



Cole Hart
SIGNATURE NOVELS

TEAM

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A HOOD LOVE STORY

MYEISHA NEWTON

TEAM US 2

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Team Us 2: A Hood Love Story

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SAGE LOVETT

Feeling my heart pounding with every breath that I take, I can't believe after all this time, Ricardo Alvarez is here in front of me, living and breathing. The nerves he actually has to send smirks my way knowing the history we have between each other. Taking in a deep breath, I glance at Chance and he's heading towards me, but I put up my hand, stopping him right in his tracks.

“Don't come any closer to me, Chance. I asked and asked who the fuck we were going to... Deep down, I knew something was off. You asked me if I trusted you, and like a fucking fool, I let you know that I did. Because not once did you make me feel or believe that you were capable of lying, at least not lying to me. You honestly just led me to a damn slaughter house, as if I'm some got damn pig or a fucking cow. Out of all people in this world, it had to be him, who's your godbrother. He's Cliff's son, isn't he?” I ask Chance, already honestly knowing the answer to that. The older Ricardo has become and seeing his hair this way, along with knowing Cliff, the similarities are hard to miss now.

Ricardo strides over to me a few steps forward, then where Chance is standing. His eyes continue to trail down my body, taking me in. He's not hiding the pleasing look of seeing me again. Our eyes meet and my breathing becomes a little heavy. I'm trying to keep calm the best that I can. I look away from Ricardo and focus on the concrete pathway.

“Baby, he’s Cliff’s son, but you got to help me understand how the fuck do you know his n—”

“Sage, I know I’m not worthy of your forgiveness, but I longed for this day to happen. For us to be in front of one another once again, our boys... I want the opportunity to meet them, to step up and be the father that I should have been the moment you told me you were pregnant, but you and I both know that I really couldn’t though, for obvious reasons we always talked about. Nobody back then was going to ac—”

Chance strongly punched Ricardo dead in his jaw, cutting him off from talking any further to me. Hearing him say ‘our boys,’ it’s safe to say Chance has put together who Ricardo is and how I know him.

My clutch purse falls from out of his hand, landing right in front of my feet. Ricardo lets out a haughty ass laugh, and Chance’s eyes are completely burning with hatred. He loses it even more and starts swinging his fists at him. His hits are connecting every time to Ricardo’s body, more so in his face. Ricardo goes to throwing blows right back at him, not going down easily at all. The both of them are holding their own, but then Chance hits him with a solid uppercut, and Ricardo stumbles back, and blood starts rushing down from both of his nostrils like a waterslide. Chance charges at Ricardo and wraps his arms around his lower body, slamming him down to the ground. Ricardo lets out some painful grunts, and I won’t be surprised if his back is broken from that damn slam.

He’s getting the ass whooping he fucking deserved years ago. Chance knows who he is now, and, of course, after everything I spoke to him about my sons’ sperm donor, who he now knows is Ricardo, he’s blacking out. I don’t know the full story of these two, but I don’t even care to, because the bottom line is that Chance has lied to me. And as much as I want him to beat this motherfucker bloody, having him on his dying breath by his hands, Chance will go right back to prison as a murderer. He’s beating up Ricardo ten times worse than what he did with Rahil. Chance wraps his hands around Ricardo’s neck, and he begins banging his head to the concrete, strangling him. Ricardo is still managing to have a

smile on his face even with it being covered in blood. He's becoming redder than his own blood.

I start to move down to them, but then a blaring sound of a gunshot freezes me in place.

“Hey! I advise you to get up and step away from my husband! Unless you want to get your fucking head blown off by these gentlemen!” a seductive but very demanding southern accented female voice yells. Looking away from Ricardo and Chance, I see a curvaceous redheaded woman with wild and curly hair and a rosy beige complexion, strutting over to us in a short, black, skin-tight dress and some high-inch nude heels. She's holding a mason jar in her hand that looks to be filled with ice cold water, mint leaves, and cucumbers. There's three tall and muscled-up men walking behind her in regular street clothes, with pistols in each of their hands, ready to shoot if necessary by the serious looks on their faces.

“Oh shit,” I lowly say to myself, looking at all four people coming our way.

Who in the hell is Ricardo now? What money does he have to be living like this? To have men running to his defense strapped like this? That woman is his wife, she's beautiful, and looks to be around his age... Maybe he doesn't like all of the females he fucks with to be young.

I drop down to my knees, ignoring the burning of them being scraped up. I don't even say a word to Chance. I go straight for his hands, trying to pry them away from Ricardo's neck. The more I'm trying to pull Chance's hands away, the tighter they become around Ricardo's neck. Ricardo seems to no longer have any strength left in him to smirk or even fight off Chance. Chance, at this point, is literally killing someone right in front of me. He's not thinking straight, he's just raging the fuck out.

“Oh, this nigga is real bold, he must have no fear of dying. I should keep on letting his ass choke him out, because I told him to be upfront with his godbrother, but what kind of wife would I be if I continue to let this go on? Chance! This is your last fucking warning, don't make me order one of these men to

kill yo' ass. You're actually a good guy, from all I heard," Ricardo's wife speaks again. I quickly glance up to her, and with seeing her up close, she's definitely a mixed woman. We lock eyes for a split second, then I go back focusing on Chance.

