settle down, right?”

My phone began to ring again. “I was supposed to meet someone. I was leaving to meet them when you showed up here. They’re just gonna keep calling, so I should answer.”

“Your mom?”

I nodded. “Yeah, my mom.”

“Give me your phone. I want her to know she didn’t win. She needs to know that no one can keep us apart.”

I just sat there, frozen, because I knew it was Nathan and not my mom calling. He was convinced there was no other man. How would he react to finding out I *wasn’t* lying?

*I will shoot myself right now in front of you. Hell, I might shoot you first.*

I eyed the gun in his hand. “Put the ring on my finger,” I said.

“What?”

“Forget my phone or my mother. Put the ring on my finger.”

“So . . . yes?”

“Of course, yes!” I held my hand out to him and watched as he slid the ring onto my finger, then he basically crawled to me, pulling me into his arms, and I willed myself not to stiffen from his touch since he still had the damn gun in his hand.

He backed away a little, releasing me, cupping my face in his hands, and with the gun touching my cheek, he kissed me softly. “Let’s go tell my mom.”

“Now? Will they let us see her at this hour?”

“They better. Come on. And leave that damn phone.”

I hesitantly nodded and left with him, hoping beyond hope that I could keep this act up and not get myself killed.

They did let us visit his mom, and as he gushed about us being engaged, thrusting my hand into his groggy mother’s face, I saw the concerned look in her eyes as they swung from me to him. Even she knew her son wasn’t right in the head. Maybe he’d never been, and young Nadia just couldn’t see it.

We stayed with her for about an hour, with Sullivan mapping out his plans for me and him to travel the world together and have three kids. He even had names picked out—Sullivan Jr., Madison, and Martin. He was convinced we’d have two boys and a girl.

Back at my place, he kissed me deeply at my door and mercifully said we'd wait until our wedding night to have sex.

"You get some sleep, okay? I'll call you in the morning," he said sweetly. "I love you, Nadia."

Giving him the best smile I could manage, I replied in kind. "I love you, too, Sullivan."

Then I watched him leave, that gun still in the back waistband of his jeans. Fumbling with my keys, I hurriedly unlocked my door, rushed inside my apartment, and locked myself in as sobs erupted from me. I snatched his ring off and dropped it, sliding to the floor with my back on the door. A knock vibrating against my back made me jump to my feet and back away from it. I shook my head, had backed up to the couch to grab my purse and my phone when I heard a voice shout, "Nadia! You in there?!"

Nathan.

## Nadia

*Now . . .*

“So you thought he’d committed suicide all those years ago and blamed yourself because you turned down his marriage proposal?” Nate asked, as he held me close to him on my sofa.

“Well, his suicide note said so. It said he couldn’t go on without me, and I was so blunt. I didn’t really let him down easy or anything, and he was always so sensitive . . .”

Nathan shook his head. “And he came here with a damn gun and tried to threaten you into marrying him? Did you call the police on his ass?”

“I didn’t have a chance. I’d just made it back and was trying to get myself together when you got here.”

“You’re still shaking.”

“Because I’m fucking scared to death! Sullivan is out of his mind! The stuff he was saying? He believed it! And I had to

go along with it. I had to accept his ring and go tell his mom we were getting married, because I really believe he would shoot me!”

He kissed my forehead. “You did the right thing.”

“Yeah. This is just . . . he showed up at my job, too.”

“He did?!”

“Yes, earlier today or yesterday, or whatever, and I knew something felt off then, but I didn’t see *this* coming.”

“Okay, I need you to do something for me.”

“W-what?”

“Go pack a bag. You’re going home with me, and I don’t know if I’m ever letting you come back here.”

“Nathan—”

“No, not tryna hear it. Pack a bag, and while you do that, I’m calling the police.”

I closed my eyes as he squeezed me tighter to his body and said, “Please. It’s not safe here. He has a gun, baby, and the motherfucker is unstable. I know you probably feel sorry for him, maybe you even still have feelings for him—”

“No, I don’t, not those kinds of feelings.”

“Then go pack a bag.”

“All right.”

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It turned out that Nathan was the king of being overprotective. I'd basically moved in with him, and he'd hired a bodyguard, a bodyguard who followed me to and from work and stood guard outside my office and my classrooms. I thought it would be hard to get my dean to be okay with that, but once I presented the temporary restraining order against Sullivan that I now possessed, she acquiesced. I hoped this didn't affect me becoming Interim Dean, but then again, a part of me would be okay if it did. I wasn't so pressed to have that position anymore. Rising in the world of academia was no longer much of a priority for me, and it definitely didn't supersede my need to protect my life.

This had all been so hard—calling the police, filing for the restraining order, attending a court hearing that Sullivan didn't even bother to show up at. I felt bad, almost like it was all my fault although Psychologist Nadia knew better. I still cared for Sullivan in the way a person with a heart would care for another human being, and we had so much shared history, but I couldn't let him endanger my life. So, restraining order, bodyguard, and a new home with Nathan and Mecca and Ian.

Anyway, I was thankful for Nathan, who was able to think clearly amid this mess while I struggled to process it, and it wasn't lost on me that this was also a good way for him to achieve his goal of me moving in with him, but I was good with it. I wanted that to happen, too. I was just trying to be cautious and pace things, be a support to a still-grieving

Nathan and not a burden. I wanted to pour into him while he did the same for me. I wanted us to be each other's peace, and I truly believed we were. I felt it when we held each other at night, and his children? Mecca's beautiful smile greeting me every morning, or Ian sounding like a little man as he recapped his latest viewing of some episode of *In Living Color*? Those things brought me more joy than I knew my spirit could hold. Life was good despite the bad, and I couldn't be anything but grateful for that.

## Nadia

I grinned as I watched Nathan bounce in the driver's seat of his car to Big South's *South in your Mouth*, an oldie, and apparently, a goody. I wasn't that big into rap, but since finding out that Big South was my cousin a few years back, I had attempted to listen to his music. It didn't do much for me, but as far as rap went, I supposed he had skills.

"Aaaaaye!" Nathan shouted, and then began rapping along with the song:

*"I ain't here to play with you*

*Not tryna stay with you*

*Or put on a display for you*

*Ain't got shit to say to you.*

*I came here for one thing, shorty*



*Want a replay of what I know you got for me*

*Open wide and get ready*

*Because you know my shit is heavy ...”*

Shaking my head, I said over the music, “You know, when you first walked into my classroom late all those months ago, I had no idea you were so ratchet. A little conceited? Yes. Handsome? Absolutely. But ratchet? I had no idea.”

“You also didn’t know I could fuck like a champ or make you fall in love with me, but here we are.”

“Oh, I figured you were good in bed. I was having fantasies, remember I told you about that?”

“Right, and wait a minute, if I’m ratchet, then your cousin, Big South, is the king of ratchetry. This is his song!”

“From what I’ve been told, that’s just a persona and Everett McClain is nothing like Big South.”

“Well, either way, I can’t wait to meet him at this reunion thing this summer. It’s right around the corner.”

“When did I say you were going with me?”

“Um, you think you’re leaving me here? I’m going, and so is Vlad.”

I rolled my eyes. “We are not taking a bodyguard to Texas. I’m sure Everett has his own, and Leland, too. From what I hear, my cousin Kathryn is married to one! My dad called him, and I quote, ‘a gigantic-ass nigga.’”

“Ah, you said *we*. Told you I was going.”

“Whatever. Anyway, are you sure about this?”

He glanced at me. “About paying this money to Ian’s mom? Yeah. It’s the only way she’ll give up her parental rights to him, and shit, it’s honestly chump change for me. I should’ve done this a long time ago. Being able to officially adopt Ian is worth way more than what her trifling ass is asking, and since Bernard signed over his rights years ago, her cooperating with this is the only thing I need to move forward and change my boy’s last name to Moore.”

“Does . . . has Ian ever met her? Does he know you’re his uncle and not his biological father? Does he know that Bernard is his father?”