He's probably so out of it that he can't hear anyone or doesn't even care to do so. Ricardo is starting to go limp. If I don't think of something quick, both of them are going to be dead in another a minute, or maybe just Chance will be.

"Chance...please snap out of it! Think about what the fuck you're doing. This time around, you're throwing your own god damn life away. Let him go! Whatever you're thinking or feeling right now towards him because of me, just let it fucking go before you do something that you can't take back!" I yell so loudly to him that it's really to the point of screaming to the top of my lungs, but he isn't budging.

I start back pulling on Chance's hands, my nails digging deep into the skin that's on top of his hands, scratching him up. Without any hesitation, I go to slapping Chance with all my might. I'm trying the only thing left that I believe can snap him out of this killer mode. The palm of my hand is blazing hot from how hard I'm slapping him. A few seconds go by and, finally, Chance looks up to me. I glance down to his hands, and he's moving them away from Ricardo's neck. Our eyes reconnect, and I cease from slapping him any further. I softly place my hand up to the side of his face that I repeatedly slapped. It's completely red, and I might have even bruised it a little bit. Me being angry with him isn't on my mind this very second, just keeping him calm is all that I'm caring about. We can deal with the rest when we're far away from here. Chance gets off of Ricardo and moves to my side, getting on his knees as well.

"I didn't know his ties with you, Sage, him being a part of your sons. I promise you I didn't. When he was talking to you, everything rushed back to me. The first time I saw him again after so many years. Outside of Sia's and Jabari's house, he mentioned your name before I ever let it be known. I didn't think nothing of it in that moment, I just figured that Cliff was

running his mouth, just being the typical ‘proud padre,’ catching that motherfucker up on everyone important in his life. I put it on my life that Cliff didn’t mean any harm. He was just clueless with running his mouth, not knowing he was talking on someone that Ricardo already knew. I would have never brought you around the man that completely de—”

Chance suddenly gets pistol whipped by someone knocking him down. He lands on his side, but then gets back up quickly on his feet. He swiftly moves his shirt up, taking out his own pistol. He wastes no time taking the safety off and aiming it at someone. I follow the direction of the gun. Ricardo is now back on his feet, rubbing his throat with one hand and holding a pistol in the other, looking behind him. His wife is sipping from a metal straw in the jar, and one of the men is no longer carrying two pistols. She doesn’t seem to be fazed by this at all, she’s just drinking her water as if it’s a beautiful day at the beach and she’s relaxing.

I’ve never seen Chance aiming, riding around, or even carrying a gun until now, but I figured he always had one and he just decided to hide it from me. I get how necessary it is to have one, but regardless of me seeing no wrong, the law will forever only see him as a felon and not being able to legally carry a piece. We don’t know what Ricardo and the rest of these people are all about, so him being this careless is not the move. One call to the police is all it’ll take for him to be put back into a cell or worse.

“Come on now, little brother, do you really think if you pull that trigger, you’ll make it out of my gates alive? I prepared myself for a few punches, even a couple of kicks as well from you. What I didn’t expect was for you to get the best of me like that though. I have to tip my hat to you, because prison has turned you into a straight animal. I remember you most of the time being a little boy that went crying to his mother whenever Briceson would beat up on you for the fun of it or to teach you in his own way how to fight. He said all the time he was making you tough for the world... He for real helped you by throwing you right behind bars. You’re mad, and I get why you are, because you’re a dumb motherfucker that lied to *your* woman when you had weeks to let her know

what was up. I told you to keep this day a secret and you obeyed me. It's not my fault that you're a little ass bitch. You're the type of man that wishes upon a star to make shit in your life come true. You really thought a well-established man like me would give you your dream just like that. I believed you to be smarter than that, but you proved me wrong, and you also proved to Sage that trusting you was the wrong move for her to make.

“So don't get ahead of yourself and lose your life trying to show off now, with defending her from the 'bad guy' in her life. You against me will be too easy to handle. I don't need to beat yo' ass. All it will take is one shot to the head and for someone to get rid of your body. You just don't know how much pull I have here and wherever else I touch the fuck down at. Be smart on your next move with me,” Ricardo says with such a hoarse voice to Chance. Just to hear his voice is making me nauseous. I once loved every word that rolled off his tongue, but now I just want to cut his tongue out so he can't ever speak again.

It's almost like Ricardo is trying to control the situation between me and Chance. His little comment about me wrongfully trusting Chance, I bet he's counting on me to despise him. I truly hate that Chance has lied to me, and now learning that he did so for weeks, it really does hurt to know that.

Chance's finger tightens around the trigger, and I silently begin to pray on him not pulling that damn trigger. Too many guns are pointing at him. His one bullet will be no match for all the clips in the other guns that are possibly loaded, regardless of if he hits Ricardo or not.