Nathan sighed. “He does and he doesn’t. I’m the only father he’s ever known, but I did tell him that he was made by two other people. Ian doesn’t process things like a neurotypical kid would. I mean, he’s highly intelligent, but very concrete in his thinking. What he understands of a father is what he’s seen on TV or read in books, and I fit that image, so when I told him about his biological parents four years ago, his only concern was whether or not I would stop being his dad, and I reassured him that would never happen. He’s never asked to meet his mom, and he calls Bernard his uncle even though he knows that’s his bio dad. He just doesn’t see him that way.”

“Have his mother or your brother ever tried to have a relationship with him?”

“Hell, no. Tootie . . . she’s just fucking crazy. Sorry, I know you hate that word, and that’s the second time I’ve said it since we’ve been in this car.”

I shrugged. “I don’t hate it as much as I used to, and I actually like the way it sounds when *you* say it, and you do realize you’ve said it several times since I told you I disliked it.”

“Have I? And you like the way I say it? Then let me say it again. Fuuuuuuuck.”

I giggled. “You’re so silly. Anyway, finish answering my question.”

“Oh, yeah . . . so Tootie is so damn crazy and money-grubbing, she doesn’t have time to think about being a mother to Ian. Besides, she’s got three other kids that’ve been taken from her. I tried to locate them so Ian could meet them, but all their info is sealed.”

“Wow!”

“I know. And ‘Nard? He’s been too busy getting his stupid ass locked up left and right to be a father.”

I sighed. “Then Ian is truly blessed to have you.”

“No, I’m the blessed one. Believe me.”

He pulled to a stop on the lot of a shiny, four-story building that housed his lawyer’s office, leaned over to kiss me, and asked, “You sure you don’t wanna come in?”

Shaking my head, I replied, “Yeah, I’m sure. You said it’d only take a few minutes, right, and then we’re gonna pick up the kids and head to dinner? I don’t wanna spook her. She doesn’t know me, and me being with you might make her change her mind or go up on the price or something. I’m sure she’ll already be feeling some kind of way about meeting your

lawyer, but I understand you need to get her to sign the papers on the spot.”

“You might be right. Be back in a few, baby.”

“Okay.”

I watched him walk into the building, stared after him for a minute or two, and then gave my attention to my phone in time to see a text message pop up . . . from Brooklyn. I blinked and widened my eyes to be sure I wasn't seeing things. Yeah, it was from her.

The text message simply read: *Hey.*

So I replied with: *Hey.*

After a minute or so, she sent: *Are you busy? Can I call you right now?*

That made my eyes expand even more.

Me: *Not busy at all. Waiting for your call.*

A second later, my phone began to buzz with her call, and I quickly answered it. “Hello?”

“Hey, Nadia. It's Brooklyn.”

“I know . . . hi.”

Silence.

“I, uh . . . I just wanted to call and apologize for what I said to you. I was in a bad place, and before you say it, I know I put myself in that bad place. I was just . . . I was angry at myself and you didn't deserve to be the target of that anger,” she said.

“Okay . . . thanks for the apology, and I accept it.”

“Thank you.”

More silence.

“Um, how’s Bailey doing?” I asked.

“She’s good. She’s with Isaac this week.”

“Oh ...”

“Yeah.”

“How are you?”

“Miserable, depressed, and . . . I fucked everything up, Nadia, and I have no idea how to fix things. Isaac says a reconciliation is out of the question.”

“I don’t blame him.”

“Well, damn. Thanks.”

“Brooklyn, I love you. I really do, and you’re my girl. You’ll always be my girl, but you treated that man like shit and he didn’t deserve it unless there was something going on that you didn’t tell me about. As far as I could tell, Isaac was a good husband. Was he old? Yes. Did he struggle with his English from time to time? Yes. But those aren’t horrible traits and you knew those things before you married him. He didn’t deserve to be mistreated or cheated on and you know it.”

“Damn, I didn’t call you to be shrunk, Dr. Day.”

“Why did you call me, then? You could’ve left things at the apology, but you told me about where you and Isaac are now for a reason.”

She sighed into the phone. “I guess I called you because I needed someone to tell me what I need to hear but don’t want to hear. You know my mom is on my side because she misses Isaac’s money that I was giving her.”

“Yes, that sounds like your mom.”

“I know. Nadia, I don’t want to lose him, but I think I already have, and if I’m being honest with you and myself, I don’t blame him. But I love him. I don’t think I realized that until he served me with divorce papers last week.”

Damn, old Isaac was not playing! “I’m sorry, Brooklyn. I really am.”

“Thank you for that, and thank you for talking to me. When I texted Sharla, she texted back asking me not to ever contact her again. I really screwed everything up.”

“You just gotta give her time. She and I are different,” I offered, hoping maybe I was right and that time would change Sharla’s mind.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“So . . . what are you going to do?”

“What? As far as my life? I don’t know? I need to find a job so I can get up out of my mom’s house. Isaac wants to share custody, and since he really is a great father, I won’t block that, but that means no child support. That prenup I signed was ironclad, so I’m not getting a dime from him once the divorce is final.”

“There was an adultery clause?”

“Yep, and my dumb ass asked for it to be included, thinking it was something I could use against him. Initially, I had no intentions of cheating, and then when I did start cheating, I never thought I’d get caught.”

“Damn.”

“Damn, shit, *and* hell. Anyway, I gotta find a job, and then maybe I’ll go to school, work on getting a master’s or something.”

“That sounds good, Brooklyn. I’m here for you, whatever you decide.”

“I know you are. Nadia, do you think I’d be stupid to try one more time to get Isaac to take me back?”

“If that’s what you really want, no. It’s not stupid at all.”

“Okay, thank you. I’ll let you go now. Talk to you later.”

“Okay, sis. Bye.”

“Bye.”

About two minutes after the call ended, Nathan exited the building with a familiar face trailing behind him. My mouth dropped open as she followed him to the car. My first instinct was to roll the window down and warn him that she was behind him, but he’d made it to the car before I could do that. So had she.

Nathan opened the driver’s side door, a bundle of papers in his hand, and peeped in at me. “Hey, baby . . . I wanted you to meet Tootie. Tootie, this is—”

“This bitch is your girlfriend?! The bitch that fucked up my whole family?! Drove my baby brother crazy twice?! He done ran away and broke my mother’s heart again all because of this trick! Oh hell no! I don’t want this bitch around my Ian! Give me those papers back!”

Nathan looked so confused. I felt sorry for him.

“Antionette—” I began but was interrupted by Nathan.

“Wait a minute, why the hell are you talking about her like that? The fuck is wrong with you, Tootie?!”

“I’m talking to her like that because that toxic bitch ruined my brother’s life!”

Nathan’s head whipped from Antionette—or Tootie—to me and back. “That crazy-ass Sullivan is your brother?” he asked. “The motherfucker threatened to shoot her!”

“He should’ve busted a cap in her ass! She ain’t shit! You better drop her!”

“That nigga is fucking loco, and from what I’ve heard, he’s always been a little touched. That kind of crazy doesn’t just happen overnight, and now I see it’s hereditary.”

“Word? Okay, give me those damn papers back, and I’ll be by to pick up my son in a few minutes.”

“Give me my god damn check back, then, and what judge in this country do you think would give that boy to you when your ass hasn’t even tried to see him since he was in fucking diapers, and let’s not forget your criminal record or your crackhead history. Ian was born with damn drugs in his system, wasn’t he? Didn’t they take him until you got clean back then? And looking at you right now, I bet you’re gonna go blow all that money getting high with some nigga who’s going to put another baby in you that the state with have to take. So you can miss me with the threats. I have paid you, you have signed the papers, and if you EVER bring your ass over to my house and even attempt to take MY son from me, it’ll be the last thing you do.”

“Who do you think you are, talking to me like that?”



“I think I’m the person who will make sure you never see another sunrise if you even call my woman again harassing her about your mentally ill brother, and if you see her in public on the few days of the year when you aren’t locked up, you better not even breathe in her direction.”

“Talking all that big shit now. I bet Bernard could bring you down a peg or two.”

“Let him try,” Nathan said and then climbed in the car and sped out of the parking lot.

## Nathan

She’d been quiet at dinner, quiet on the ride home, quiet when she hugged the kids good night, and now, lying in my arms in bed, she was still mute. I figured she was processing the events of the day, but I knew she could go all fatal with taking blame for things that were not her fault, so I softly asked, “Hey . . . you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she answered in a tiny voice, a voice that told me she was definitely not okay.

“You sure? You wanna talk about it?”

“No, but thank you for standing up for me. You didn’t have to do that. I would’ve done it, but I was so . . . shocked.”

“I did what I was supposed to do. You’re my woman and I’m supposed to protect you, baby. Don’t you ever forget that.”

“Still, thank you.”

“Always. So . . . you’re sure you don’t wanna talk about it?”

“I’m sure, Nathan.”

“Okay, I won’t push you, but I do want to share something with you.”

“Okay . . .”

“Mecca’s mom and I . . . we weren’t all that serious. I mean, I cared about her, and things probably would’ve gotten serious if I’d let them, but I was young, had just started playing pro ball, and I wasn’t trying to be tied down, so when she told me she was pregnant? I went ballistic, swore to God she was trying to trap me or hem me up with child support, but the truth of the matter was that I was careless, and she was actually a good woman, very smart. She had a big future ahead of her and getting pregnant wasn’t even what she wanted, but she decided to have the baby, and that pissed me off. I wouldn’t have anything to do with her. Never went to any appointments with her. Nothing. It was her mom who called and told me she’d died in childbirth. She was so upset, she said I needed to come get my baby because she didn’t even want to look at her after what happened to her own daughter. Hell, over the years I’ve tried to reach out to her and she still wants nothing to do with her granddaughter. Nadia, I felt like

shit for a long time, carried around a lot of guilt over Val dying while bringing my child into the world, but I eventually came to see that I'm not a god. I didn't make it happen, and even if I'd been supportive, it probably still would've happened."

"I'm so sorry you went through that, Nathan."

"So am I, but I can see the beauty of it now. I have Mecca. Wouldn't give anything for her."

"I know. She's such a sweet, smart girl."

"That, she is . . . most of the time."

"And thank you for sharing that with me."

"I'm glad I did."

I heard her release a tiny sigh. "Nathan, that confrontation with Antionette or Tootie bothered me, but I'm fine. I really am. It's hard to hear someone say stuff like that about me, but I know I'm not responsible for Sullivan's actions or the way he is. It's just . . . I don't know. I'm afraid she'll really try to take Ian from you out of spite for me. She hates me that much."

"Don't worry about that. You heard what I told her. It'll be a cold day in hell and monkeys will start pissing gold before I ever let her take Ian, and I mean that. I let her believe she had power over this situation for a long time because I wasn't thinking straight, but now I am, and fuck her and her empty threats. Besides, the papers are signed, were signed in front of my attorney. She'll have a hell of a time trying to un-sign them."

"Hmm, you said that word again."

"You turned on or something?"

“You don’t *know* that I’m turned on, Mr. Dominant?”

“There you go with that mouth again. You like being punished, don’t you?”

“Yep. Do I get to choose my punishment again, sir?”

“Absolutely.”

I felt her move down my body, snatch the covers off of me, and then take me into her mouth. Through a groan, I said, “I love you, Nadia.”

“I love you, too, Nathan,” she garbled.

## Nadia

I checked myself in the mirror that took up an entire wall in Nathan's—and I guess my— bedroom and smiled. I'd gained a little weight—my mom called it happy love weight—but I looked good in a gorgeous, pleated, halter-neck, red and white maxi dress. Smiling, I ran my fingers through my rapidly growing afro and slid some gold hoops into my ears, musing to myself that I was really beginning to look like my mother, but that wasn't a bad thing. I could only hope to tap into the fountain of youth she had liberal access to.

My smile widened when Nathan appeared behind me in the mirror, snaking his arms around my waist and pressing his mouth to my ear. "I am one lucky man, you know that?"

"Mm-hmm. You're rich, handsome, got great kids, *and* me. You have to be the luckiest man on Earth."

"Exactly. How does thirty feel, Dr. Day?"

"Like twenty."

“Oh, I got you feeling young, huh?”

“You absolutely have something to do with it, and in addition to everything you give me, I just feel like . . . I found myself. You know?”

“You’ve been liberated, baby.”

“Mission accomplished for you, huh?”

“No, *you* did it. Hey, your mom and sister just arrived. They’re down in the living room with Mecca and Ian.”

“Really? My birthday twin, Braeden, didn’t come?”

“He did. He’s out back checking out the horses that you’re too scared to ride.”

“I don’t know how to ride a horse, Nathan.”

“I told you, I’ll teach you, Nadia.”

“You tried to get me to ride a horse named Danger. Do I look that stupid?”

“He’s a calm horse. Mecca named him that.”

“Uh-huh. Let me get on down and greet my mom and sister.”

“Scaredy cat.”

“Whatever.”

He grabbed me and kissed me, then said, “I need to ask you something before we go downstairs.”

“Okay, what?”

“Remember you told me your mom didn’t believe in marriage and that you didn’t either back in the day? That’s

why you refused dude's proposal, right?"

"That, and I just wasn't ready to marry anyone at that point."

"What about now? You believe in marriage?"

I frowned slightly. "Hmm, I really don't know, Nathan. I'm still evolving and so is my thinking. I think a part of me does, but another part of me is unsure how I feel about it."

"Okay. I hear you."

As he followed me out of the bedroom, he said, "I really love your mom."

"She's hard not to love."

"Yeah, she came with gifts for all four of us."

I halted on the stairs. "All four of us? Me, you, Ginger, and Braeden?"

"No, me, you, and the kids."

I almost fell as I raced down the stairs to the living room, was panting by the time I made it in there to see Mecca and Ian smiling from ear to ear, each holding a red *Passion Play* gift bag.

Ooooooh, shit!

No, no, no! What had she given them? Matching raccoon dick bone pendants?

"Uh . . . um, hey, Mommy, Ginger."

Both hopped up from the black leather sofa and hugged me as I kept my eyes on the kids, my heart jumping double-dutch in my chest.

“Hey, my love! I was just getting acquainted with Mecca and Ian! Nathan, you have such sweet children! And smart! And, they love their gifts!” Mommy sang.

“They’re all right, I guess,” Nathan said with a grin.

“Wow, Noddy, if you two get married, you’ll be like a real mom. I never thought you’d be a mom. I honestly was starting to think you were a robot who worked and slept, and that was it. Thanks for reviving her human side, Nathan.” That was Ginger.

In response, I rolled my eyes at her and turned my attention to the kids. “What did you two . . . get?”

With the hugest smile on his face, Ian pulled a black *In Living Color* t-shirt out of his gift bag, holding it up so that I got a good view of the multi-colored logo splashed across the front of it. “Oh, wow! Nice, Ian!” I gushed.

Next, Mecca showed me her gift, a black t-shirt with “There is no spoon” printed on it, a reference from *The Matrix*. The words were comprised of green computer code. After I gushed over it to Mecca in sign language, my eyes found my mother.

She was wearing a smirk. “What? Did you actually think I brought them—” She lowered her voice. “Sex toys or something?”

I lowered my own voice. “Uh, yeah.”

Mommy sucked her teeth. “Nadia, really? I even covered the logo on the bag. I’m not crazy, you know.”

*I guess.* “How did you know what to get them?”

“Nathan told me.”



Now my eyes were on him.

He shrugged. “I dropped by her shop a few days ago, and we chatted.”