“Don't you ever in your fucking life address me as your brother. You're trying to be funny with bringing up Briceson, but that shit won't get to me. None of the shit you said I will let get to me. I know my faults and I hate that I let you pull the wool over my eyes. Everything exchanged between us up to now has been pieced together in my mind. You just wanted me to get my woman here the easiest way possible. I felt Cliff was being too soft to let you back into his life, but I figured if he

did then I could too, but you used him, and I also fell into the trap like a dumbass nigga. Of course, you didn't have any real intentions of rekindling a relationship with your father or me, even becoming my and Sage's investor was all a fucking scheme. Do these people behind you really know what the fuck you're about, what you've done to Sage? How old she was when she carried and then pushed out the babies she conceived with you?" Chance responds back to him, and I can see the anger fully taking over him, and his finger is pushing down onto the trigger of the gun little by little. I rapidly gather myself up off the ground and just with a split of a second, I move the gun up into the air, and the bullet shoots out flying high. My heart drops as a piercing sound rings through my left ear. Looking over my shoulder, nobody has moved. Ricardo turns back to the men and his wife. He's saying something to them, but with the ringing in my ear, it's hard to make out anything he's telling them. His wife shakes her head and then turns on her heel, strutting away back to the doors of the mansion.

The three men begin heading over to me and Chance. I take the gun from out of his hand and quickly put the safety back on. I turn around, pressing my body up to him. I don't know what me shielding him from will help prevent, but I can't let them hurt him, if that's what they're thinking or being ordered to do. Maybe if we just present to them that we're not a threat, everything will deescalate.

"Ricardo! He's not threatening you in any kind of way anymore. So just stop these men, just let us leave without there being any more fucking trouble. You can't be pissed off about an ass whooping that you rightfully deserved. You're lucky it wasn't someone else in my life to give it to you instead, because I know I wouldn't have been able to stop them. You know our disturbing history and for that, you had no right of coming back here and trying to stir up some shit. I don't know every single thing that was said between you and Chance for this to come about, but with everything I heard, it just shows that you physically got older but nothing else about you has changed. Whatever the fuck it is that you're wanting, you can't have it. Not me, not my forgiveness, and especially not

stepping foot into *my* sons' lives. You disappeared and my younger self felt like that was one of the most devastating things that happened in my life, but it was a blessing. My sons might sometimes feel down about not knowing you, but they're better off with never looking up to someone that's like you. You could never teach them what it is to be a real man," I say to Ricardo, as the both of our eyes are locked on one another's. A cocky smile forms on his lips and for a split second, I catch a glimpse of my baby boy Silas more than I do Saint. He's the main one out of the two that does that cocky ass smile on the regular.

"You three fall back. It's best to not get shit too messy out here anyways. I can handle it all from here, but be on standby just in case," Ricardo says briefly to the men, and just like that, they're lowering their guns. The three of them stop heading over to me and Chance and instead turn around, making their way back to the mansion just like Ricardo's wife did not long ago.

"You're wrong about me, Sage. I'm not that man that you once knew... I have changed in ways that I want to show you, because me telling you isn't going to ever convince you that I indeed have. How you got to my mansion, I'll admit was fucked up, but you're here and we have catching up to do, seven years' worth. So, move away from Chance and come inside so we can talk about our sons. I'm even willing to let the motherfucker live to show you that I'm stepping to you with nothing but good intentions. The shit he did to me minutes back, on any other day my men would have offed his ass, or even I would have," Ricardo says to me, and he takes slow steps to us, gritting his teeth. He moves up his shirt that I'm sure is expensive, but it's now ruined from his blood. He places the pistol down in the waist of his pants and before dropping his shirt back down, I catch the sight of a huge bruise on the left side of his stomach. Even after all this time, it's clear he still works out. He has abs for days and is real cut up. He looks like one of those rich ass men that be posing in bougie ass magazines, flaunting around high-priced things or wearing clothing that only poor or even middle-class people could only dream of having. His style is so different compared

to how I remember him dressing, him even talking about killing Chance is new, because this man back then was acting like such a peace maker, wanting to change the world and more. He told me the reason he worked at the boys and girls club was to help children know and realize that there was more to the horrible environments they were growing up in. Everything about him was a lie. It's hard for me to believe that I ever knew him, because of what I had went through with him.

I grab my clutch purse from off the ground and open it up, placing the gun down in it. I move back, pressing my body back up against Chance, and he wraps his arm around my waist. I have to keep a tight grip on my clutch, knowing Chance killing Ricardo is still running through his mind.

Ricardo's eyes direct right to Chance's arm around my waist, and my eyes aren't playing tricks on me; he looks pissed to be seeing it. Our eyes connect and he immediately wipes away the expression, giving me a half smile as he comes to a stop in front of me.

“The fuck makes today any different? You acting like you so about it, but a nigga still breathing. You got some sorry ass men if you ask me, and don't think for a second this shit is over between us. If you so much as even think about coming near Sage, I promise you there will be no her or anyone else that's going stop me from taking your fucking life. You're a sick and twisted ass motherfucker. You not only took Sage's virginity when she was fifteen, but you also got her fucking pregnant. The way you used her pain and trauma to create yourself as someone she could cry to and be vulnerable with is sickening. There's so much that she cried to me about when it came to the man that honestly broke her more than her own father, and all along, that man was you. At least with her father, he showed her up front how much he didn't love her, as fucked up as it sounds, but with you, you instead made her believe your lies. A grown fucking man in love with a little ass broken girl.