“We sure did, and he spent like three hundred dollars,” Mommy said, and then smacked a hand over her mouth. “Oops.”

“Oops?” I parroted her, my eyes volleying between her and Nathan.

Mommy gave me a sheepish look. “I think he wanted to surprise you ...”

“For your birthday,” Nathan interjected.

“Ooooh, girl, you about to get it good tonight!” Ginger shrieked.

“Ginger, please. Not in front of the kids,” I damn near begged.

Ginger moved in close to me and whispered, “My bad. I brought some more Magic Pussy oil with me.” She patted her purse. “Want some to go along with whatever Nathan got you?”

“Well, that’s a dumb question,” I whispered back. “Of course I want some, fool.”

My baby sister smiled and winked at me as she dug in her purse.

The doorbell rang, and Nathan announced, “That must be Sharla. I’ll get it.”

I wanted Brooklyn to be there for our little get-together, but she was working. She had a new job at one of the stores in the

mall and couldn't take off, so at least that meant Sharla wouldn't back out of coming.

"I have arrived! I know y'all been waiting for me!" Sharla greeted everyone. She looked perfect in a Kelly-green jumpsuit, her hair in long blond box braids. Sharla was my height but heavier than me. I'd always said she could've been a plus-sized model.

The doorbell rang again, and Nathan left to answer it, returning shortly with Luke and Melanie North with Braeden bringing up the rear. A few minutes later, we were all gathered around tables set up in the backyard for an early evening celebratory dinner.

"This is so beautiful," Sharla said, leaning in close to me as her eyes toured the yard in wonderment.

It was gorgeous. Melanie and her crew had done a wonderful job of setting everything up from the rented tables and gorgeous décor of hanging fairy lights and tiki torches to the delicious, catered Mediterranean food. She even made sure there were vegan options for my mother and Braeden, although he sampled the non-vegan food as well.

"I'm gonna have to get Melanie's number for when I find my husband and have to plan our engagement party," Sharla continued. Sharla was now on this intense manifestation journey for a husband. It was similar to the things my sister

believed in, and I had adopted the same attitude for her as I had for Ginger. If it made her happy, it made me happy for her. And hell, the way that oil of Ginger's made both me and Nathan want to climb the walls—my pussy was even good to *me* when I used it—I was beginning to believe in that moon stuff.

Just a little, though.

“Yeah, she's just started planning events for small groups instead of only couples. She did such a great job,” I said.

“She sure did,” Sharla agreed.

On the other side of me, I felt Nathan stand from his chair. “Can I have everyone's attention?” After the murmurs filling the backyard had quieted, he continued, “First, thanks for being here tonight as we not only celebrate my baby's thirtieth birthday but her promotion to Romey University's Interim Dean of Behavioral and Health Sciences!” He gazed down at me. “I'm so proud of you, baby, and I love you so much.” Then he raised his wine glass. “To Dr. Nadia Day!”

Everyone followed, raising their glasses of wine, or juice in Ian's and Mecca's case. I smiled and hugged Nathan once he'd reclaimed his seat, and then stood from mine. “Thank you all for being here to help me celebrate. Just a few months ago, my life was so different. I would've never believed the academic year would end like this, with me being the youngest interim dean in Romey U history, or with me being surrounded by even more people I love.” I let my eyes drift from Nathan to Mecca and Ian. “And new friends.” I smiled at Melanie and Luke. It wasn't like we spent a lot of time together, but I'd chatted on the phone with Melanie enough to know we were

on our way to an epic friendship. “I am so grateful for this path my life is on, and I can’t wait to see what’s next!”

“Hear, hear!” Nathan shouted.

I stepped into our candle-lit bedroom later that evening and smiled.

“You like?” Nathan asked from behind me.

In addition to the many candles illuminating the space, there was a trail of red rose petals leading from the doorway to the bed, and on the bed, a large red gift box with a black bow.

“I do like,” I said. “How’d you do this? None of this was in here earlier.”

“Mel’s people set it up while we were out back having dinner.”

I turned and kissed him. “Thank you!”

“You’re welcome. Go open your gift.”

A minute or so later, I was seated on the bed, lifting the top from the box, and my eyes ballooned at the contents—a black riding crop, what looked to be a black dog collar, gold handcuffs, and some gold chains. The stuff looked like it was of high quality, too. I gazed up at him as he took the collar from the box and eased it around my neck, snapping it. Then he slid his finger between the collar and my skin and tugged

on it, urging me to stand. Once I was on my feet, he slid my dress over my head and shook his head when he saw my panties, my *black* panties. Yeah, I did that on purpose.

“Now, you knew better than that, didn’t you? Black panties?”

“I forgot,” I lied.

“Take them off.”

I did so quickly, handing them to him.

“No bra?” he asked.

“No, you gonna punish me for that, too?”

“Uh-huh. Turn around and bend over the bed.”

If I’d obeyed him any faster, I would’ve made myself dizzy. He made me wait for a minute or so, and then I felt his hands on me, covering my back, ass, and legs with the Magic Pussy oil that I recognized by its distinct fragrance. Another moment or two passed before that crop gently smacked against my butt. I jumped.

“Turn around,” he demanded.

Facing him, I watched him oil the front of my body. Then he grabbed the chains, connecting them to the collar and the handcuffs, which he then put on me.

“Lie down.”

I lay on my back and watched him shed his clothes and climb on top of me.

His final command was, “Don’t scream.”

And then he went to work, his mouth everywhere from my lips to my neck, my breasts, and finally, my yoni, sucking and tugging and slurping until an orgasm took my breath and common sense away, because I didn't care about how he tugged on that collar as he entered me, or how he bit my left nipple, or how he drove into me like there was no tomorrow. On the contrary, I loved every single second of it.

## Nathan

“Did you hear that?”

Nadia's troubled voice pulled me from sleep, and when I opened my eyes, I found that she'd turned a lamp on and was sitting up on the side of the bed wearing one of my old Texans t-shirts and a pair of her own shorts. She'd been naked when she climbed into bed with me.

“Where you going?” I asked, still in a sleep haze.

“To see what that was.”

“To see what what was?”

“The sound.”

“What sound?”

“Like a door closing or something. It came from downstairs. I heard it when I got up to use the bathroom, and I

thought I'd imagined it at first, because this house is huge, but now I think I really heard something."

"Baby, that's impossible. I set the alarm—" Shit, did I set it? "I'll check. You stay here."

"No, I'm going with you."

I sighed. "I don't need back-up, baby. Stay here."

Holding up a shoe, she shook her head. "No, I'm coming with you."

"And what the hell are you supposed to do with that shoe?"

"I don't know . . . hit whoever it is with the heel? I bet I could put their eye out or something."

All I could do was shake my head. I thought about grabbing my gun but decided against it.

We checked on the kids first. They were both sound asleep, so we were quiet as we descended the stairs, checking the different rooms—living room, dining room, study, foyer, and then the kitchen, where we found the source of the sound Nadia had heard, my brother Bernard.

## Nathan

“What in the fuck are you doing in my house?! How’d you get in here?!” I yelled.

Nadia’s small hand met my bare back. “Nathan, you’re gonna wake Ian up.”

“Nigga, I’m waiting! Did you break in my house?!” I wasn’t really yelling, but this situation wouldn’t let me lower my voice too much or shut my mouth.

“I’m . . . I’m gonna go check on Ian,” Nadia softly said.

“Naw, bitch. You ain’t going nowhere to call the damn police on me. You just look like the type to call the police on a nigga,” Bernard said, his voice booming as he stood in front of my refrigerator and put a carton of orange juice to his mouth, taking a gulp of it.

“Don’t talk to my damn woman again, and you know what? Just get the fuck out of here before I kick your ass.”



“You don’t wanna know how I got in here anymore?” he asked, holding up a key ring. *Mama’s* key ring.

Shit. I’d forgotten about those keys.