“I love her sons, I care for them as if they're my own, and no matter what happens between me and Sage, those little

boys I'll forever protect. I'll do whatever is needed for them to never know your nasty, perverted ass. Those little boys have too much light in them to be exposed to knowing that they come from such a dark ass place. If their mother would one day want to tell them when they're older, then that'll be her choice, but either way, they'll have her to look up to and know that it won't ever define who they can become in life. I know where Sage stands when it comes to you, and the only way you'll ever get a chance to get close to her or her sons is if you kill me, but best believe I'll take my last damn breath making sure you come right with me. I already showed you how easy it can be for me to take you out with my bare fucking hands, so I want you to try and pull another stunt to get to her," Chance says as he takes his arm from my waist and walks in front of me. He lightly pushes me back and gets in between me and Ricardo.

"I told my men prior to this, to not uphold what they usually do. Protecting me is always at the top of their list. I'm the man that keeps their stomachs full along with their families and keeping a roof over their heads and everything else they need and want. They would kill for me even if someone stepped on my shoes and I took it as disrespect. I'm a very powerful man, so, trust me when I tell you, Chance, that you wouldn't even be talking to me right now, if I didn't do so. Your threats don't mean a damn thing to me. It's laughable, to be frank, because you really don't know who you're fucking with, but if you would want me to show you in fact who you're fucking with... I won't have a problem doing that for you, comprende? It's not only Sage that's saving your life, but I want to keep Cliff's golden son alive, since you're the only one he has left. It'll be a shame for him to bury another son, but motherfucker, if you keep on tempting me, you're going to get what you want," Ricardo says vehemently to Chance, and I can't have this start back up with them fighting or killing each other. Something deep down is telling me that Ricardo isn't to be fucked with, and Chance might not be afraid of dying, but I can't have him losing his life over me.

"Chance, just go to your car. You've done enough. Go and cool the fuck off and leave me to handle this," I say as I step

from behind him and stand beside him. I can feel his eyes on me, but I don't look his way. Ricardo smiles, and my stomach twists into a knot. I don't want to be left alone with him, but Chance is such a damn hothead, and, of course, nothing will be civil between them.

“I'm not about to leave you alone with him, Sage, is you fucking crazy? If I'm heading to my car, you're going to be by my side like you are now, walking right to it as well with me.”

I turn my head to Chance and look up to him. He and I have never been put into such a fucked-up situation to see how reckless our mouths can get with each other, but now he's about to unfortunately know how reckless mine can get.

“The real question is, are you fucking crazy? To believe that you even have the right to puff up your chest at me, telling me what I'm going to do like I'm a got damn child. Chance, we're here because of you, you're the root of all of this, so like I said before, go to the fucking car and chill. I'm going to handle what the fuck you dragged me into, it's simple as that. I don't need you to be my knight in shining armor. Even if you were, it's obvious you couldn't even rescue me from the fucking dragon, because here we are.”

Ricardo starts to laugh, and my blood is boiling over like a pot full of water on a stove, so I can only imagine how Chance is feeling with hearing him laugh. I'm not trying to embarrass Chance or anything like that, but he is the reason why we're here, so he's the last person to try and direct me.

Chance nods his head in such a defeated manner. “If he tries anything, you know what to do,” he says to me and then discreetly glances at my clutch purse. His gun is inside, but he's still not thinking with a clear head. He's not caring for anything Ricardo has said to him. True or not, I will not be taking the risk of figuring out which is it.

Chance walks off from Ricardo and me, and I turn to look at him as he's walking away. He turns his head back, glancing at me over his shoulder, but then turns back around, not looking back anymore.

Ricardo continues on laughing, and it's just infuriating the fuck out of me. "Will you just shut the fuck up!" I snap at him as my eyes stay fixed on Chance. He keeps on laughing but then stops, letting out a couple of chuckles before going completely silent. Chance makes it to his car, but he doesn't get in. Instead, he leans on the car, looking from afar at me and Ricardo.

"Seems to me that you're the one wearing the pants in the relationship. If you were my woman, I wouldn't ever leave you in the sight of another man, especially a fine and smooth ass man like me. I also see you still have those pretty ass lips but a dirty ass mouth now. I remember the Sage that never once so much as breathed a cussing word."

I turn around to Ricardo, and he's pulling up his shirt, wiping the somewhat dried blood off his face. "You look stunning, by the way. You definitely filled out over the years. Chance should be thanking me instead of being so damn mad. He did bag the girl that I taught very well. I bet you got him wrapped around your finger from all the tricks that I taught you in bed. He's so ready to die over that pussy of yours," he continues talking to me. I softly chuckle, not out of amusement or anything being funny, it's all because of my defense mechanism. My brain is slowly processing what's currently going on like molasses. Ricardo is a sick ass man, and with him saying what he did, the years that've passed by, he doesn't seem to regret a single thing between us. I so badly want to regret everything we were, knowing how wrong it was, but it's almost impossible for me to ever do.

I love my sons more than my own life. They're everything to me, and I can't ever think of them as something in my life that broke me. When I gave birth to them, I brought such pure and beautiful souls into this world. They gave me hope and a reason to keep on living, so giving up on life wasn't ever an option even if I wanted it to be. I want to hate Ricardo until the end of times, but if I hate him, I'll forever be hating my sons, because the truth of the matter is that they're a part of him. I can't hate him and love them completely, to me that will never work, but I can always hate what Ricardo has done to me, even though I know I should let all that hate go. I'm not at all

healed from our past together, and with him popping back up, I feel it's going to destroy any progress that I have made since he left.

I stare at Ricardo, and he takes two steps to me, closing the little space between us. His looks could lure in any woman that he wants, so my younger self always wondered why he wanted me. With seeing his wife, not much has changed with him pulling gorgeous women, but just like the devil or a demon, they tend to shapeshift into whatever one dreams of having as a lover or more. Everything that looks good ain't good for you at all, and Ricardo is one of the most evil ass persons that I have ever come by in my life.

He brushes his fingers down my right cheek, and his touch is taking me back to the old days of us sneaking around. I yearned for his touch so many times when I was younger that it used to drive me insane on wanting it on the regular, but not anymore, and I never should have craved anything from him in the first place. He boldly cups my face in his hands, and I immediately grab up both of them, shoving them away from my face.

“Don't you dare touch me again. I don't ever want your filthy ass hands touching anything that's a part of me,” I say to him as I try to hide the shakiness in my voice. I'm holding back the tears that are fighting to form in my eyes.

“Come on, Sage, don't be like that. You once loved how my hands roamed all over your body, the love and appreciation that I showed you every chance we were alone. Don't act like you haven't thought about me or even missed me the whole time I was gone. Chance and even that corny ass boy, Rahil, can never compare to how I can make you feel in and out the bed.”

Shockingly, I look at him, and he hits me with a dazzling smile. I back away from him, tripping a little on one of my heels. This officially has become too much for me to take mentally.

He knows about Rahil, but I never once mentioned him to Ricardo. He didn't know any friends I had aside from the

obvious of somewhat knowing Sia and my cousins. Those are the only three people I ever hung with that he knew of.

“You’ve been keeping tabs on me?”

He nods his head and takes out a wallet. He opens it up and moves over to me. He places the wallet in front of my face, and I look at it. There’s a picture of Saint, Silas, and me in a clear holder. It looks to be us at a park, we’re sitting on a blanket, possibly having a picnic. They couldn’t have been any older than two. I’m holding them both in my arms, smiling down at them. As I keep on looking at the picture, the memory of that day clicks to me just a little bit. I was with Sia, her two daughters, Mickey and Layla, and also Tamila and her two kids she had at the time, which were Jeremias and Camille, but none of them are in the picture. They probably were doing other things during that time at the park. We didn’t take any pictures or anything like that from what I recall, so Ricardo must have had people snapping photos of me and my babies without my knowledge.

“There’s a lot that you don’t know about me, Sage, even when we first met. I was getting into a lot of illegal shit, making some risky ass moves in my life. The higher I climbed up, the more I needed to keep my cover safe. You were going to blow all of that for me. So, I had to make a choice, and that choice was to leave you behind even though you were pregnant and needed me the most. I changed my name and I kept on rising up, raking in millions, but I never for a second forgot about you. So, when money was no longer a problem for me, I hired people to keep tabs on you, and to my surprise, you kept the baby, or babies as I learned with seeing that picture and many more from that day and on. I figured you would have got an abortion, but you didn’t, and seeing you after two years and holding our sons, it’s like I fell in love with you all over again, and I wanted you and them to be with me, but it wasn’t that easy to make happen. Then about three more years passed, and I could have come back then, but I forced myself to believe you were better off without me, so I moved on and gave my now wife, Brynlee, the chance she’d been wanting for years with me. I felt happy, I guess, but something was still missing, and then last year in December, I got word

that you were messing around with some guy, had him looked up and all of that shit. It had me madder than I've ever been in life, because you were mine and you let some other man get close enough to touch you, to slip his dick inside of you, and then when that ended, you went right to my godbrother, Chance, and I couldn't have that.

“So, I knew it was time to make my way back into your life and gather up my sons so we can finally be the family that we always talked about and wanted. Silas and Saint came earlier than we had planned, but everything is all good now. Nobody will be looking at us funny or anyone wanting to lock my ass up. You are grown now, and we both can do whatever the fuck we want. I have the life only those can dream of having, and, Brynlee, that bitch doesn't deserve all that she has right now. You're my queen, you always have been, so, it's only right that you finally take the crown that's rightfully yours. Let's go into the mansion and sit down and talk. Brynlee should be leaving in a minute to fly out somewhere. You can even stay here with me for the next couple of days. We'll have it all to ourselves aside from my men, but they won't bother us. Then I could send someone for the boys, as long as you give your friend, Sia, a heads up, since she's in a gated place.”

I'm deeply disturbed by this man. He's insane. I can't believe I ever opened up to somebody like him, even went as far as claiming him as my first love. I wish someone would pop out right now and let me know how much of a sick joke this is and I'm just being pranked or something, because I can't wrap my head around anything that's come out of his mouth. There've been people watching me and my sons, snapping pictures and reporting back to him on every move I make in life. The chilling thing is I never once felt like I was being watched. Those people he's paid or still is paying, they're good at what the fuck they do.