“Yeah, nigga. Auntie Chris told me she called about you coming to get Mama’s stuff from her house and you never got it, proving that you never gave a shit about her, but you were her got-damn favorite. Even after you kicked her out of here, she was always talking about how she wished I could be more like *Nathan*. She loved your ass so much and what did you do? You fucking killed her! You killed my mama!”

“She had a heart attack, ‘Nard. All that drinking and whatever else you had her doing? *That’s* what killed her. That and the fact that you worried the shit out of her getting locked up every other second. I tried to help mama. That’s all I ever did.”

“Naw, you putting her out of here is what killed her. What the fuck kinda nigga puts they mama out?”

“The kind with kids to protect.”

“I oughta take my damn son from you, let you see how it feels to lose something you love. I loved Mama!”

“So did I, and if you think you’re gonna take *my* son from me, you better be ready to sacrifice your life to make it happen.”

“What you gonna do? Shoot me with that gun of yours? That’s gotta be it, because you know you can’t kick my ass. You could try, but I’ll mop up the floor with you like I did when we were kids.”

I laughed wryly. “If you stay your ass in my house, you’re gonna find out that I’m not a little boy anymore and you definitely won’t be mopping shit up with me. I guarantee that. Look, I don’t like fighting, and I don’t want to fight you at all because we do share some DNA, but I will, and I will enjoy doing it because it’s been a long time coming.”

“Whatever, nigga. If you wanted to keep folks out, you should’ve gotten these keys from Aunt Chris and set your damn alarm, thinking like a rich white man. You believe your money will keep you and them kids safe. Think again.”

I guess I really had forgotten to set it. Shit, I would never let that happen again. “Nigga, you got one more time to threaten my damn kids. What the hell kind of person are you? I mean, one is your only biological child and the other is your niece!”

“Naw, I got other kids out there. I won’t miss the one you been raising. Ain’t like I’m fucked up about any of them, on the real.”

That’s when I lunged for him, heard Nadia shriek my name, and felt her grab my arm.

Bernard backed out of my reach, raising his hands. “Damn, you quick. You remember that time I pulled your pants down out on the sidewalk in front of our place when we was kids? Everybody saw your little dick.” He doubled over with laughter and I punched his ass, knocking him to the floor, and then I couldn’t stop punching him. All I could see was images of me as a little boy being slapped and punched and kicked and humiliated by this motherfucker.

“Nathan, please!” Nadia screamed. “The kids are in here!”

That made me stop. I looked down at Bernard's bloody face and then got to my feet to see Ian standing just inside the kitchen doorway, and behind him was Mecca. I looked down at my bloody hands and then used them to sign: *Go back to bed. Both of you*, in the dimness of the kitchen. The only light on was the one over the stove.

Mecca signed: *Ian called the police* before ushering her drowsy brother out of the kitchen,

"Hey, come back, little man! Come back here. You going with me."

I kicked my brother, who grunted out, "Damn, Nate! Shit! I just came here for some money. Tootie told me you out here paying for kids. Where's my cut?"

"Fuck you! The police are on the way. If you don't want to go back to jail for breaking and entering and attempted burglary, you better get your ass out of here."

He groaned as he slowly made it onto his feet. "I ain't stole shit!"

"Who you think the police gonna believe? My rich ass or you?"

He rubbed his jaw as he hobbled to the door that led from the kitchen to the backyard. "I'll be back."

I watched him leave my house, locked the door behind him, and asked Nadia to set the alarm while my eyes followed him through my backyard into the woods that bordered it, answering the question of how he'd managed to get onto my property. I'd changed the gate code after Mama passed, but my dumb ass had opted not to extend the fence behind my

property because my property was so vast, and I didn't want to ruin the woods that provided a natural fence of sorts. Well, Bernard being able to navigate his way through the wild to my house let me know a fence was definitely needed. As Nadia wrapped her arms around me and rested her head on my back, I sighed.

“Are . . . are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, just gotta upgrade the security around this place and get a fence, see if Vlad knows a bodyguard who can move in here with us.”

“You think we need a live-in bodyguard?”

“Yeah, I thought the gate and alarm was enough, but now I don't know.” I turned and looked at her, kissing her on the forehead. “Are *you* okay?”

“Yeah, I'm fine.”

“Good. Let's go check on the kids before the police get here.”

## Nathan

I was in Detroit on business. My brother had managed to get his ass locked up again after trying to rob a damn pawn shop, so I didn't have to worry about him popping up at the house any time soon, and although I'd upgraded my home's security system, was having a fence built behind the house, and still had a bodyguard detail for Nadia since that Sullivan dude remained on the loose, I called to check on things back in Romey.

“Hello?” Nadia breathed into the phone.

“Hey, baby. You at work? What you doing? Jogging on the track?”

“No, I'm on my way from my office to my car. I have a meeting with my child therapist friend this morning. You know, the one we talked about sending the kids to? And I'm about to be running late. Then I have to be back here for a meeting an hour or so after my appointment ends.”

“Oh, okay. I’m glad you were able to get on her schedule. The kids seem okay after the Bernard thing, but I don’t want to take any chances. Hell, I got my ass back in therapy. So I gotta make sure my kids are all right, too.”

“And that’s why I love you. You are such a good father. You make me actually consider having a baby for the first time in my life.”

“You never wanted kids before?”

“Not particularly. Before I made my education and job my life, I just wanted to explore the world, be a nomad, and there was no room for kids in that. Then my focus was on my education and climbing the academic ladder. But now . . . I don’t know. I could see giving Ian and Mecca a little sibling.”

I smiled. “Damn, my dick is magical, huh?”

“You know what? Bye! I gotta go before I’m late. And guess what? I think I’m gonna go to the car wash between meetings and clean my car out.”

“Thank God!”

“Screw you.”

“You can as soon as I get back home.”

I heard her start her car. “You’re too much. Hey, I gave Vlad the day off.”

“What?! And how?! I’m the one paying him!”

“I told him to take the day off, and that you’ll *still* pay him. I can’t go to the therapist’s office with a bodyguard, Nathan.”

“Nadia—”

“It’s just for today, okay? Talk to you later.”

She hung up before I could reply, and I told myself that everything would be fine. I almost convinced myself, too.

Powering my phone off and slipping it into the pocket of my slacks, I gave an awkward smile and tiny nod to the young lady who breezed past me and out Armand Daniels’ front door. Then I let my eyes scan the living room of his condo. It looked like the home of a rich, irresponsible young man—sleek, expensive furniture and electronics, *Scarface* and *New Jack City* posters on the walls, and what I knew to be the remnants of cocaine on the glass-topped coffee table. How the hell was he passing the league drug tests? Or was the nose candy for the women who revolved in and out of his home and life. Armand was a known womanizer, and that had caught up with him. Hence his panicked phone call to me in the middle of the night and my arrival in Detroit that morning. He wasn’t an official North Sports Agency client yet, but I couldn’t not help him, not after that phone call.

Finally, he emerged from the back of the condo for the first time since about an hour earlier when he opened the door for me. “Hey, sorry I kept you waiting. I almost had to curse that chick out to make her leave. She ain’t even my girl, just some chick I met at the club last night.”

I scooted to the edge of his sofa, sitting up straight. “So . . . about your phone call. What’s going on?”

“Shit, I told you last night!”

“I know, but I need to hear it again.”

He sighed, dragged his hand down his stubbled face, and leaned forward on the sofa next to me, turning to look at me. “This motherfucker is saying I drugged and raped her. She’s threatening to file charges if I don’t pay her a million dollars.”

I sighed heavily. This didn’t sound any less troubling to me in person than it had on the phone. I stared at the floor for a few moments, gathering my thoughts.

“You just gonna sit there and not say nothing?” Armand asked.

Looking up at him, I asked, “Was is the girl who just left?”

“Hell no!”

“A different girl?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, let me ask you this, and it’s important that you’re truthful with me, Armand. Did you do it?”