Ricardo comes back closer to me and he reaches for my hand, but I pull it away. He doesn't take the hint at all and still goes for my hand. He intertwines his fingers with mine. He starts leaning towards me, and I believe he's really going in for a kiss. I hastily snatch my hand out of his and piss slap the shit

out of him. I go into my purse and pull out Chance's gun, taking the safety off. I waste no time aiming the gun at him.

“You're out of your mind if you think I would ever step in a place that's yours and sit down to have any sort of conversation with you, especially one where you believe I'll just fall back into your arms and we magically become this happy fucking couple that are so in love. That fifteen-year-old girl that I once was, she could be fooled easily into doing what you wanted her to, but the twenty-two-year-old that I am now would never bow down to you, giving you all the power that you already took from me once. Let this be the last and final time that you ever see me in person, and you might as well just call off the people that you got watching me day in and day out, you crazy ass motherfucker. Because I'm not going to stop living my life for you. What I do and who I fuck is none of your god damn business, and everyone around me that I care and love for, you better keep your distance. I don't want you, Ricardo. I haven't missed you in forever, and I without a doubt have no fucking love for you. Go back to wherever the fuck you've been, because you and I will never happen. I'll die before I ever claim to be your woman. Me being young doesn't even fucking count. I was a little damn girl, and the fact that you said all that about me at an age where I wasn't even legal yet, shows how far gone you are in the head, and there's no way anybody or even God can help your vile ass.”

He wraps his hand around the barrel of the gun, and he places it right over his heart. “You're angry at me, so I'll let you slide with that slick ass tongue of yours. One thing about me, Sage, I tend to get what I want, and what I want is you, but for you, I'll give you a little bit of time to let all of this sink in. After that, I guarantee by the time we meet again, you'll be on your best behavior and know that you're forever my lady. So, remember everything that you do, I'll know, but I won't get anybody to handle you. I'll personally do that myself. I'm warning you, Sage, it's best to not try me. Now, go ahead and get the fuck on. I'm tired of Chance huffing up and down, and you better dead whatever the fuck you got going on with him and keep him the fuck away from my sons.” He lets go of the gun and walks away from me. I glance up at some of

the windows in the mansion, and two of the men that were out here earlier are posted up at the window. Putting the safety back on the gun, I place it back down into my clutch purse and start heading back to Chance's car. I begin breathing in and out, stopping myself from having a panic attack.

Getting to the car, I try to put on a blank face as if nothing is wrong with me, but tears escape from my eyes. I quickly swipe them away, but Chance stands up straight off the car and he studies me a little before opening the car door. I get into the car and he shuts the door and then walks around the front of the car, getting in as well. He cranks the car up and he starts flying away from the mansion, driving back on the road path leading to the front gates.

Chance grabs up my hand and he kisses the top of my hand. Usually, I'd be melting from any of his kisses like it's the first time all over again, but my heart is weighing heavy in my chest, and it feels so hard to breath, and none of his kisses are going to make anything better. Tears keep flowing down my face and it's ruining my makeup. I lay my clutch in my lap and I begin wiping away the tears, but it's pointless because the more I wipe, the worse my crying is getting. Through my blurry vision, I see the front gates and they open up. He speeds right through, not waiting for it to open up all the way. He's going even faster now, getting us far away from here.

The traffic light up ahead turns yellow and then switches right to red, but Chance keeps the speed up, zooming on by, running the red light.

"I'm going to make this all right, baby. I promise you that I will, just calm down. I'm going to get that motherfucker," he says determinedly to me, breaking the silence between us. There's no old R&B music or any music blasting in his car, but I wish there was right now. Silently in my head, I coach myself to control my breathing so it can help stop me from crying.

Just keep on breathing, in...and out, you got this. Hurt and pain is all you've ever known, so don't let some man from years ago have you hyperventilating and weeping like this. You're stronger than this, been through far worse. You weren't

even supposed to make it into this world from how much your father beat on your mother, you fought to come into this world, and held on to life even now, so, this should be nothing to you.

When I lived back in Mississippi with my father, it was a constant thing to do this, because if not, more beatings were to come if I didn't stop crying. He eventually got me to the point that I hated even when a tear fell from my eyes whether it was from being sad or happy. I have to treat this moment as if he's still alive and he's threatening an already traumatized me with beating my ass more or worse. Crying isn't going to help me with anything that's to come. Ricardo was real confident in all he said, which lets me know there's truth to his words, but I can't have him, or any other men, put fear in me, but I'll be lying to myself if I claim that I'm not at all shook. Steadily, I keep on breathing and talking to myself. Less tears are falling from my eyes until there's no more at all. It almost feels like a switch is being turned off inside of me, and I can feel my heart just going cold, and my indestructible walls, as Chance described them before, are rising back up to protect me once again. I never should have let them down in the first place, especially not for a man. A huge dumbass is what I am, to think that I could actually have happiness and to be with someone and know love without pain.

“We're done, Chance, your lies are what led us here. There's nothing in this world that you can ever do to make up for what happened. You made such an impossible promise to me when we officially got together, but yet I believed that you would be the man to show me that it is possible for a man to not break my heart. Yet, I was proven wrong. You're not who I was made for, I don't think God has anyone in this world that he made me for, maybe I was just made for myself and myself only. I listened to my gullible ass heart and people who just believed we were so good together; it clouded my judgement on giving my heart again. I'll understand with us no longer talking after this, even with us both having best friends that are married to each other or the plans with the salon and barbershop, that's now dead. Then with Saint and Silas, they'll be upset for some time, but I'll handle it all with them.”