“No! I’m fucked up in the head and I know I am, but I ain’t never raped nobody, and I damn sure ain’t had to drug a girl to get pussy. Anybody I ever fucked wanted me to fuck them! No cap!”

“But you *did* sleep with her?”

“Yeah . . . once or twice.”

“Casual sex. No relationship?”

“It’s always casual sex for me because I ain’t finna be gone over no chick and let them make a damn fool outta me. Man, fuck that!”



There was some deep shit going on with Armand. His head was all twisted up when it came to women. “Okay . . . is she black or white?”

He gave me a smirk. “What you think? White! Shit, it wouldn’t really be an issue if she was black because the police ain’t gonna give a shit about that. But you know they gonna fuck my life up over a white chick! Hell, we could go to court and I could win and my life would still be ruined!”

I couldn’t argue with that logic. It was a totally messed-up truth in this country. Being found innocent in court didn’t make a damn bit of difference in the court of public opinion, no matter who you were, but if you belonged to a group like ours? Things were doubly stacked against you.

“Okay, what does your gut tell you to do, fight this or pay her off?” I asked.

“My gut ain’t no shit I can trust right now. My head is messed up, man. Maybe I shoulda stayed in therapy.”

“You’ve had therapy?” I asked, sounding more shocked than I intended to.

He nodded, shifting his eyes from my face to the floor in front of him. “Yeah, childhood shit be chasing me, stuff I saw happen to my mom. Man . . . I don’t know what to do. I don’t wanna pay that chick. That’ll just make me look guilty, won’t it? And I ain’t guilty. I put that on my granny. That’s my girl. I wouldn’t put nothing on her if it wasn’t true. I know I’m fucked up, but I didn’t do this shit.” His voice quivered, and as he up looked at me again, I saw tears and fear in his eyes. That’s when I decided he was telling the truth.

A phone buzzed, and I watched as he dug it out of the pocket of his sweats and groaned. "It's my mom."

"Take it, if you need to."

"Nah, I'll call her back. Anyway, I gotta do something before this shit gets out."

"You got any proof that your hook-up with her was consensual?"

"Like what? I ain't record the shit. I ain't R Kelly."

"Text messages, DMs. How'd you meet her? Did you two correspond after you slept with her?"

"Oh . . . yeah. She slid in my DMs and met me at a club. I got texts and shit, too, where she's telling me how much fun she had and how she wanna get with me again."

"Okay, one good thing is you're famous, so your moves are pretty easy to track. If her dates don't match up or something like that, that'll be a plus."

"Yeah..."

"Armand, I think you should sue her," I suggested.

"What?"

"If you're truly innocent, then get in front of it. Sue her for attempted extortion."

He stared at me. "Damn."

I nodded. "Yeah."

"You think that'll work?"

"It might. It's better than sitting here worrying about it or paying money over something you didn't do."

“Man . . . thank you. Uh . . . you know any lawyers that handle shit like this?”

“I can put you in touch with someone.”

He sat back on the sofa, nodding his head. “I’m ready to sign with you guys. You’ve more than earned that shit, because damn!”

“Good. I look forward to representing you. But you might not like what I have planned for you.”

He gave me a skeptical look. “What you got planned?”

“I believe you need to strongly consider a move from the Pistons.”

“Shit, I been thinking that myself anyway. I’m still messed up about how he Heat traded me.”

“And you need to get back into therapy to work on your anger and impulse control issues, start volunteering with some organizations other than your own, and you gotta slow down with the women or you’re gonna keep running into these kinds of situations. And what’s this? You using?” I pointed to the white powder on the coffee table.

“Naw, a couple of my friends mess with that stuff.”

“Then you also need new friends.”

“Man . . .”

“You want to hit the status a man with your talent deserves to have, you gotta make big changes, Armand.”

“I’ll try.”

“That’s all I can ask you to do.” I proffered him my hand.  
“Welcome to the North Agency.”

“Thanks, man.”

I stayed there another two hours just talking to the young man, getting to know him, and when I left, I believed I was going to be able to make a difference in his life.

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I was in my rental, on my way to find some lunch before I thought to turn my phone back on and was immediately greeted with a phone call from Luke in addition to a slew of text messages popping up on the screen.

I answered the phone with, “Armand Daniels’ new agent speaking.”

“Man, you still in Detroit? You need to get back here ASAP!”

The panic in his voice made my heart drop into my grumbling stomach. “What’s going on?!” Was it one of the kids? Had Mecca contacted him while I had my damn phone off? I only turned it off so that I could give Daniels my undivided attention. Shit!

“There are reports of an active shooter on the Romey U campus. Mel has Nadia’s number but she’s not answering. We even tried her office number, and the police won’t let anyone on campus or I’d be there right now trying to find her.”

“Did you . . . did you check the house? Maybe she’s at home for lunch or something.”

“I dropped by there. Didn’t see her car.”

“Uh. . . she was supposed to meet with a therapist we’re thinking about sending the kids to. Maybe she’s still there.” That wasn’t likely, but I was desperate. I needed her to be anywhere but on that campus.

“Give me the therapist’s name, and I’ll check and get back with you.”

I did, and then made my way to the airport. I’d have to get something to eat in there and the luggage I’d left at my hotel room would just have to be there for now. I had to get back to Romey.

I took the earliest flight I could back to Tennessee, had to drive from Memphis to Romey, and by the time I saw the sign informing that I’d made it there, I was about to lose it. She wasn’t at home and Luke had confirmed that she’d made her appointment with the therapist and left to return to work. She still wasn’t answering her phone, and I honestly didn’t know

what to do other than head to the campus and fucking make them let me look for her. If I got arrested in the meantime, so be it, but I had to find her. I had to make sure she was okay.

It didn't help that all the local radio stations were reporting on the shooting, talking about how after hours had passed, they still weren't sure how many, if any, casualties there'd been. All they knew was that a black male had opened fire on campus and was now holed up in one of the buildings. They didn't tell which building. Other people were calling in saying their loved ones had contacted them to assure them they were okay, but Nadia hadn't called anyone—not her mom, her sister, no one. I knew that because I had called her mom and her mom had called her sister and her friends, Sharla and Brooklyn. No one had heard from her, and as I drove to the Romey U campus, tears got stuck somewhere in my throat. If that Sullivan motherfucker had hurt her, I was going to kill him with my bare hands, and then resuscitate him and kill him again!

My eyes were all over the place as I made my way to the campus, searching for . . . what? A sign from heaven that she was okay? I didn't know, and it was a miracle that I hadn't rear-ended someone since I couldn't seem to stay focused on the road. My eyes darted to the left, and I caught sight of something that made my heart jump for the fiftieth time that day. It was a car that looked like Nadia's on a car wash parking lot.

The carwash.

She'd said she was going to clean her car out, and although that was hours ago, maybe, just maybe . . .

I pulled onto the lot of the car wash, almost getting hit by about two cars, and parked behind the Lexus which was sitting beside a vacuum cleaner. I silently prayed to God and pleaded with the universe that I'd find her inside of that car.

And I did.

I tried the passenger door only to find that it was locked, and then knocked on the window, watched as she jumped and looked at me with a wet face. Then she hit the button to unlock the door and I slid inside, grabbing her and pulling her to me. "You had me so worried! Why haven't you been answering your phone?!"

"You're back? I thought you were coming back tomorrow," she said into my shoulder.

"I was, but then I heard about the shooting on campus and everyone's been trying to get you and I thought you . . . I'm so glad you're safe! What are you doing here? How long have you been here?"

As I released her, her puffy eyes rounded the interior of her car before landing on my face. "I don't know. I came and started cleaning my car out, and I found these letters among the papers that I had all over that seat and the floor. I thought they were flyers, but they were notes from Sullivan. Some were sweet, others were threatening, and one . . . was a suicide note. I read it, and it was like it triggered something in me and I started crying and couldn't stop. I had the radio on and they started talking about the shooting and I froze. I've just been sitting here crying because . . ." She handed me what I would soon know was the suicide note, and after I read it, I realized

why she was so shaken by it. He'd vowed to not only kill himself, but to take as many people with him as he could.

"You think . . . that's him on campus doing the shooting?" I asked.

"After reading that, don't you?" she replied.

"I don't know, baby. All I know is if it is, it's not your fault."

"How? I'm not even there! He's hurting all those people over me and I'm not even there!"

"Thank God you're not!"

"But I should be!"

"No you the-hell shouldn't!"

"Nathan . . ."

I grabbed her face, turning it toward mine. "I love you and I need you. So do Mec and Ian. We can't lose you! Ever! Shit, it wouldn't be fair to us!"

She stared at me as her phone began to buzz. She didn't even look down at it, continuing to ignore it.

But I did. "It's your mom," I told her.

"I can't talk to anyone right now. You answer it and tell her I'm okay."

I did, and after the call ended, I asked, "Do you know a Bilal Ivers?"

With a deep frown, she nodded. "He's one of my former students. Why?"

"They just arrested him. He was the shooter."



# Nadia

Lying in bed next to Nathan, I tried to settle my mind down but couldn't. I kept thinking about the letters from Sullivan, then I wondered if he'd actually committed suicide this time, but I felt like he hadn't. My gut told me that this instance was no different from what he'd done in the past. Then there was Mr. Ivers. Evidently, mine wasn't the only class he'd failed, plus he had a bigger bone to pick with his advisor, who'd convinced him to take a difficult statistics class, than he did with me. That advisor was his target and was injured, but no one was killed, thank goodness.

“Hey, how you feeling?” Nathan asked, his voice rumbling in his chest.

“Okay. You know, I talked to my therapist friend about me getting some counseling and she recommended some folks to me. I think I'm going to call them tomorrow. I . . . I think I need it.”

“That sounds good, baby.”

“Yeah, I should've sought counseling years ago.”

“Better now than never.”

“True, and I’m going to take a leave of absence from work. I know it’s going to look bad with me just starting this new position, but I can’t wrap my mind around all that right now. I . . . I need a damn break.”

“That sounds good, too.”

“Nathan?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for having my back and being my rock.”

“Always, baby.”

## Nadia

“OMG, did you see that house?”

I sighed. “Yes, Ginger. I was in there, too.”

“I know! But OMG! It’s so huge!”

“It’s the house of a damn billionaire, Ging! What did you think it would look like?”

“Nadia, I don’t think any of this has sunk in for you. Big South is your first cousin! His mother was your father’s sister, and that means Leland McClain is also your first cousin. We came here in a private jet. A private jet owned by Big South!”

“Actually, my dad says it belongs to Big South’s wife.”

“Shit, and? Tell her, Nathan! This is crazy!”

We both turned to Nathan, who was walking behind us with his mouth hung open, his eyes pasted to something in the huge yard.

“Nathan?” I said, “What’s wrong?”

“Big South! That’s Big South over there!” he shouted, and then he took off running. Damn, he was fast. I could see where he probably was a great football player.

As I stood there feeling totally and completely embarrassed, Ginger streaked past me, running somewhere.

“Daughter, why you standing here by yourself?”

I spun around to smile at my father. He was smiling, too, as he patted his bulging belly.

“Sorry it took me so long in the bathroom,” he continued. “Let me introduce you to your people.”

I nodded and looped my arm with his, walking deeper into the yard full of brown people, tables, chairs, and music. Our first stop was my Aunt Ever’s table, then my Aunt Wyvetta’s, then I met a host of cousins, and finally, we made it to a group of tables full of my Aunt Juanita’s kids and their families, including Big South, who was holding the cutest little boy while having a lively conversation with Nathan.

“Nod-ja, this here is Tick and his wife Little Jo, Leland and my Kimmy, the twins, Nolan and Neil, Nolan’s wife Bridgette, and Sadie, Neil’s wife. And this is Kat and her big ass man, Tommy. Y’all, this is Nod-ja, my daughter,” my father introduced me.

I was inundated with greetings and hugs from this group of attractive people. My cousins not only resembled each other, but also resembled me a little, and my heart swelled. When Big South hugged me and introduced me to his petite wife and gorgeous kids—that Ella was nothing short of stunning—he seemed so down to earth. So . . . regular and normal.

“I’m standing here looking at you, but I still can’t believe I’m related to Big South,” I gushed. Yeah, I was just a starstruck as Nathan and Ginger, maybe more so.

“Call me Everett,” he said. “Or since you’re family, you might get away with calling me Tick.”

Everyone laughed, and then Everett added, “I can’t believe The Gate is your boyfriend! I’m a big fan!”

“No, man . . . I’m a fan of yours! I still can’t get over you being my lady’s cousin,” Nathan said, stepping over to me and wrapping his arm around my shoulder.

Everett smiled. “Hey, Gate says y’all got kids? You coulda brought them. Be sure you bring them next time.”

My heart grew even larger at hearing that *we* had kids.

“We will. We will,” Nathan said.

“Well, I gotta go get back on the grill. Don’t want the pineapples to burn,” my father said. “Y’all get to know each other.”

I took a seat at a table with one of the twins, Neil, I think, and his gorgeous curvy wife. “Grilled pineapples?” I asked.

“Oh, let me tell you about them,” the other twin’s wife said.

Big South, who had been engaged in another conversation with Nathan, quickly interjected, “Naw, that’s Unc’s daughter. Don’t be telling her that shit!”

“Hell naw! She don’t need to know that!” Leland agreed.

“Y’all some damn haters! You don’t want Nathan to enjoy the benefits of her eating pineapples to make her coochie nice

and sweet?” That was the woman I recognized as Everett’s wife.

“Jo!” Everett shrieked.

As the other women at the table high-fived her, she widened her eyes and said, “What, baby?”

Her husband just shook his head, and I made a mental note to share my sister’s website with them. Since they’d shared the pineapple knowledge with me, I figured it was only fair to share some Magic Pussy with them.

Speaking of Ginger . . . I hadn’t seen her since she took off running *somewhere*. Letting my eyes scan the yard, I found her . . . and Lunch Meat, both grinning at each other, deep in conversation. It was Nathan who’d convinced me to bring her, finally making me see that there was nothing taboo about her pursuing my brother since he was of no blood relation to her. Besides, knowing Ginger, this thing probably wasn’t going anywhere anyway.

“Ribs, chicken, and pineapples ready!” I heard my father announce, and then there was a damn stampede as people came from everywhere with paper plates and Styrofoam trays in hand.

As I stared in wonder, Nathan sat down in a newly vacant seat beside me and observed, “Your dad must be a beast on the grill, but you know what? I figured that. You can’t be a country black man with a gut and not be able to barbecue. I’m a go get in line.” He leaned in close and added, “And I’ll be sure to load your plate up with pineapples.” With a wink, he left me sitting there.

An hour later, I had overindulged in what had to be the best food I'd ever had in my life, from the ribs, to Aunt Ever's potato salad, to Aunt Wyvetta's sock-it-to-me cake. If this was what it felt like to be a part of this huge family, I wished I could've grown up a part of it. I guess my lamenting showed on my face, because as I sat there hoping I hadn't gained a million pounds from the food and watching Everett and Nathan toss a football that seemed to come from nowhere, my father took the seat beside me, and said, "I'm glad you came and met everyone, wish I could've made it happen a long time ago. Wish you could've grew up with them."

I looked at him and smiled. "Me, too, but it's okay. Better late than never."

"Yeah. I wanted you to meet my wife, Lou, but she ain't ready yet. Gotta give her more time."

"It's okay. I totally understand. Not sure how I would deal with things if I was her."

"Mm-hmm. You sure you don't wanna stay here at Tick's tonight? He got plenty of room."

"We probably will stay here. I don't think I'll be able to break him and Nathan apart."

My dad laughed. "I know that's right! Them two negroes got one of the fromances going on, don't they?"