He caresses the top of my hand with his thumb, and it throws me off. I'm expecting him to cuss me out or get real mad, but he's just so very undisturbed. I just broke up with him and he's giving me no reaction whatsoever.

Were we ever in love at all? I get it's fucked up for wanting a reaction with breaking up with someone, but to not have anything, just touching and holding my hand. Maybe my fucking heart isn't completely cold yet, because it's aching somewhat.

"You don't have anything to say?" I ask him, and he's just leaning back in his seat and driving. He glances outside of the passenger window and pulls the car over to the curb of the road. I look at the time displayed on the radio and it's 7:15 p.m. We figured we wouldn't be back until maybe nine o'clock the way Chance described the fake ass dinner, that has my world now upside down.

"You heard what I told that bitch ass boy back there. No matter what we are, Sage, me being there for Silas, Saint, or even you won't ever change. So, if breaking up with me is what you want to do, then that's what it is. I can't change a choice that's out of my control. I fucked up in a major ass way, so I can't sit here and get mad or anything like that with you, when you're right on the fact that I put you in a place with an enemy. As your man, I was supposed to protect you and I failed on doing that. And the way he was talking back there, something is telling me that he ain't going to let up until he gets you and the boys, but more so, I believe it's really only you that he wants. Us together or not, I'm going to get him, because I refuse to ever let him get that close to you again."

I take my hand out of his and shake my head. I'm not liking the way he's talking. He's hinting at something that I'm afraid for him to do. "Ricardo is my problem and my problem only. You're no longer my man; therefore, you don't have to kill him and ruin yourself for life. I'm not even talking on the fact that you can go back to prison, either. You really think you can kill someone and go on in life never thinking of it? Your brother was that type of nigga to kill and push drugs, you weren't, and you never wanted to be on that path in life, but

now you're just willing to become a killer? If anything, I can finally tell my uncle about Ricardo and ask him for some sort of help. Chance, I'm not about to have you get blood on your hands for me or my sons. Plus, I believe him when he said he's someone that's powerful. He basically told me that he's been doing illegal ass shit way back before he even came into my life. That fucking mansion looked like it was worth millions. He wanted me to stay with him, he was so confident and bold to even ask that shit to me, I don't think he's giving empty threats. Before I walked back to the car, I saw two of those men standing in front of the windows. He for real might be someone to not fuck with. If you kill him and he is indeed what he said all along, what if his people retaliate, then what?"

"Sammy and even Jabari will forever be connected to the streets, and I know people as well. Just because I didn't follow on that path don't mean I don't fuck with people heavy that's still on that same shit. I stayed out the way, but I have people that will go to war for me the same as I would for them. So go ahead and tell Sammy. Matter of fact, call him up right now and let him know I'll be on my way after dropping you off to Sia's. I know where Ricardo is laying his head, so I'm not about to let him get away. And when me and you tell everyone about who the father of your twins has always been and how he's trying to make his way back into your life now, you really fucking think everyone won't be behind me on this shit, Sage? I ain't afraid of nobody or anything in life. I done faced death multiple times surviving in prison and even dodged bullets that were never meant for me on the streets growing up and just trying to ball. Ricardo is going to get what's coming to him. Cliff will be alright once he knows the truth."

"You know what, fuck it. I'm not about to go back and forth with you on this. Your mind is set and all I got to say, is that you better know what the fuck you're, doing because every choice has a consequence. So, when that consequence is revealed after the actions you're so determined to do, don't for a second be shocked as if it wasn't coming."

Chance turns the steering wheel to the left a little and looks over his shoulder, driving back on to the road. He does a quick

glance over at me and then focuses back on the road ahead. Traffic out here isn't too heavy.

“Whatever consequence comes my way, I ain't going to be no scary ass nigga. You might have called it quits with me, but I still got nothing but love for you, Sage. I'm not about to let Ricardo come back and destroy the woman I love, whether you want my saving or not. I'm going to get rid of him, and I put that on everything.” He reaches his hand to the radio and turns it on, indicating that this is the end of us talking for the rest of the ride.

J. Cole's “Middle Child” is blaring through the speakers, and Chance bobs his head, rapping along, as if nothing has fazed him at all.

The real ones been dyin', the fake ones is lit. The game is off balance, I'm back on my shit.

I take out my phone, seeing preview text messages from clients, Mandisa, and my mother, but messages from Sia catch my attention the most. I open up our text thread and see pictures and a video of Saint, Silas, and also Sia's son, Jai, that's only two years old. He's the cutest ever with his hair braided back, and he is without a doubt his daddy's son. I tap my finger to the phone screen, making the video bigger, and it goes to playing. The three of them are in front of the house's garage with a basketball hoop. Saint is dribbling the basketball and then passes it over to Silas. Silas stops dribbling and runs over to Jai, who's laughing and jumping up excitedly. Silas places the ball in Jai's hand.