I knew he meant bromance, but I didn't bother to correct him. "Yeah, they really do. I think it's nice that they're fans of each other. I had no idea Nathan was so famous."

"Shiiiiid, that nigga is a legend! You did good, daughter! Aw, hell. This Lou right now." He tapped the button on his

ever-present Bluetooth. “What-up-there-now?! Huh? Well, shit, ain’t that old news?! I been knew that—what?! Goooot damn! I’ll be there in a minute. Shit!” After the call had ended, he shook his head and turned to look at me. “Daughter, I gotta go. Lou on the damn phone crying because she just found out Barry White died. She all hysterectomy and shit. Tell Meat I left. I’ma be back though.”

Hysterectomy? “Okay, Dad.”

After he left, I watched my family dance and play and talk, noticed that Ginger and Lunch Meat were dancing way too slow to a Marvin Gaye’s *Got to Give it Up*, and smiled. They did look cute together.

“Nice smile. Glad you were able to come,” a voice said.

I peered across the table. “Thanks . . . Nolan?”

“I’m Neil, the handsome twin.”

Through a giggle, I said, “Oh, sorry.”

“No problem. You’ll be able to tell us apart before you know it.”

“I hope so.”

“You will. Welcome to the family, Nadia.”

“Thanks, Neil.”

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“You checked on the kids?” I asked in the darkness of the bedroom.

“Yeah, they’re good. Gayle says all is well,” Nathan replied, spooned behind me in the bed.

“I gotta get used to you calling her by her name and not ‘the nanny’ when you mention her to me.”

“Well, she basically lives with us now, so I gotta do better.”

“Yeah . . .”

“This was nice, meeting your folks. How do you feel about it?”

“I’m happy it happened. I feel complete now, like I have the whole picture of who I am.”

“Yeah . . . makes me want to seek out my dad’s people, maybe even reach out to him, see if he’s any less of a deadbeat than he used to be.”

“You should. You might be surprised. I never thought things would turn out like this for me.”

“I hear you. I cannot believe I’m sleeping in Big South’s house. I mean, Big South is right down the hall. This is nuts.”

“What’s nuts is that *you’re* a star, a celebrity. How did I not know this? Folks in Romey act like you’re just a regular guy. Everett had a fit over meeting you!”

“Only diehard football fans know who I am. I’ve been out of the league for a minute now, so I don’t get recognized

much, and my dreads weren't this long when I played. I'm smaller now, too."

"So when I asked you how you played with all that hair, why didn't you tell me that?"

"Because it was long, just not this long."

"Hmmm . . . Nathan?"

"Yeah, baby."

"Will you marry me?"

"W-what?"

"Will you marry me?"

"You're proposing to me?"

"Yes."

"You know that's out of order, right?"

"Well, when you thought I was asking before, you didn't seem to have a problem with it."

"I was joking."

"So you don't wanna marry me?"

"I want to be the one to ask!"

"Well, you haven't asked me, and I was tired of waiting."

"Hell, if I knew you believed in marriage now, I would've proposed a long time ago, Nadia!"

"Oh, I didn't tell you? I believe in marriage as long as I'm marrying you."

"Okay, then . . . will you marry me?"

“I just asked you!”

“And you will be punished for that. Now give me an answer.”

“Of course, I will.”

“Good. Your ring is at home, so you’ll have to wait to get it.”

“You already bought me a ring?”

“Yeah.”

I finally flipped over to face him. I could just barely make out the outline of his face but managed to find his lips for a kiss. “I love you, and thank you.”

“For what?”

“For liberating me.”

He pulled me into his body. “It was my pleasure, baby.”

After about a couple minutes of silence, he asked, “Did you bring some Pussy Magic oil?”

“You mean, Magic Pussy? Yep.”

“Go get it so I can punish your ass.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Moore.”

# Epilogue

## Nadia

*One year later...*

The first thing I was aware of as I awakened was the heat of Nathan's body enveloping mine and the warmth of his even breaths on my neck and the weight of the arm he'd flung across my waist. All of that, the familiarity of it, made me smile and release a tiny moan of pleasure. The second thing I became aware of was the buzzing of my cell phone. I closed one eye and squinted, trying to read the screen from across the bed and eventually made out the word: *Mommy*. My eyes darted to the digital clock that sat right beside my phone—6:00 AM.

This was her morning yoga time, something that was sacred to her. So that meant something was going on, probably something serious. Maybe even something bad. Sullivan was still out there somewhere, and he hated my mom. What if...

I scrambled out of my husband's arms, untangled myself from the covers, and by the time I had my phone in my hand, she'd hung up. I was about to tap on her name to return the call, when she called back.

As I answered with, "Mommy? What's going on?" Nathan drowsily mumbled, "The hell? You okay, baby? Who is that?"

"My mom."

"Oh, tell my BFF I said hi."

Rolling my eyes, I relayed his message to my mother.

"Tell him I said hi! Listen, I called because of this: Aphrodite."

Rubbing the back of my neck, I said, "What—who?"

"Aphrodite, you should name the baby Aphrodite."

"Huh? Hold on." As Nathan scooted closer to me, kissing my lower back and snaking an arm around me to rub my flat belly, I activated my speakerphone. "Okay, what were you saying?"

"I think you should name the baby Aphrodite. Aphrodite is the goddess of lust among other things that aren't as important, and one thing a well-rounded girl must have in abundance is lust."

"Hell no," Nathan muttered.

Stifling a giggle, I replied, "Mommy, I'm only like four seconds pregnant so we're not thinking about names right now. Also, it's too early to know the sex of the baby, and even if it's a girl, I'm not naming her Aphrodite."

"Oh, right! I have a boy name, too. Dick!"

“Mommy!”

“What? You don’t like Dick?”

“I’m not naming my son that!”

“Well, I kinda like that one,” Nathan offered. In response, I swatted his arm, making him chuckle.

Mommy sighed. “See, Nathan likes it!” Of course, she heard him. Of course.

“No, Mommy. Just...no.”

“Okay,” she said, sounding genuinely dejected. “I knew that’d be a hard sell. I’ll keep thinking about it.”

“Okay, Mommy. I’m glad you’re so...enthusiastic about the baby.”

“I am! Talk to you later, my love.”

“Bye, Mommy.”

After I’d ended the call, Nathan pulled me back down to the bed and kissed me. “Dick Moore. I like that, and think about this, when they list his last name first at school, he’ll be Moore, Dick. Sounds like a son of mine to me!”

I couldn’t help but to laugh. “Nathan! I’m not naming my baby Dick!”

“Fine, dash me and my best friend’s dreams, then. You’re lucky I love you, Dr. Moore.”

Smiling as I lay on my back and he spread his body over mine, I said, “I love you, too.”

He kissed me again but pulled back at the sound of a knock at our bedroom door. “Daddy? Nadia?”

Ian.

Hearing his voice made me smile yet again, as did everything about this new life of mine.

“Yeah, buddy?” Nathan called through the door.

“Never mind. Mecca said to leave you alone because you’re probably busy having sex since that’s why Nadia’s having a baby now,” Ian responded.

“Oh my God,” I whispered.

“Shit.” That was Nathan.

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” That was Mecca, who was evidently outside our door, too.

Nathan and I looked at each other and almost simultaneously said, “Time to get up.”

A few minutes later, we were all in the kitchen collaborating on breakfast as Nathan struggled to have “the talk” with Ian, and the only thought in my mind as I alternated cutting fruit and rubbing my belly was: *this is the life*.

*Yeah, this is definitely the life.*



A southern girl at heart, Alexandria House has an affinity for a good banana pudding, Neo Soul music, and tall black men in suits. When this fashionista is not shopping, she's writing steamy stories about real black love.

Connect with Alexandria!

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*Short Stories:*

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All I Want  
Should've Been  
Merry Christmas, Baby.  
Baby, Be Mine  
Always My Baby.

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