Saint runs over to Jai and Silas, and they're saying something to one another, but with the music blasting I can't hear anything in this video. They both pick up Jai with the ball still in his hand and run over to the basketball hoop that's leveled good enough for their heights, and they help him with dropping the basketball into the rim. The both of them place Jai back on his feet and raise their hands up to him. He gives both of them high fives and a hug, then runs over to where the ball is, picking it up himself. Jabari comes into view, jogging over to them, and the video ends. I press on the done button that's at the top left corner of my phone screen, and it brings

me back to the thread. I scroll to the text Sia sent with the video and pictures.

Sia:

These little boys of yours are one day going to be some good ass older brothers, I swear! I'm still upset about those negative ass pregnancy tests, but you and Chance are locked in for forever, so my time will eventually come of being a godmother to y'all's children as well.

Sent 6:15 p.m.

I smile widely as I scroll up, looking at the photos again. Leave it to my sons to put a smile on my face no matter what's going on, but then my smile drops coming back to the situation at hand. There really isn't anything I can do. Chance is going to do whatever the fuck he wants even with me telling him not to. Knowing how Jabari got down in the streets from Sia, he was ruthless as fuck. Like, she really made a thug with a hardened heart fall madly in love with her, and my uncle Sammy is a damn street legend, so whatever Chance feels they can help him accomplish when it comes to Ricardo, I put money on it that they'll get it done. Me of all people wouldn't care one bit if Ricardo got bodied. It would save me a whole lot of trouble with him personally fucking with me, but what I do care about is what can follow after his death. He told me that I never really knew him at all, and I don't want to find out the hard fucking way of what or who he's been involved with.

I kept up the lies for years, that my kids' father was some senior guy back in high school that graduated and went off to college, never caring to be a dad. Sia, Mandisa, and even Tamila—back then when we were good—stayed being inquisitive on wanting to know who I was sneaking around with. I can only imagine how everyone is going to react to the news of Ricardo. They could possibly look at me different after the truth is spilled, but the one I'm afraid to really tell is Sia. I feel she might be hurt the most that I didn't at least come to her about it, because she had a past traumatic situation somewhat similar to mine, but hers lasted for years. No matter how it'll go with me telling everyone, at least for the first time in forever, I'll be free of any lies.

CHANCE COOLEY

Turning onto the street that leads to the gates of the housing area Jabari and Sia live in, I go ahead and turn my music off. From the time that I had lived here, I learned that this community of folks, at times, don't fuck with no loud ass noises, and it's a mixture of different races of people and families. I ain't got time to be having eyes on me, because for the rest of the night, I have to move in straight silence, no unnecessary attention brought to me. I ended up doing a little bit more work to my car, and I now have tinted windows, so that might do me some good staying somewhat out of sight.

I turn my head over to Sage, and she's leaning back in the seat, staring out the car window with her arms crossed over her chest, and her makeup is ruined from all the crying she has done. She appears to be in deep thought, that worry line on her forehead is far from invisible. She dressed up so beautifully tonight. That orange dress complements her miraculous, dark, smooth skin. Anything that a black woman rocks is going to be nothing but phenomenal, and with Sage, she's beautiful in anything that she wears. I haven't just ruined the rest of her night; I believe I have ruined her from ever trusting anyone again the way that she did with me. If I could beat my own fucking self up, I would, right now, pull my car over and beat the fuck out of myself the same way I did Ricardo's ass.

I'm feeling so less of a man because I let someone like him fool me the way he did. I did exactly what he wanted me to. He stood in my face weeks back and straight up lied to me. He

was spitting that shit to me while looking me dead in my eyes, and the whole entire time he was fucking with me, and I'm sure he enjoyed every moment while doing it. That night after Sage revealed to me what happened to her with Ricardo, and opening up more with the weeks that passed on that part of her past, she never gave me his name or anything. She just stated it was some older dude that worked at the boys and girls club she had went to. That wasn't enough information to go off of, trying to figure out who she was talking about. So many men be in organizational buildings like that working with children and teenagers, so even trying to narrow it down within Charlotte would have been pointless.

Seeing Ricardo weeks back was the first time I'd seen him again in years. Last time I saw him, I was ten years old, and he was supposedly going off to college. That was around the same time he had cut all ties with Cliff and the rest of his family. His mother and brother died later, and then out of the blue, he sent about three letters to me five years into my sentence and sent one to Cliff and they weren't really full of information on him aside from the fact that he got married or some shit. The other two letters that came after the first one he sent me were just words to keep my head up while in prison. I'm glad I threw out all my letters before I stepped foot back into the real world. I didn't feel the need to hold on to anything else but my notebooks, because that was my future, and the old letters were just going to be physical representation of my past.

Everything that came out of Ricardo's mouth, I'm not about to believe. Seeing that woman and those three men, it doesn't justify anything, and if it does, then I don't give a fuck about none of that shit. It ain't going to stop me in no way. The only thing that's facts with him is that he's a motherfucking snake and a sex offender that didn't get caught. He's not only proved to me that he's someone to not be trusted, but he's also a person who shouldn't be allowed to walk this earth any longer.

How he was sending shots at me and doing all that threatening, and claimed he was this and that. It was nothing but clown shit to me. I ain't the type of nigga to brag or feel

this is anything one should be proud to admit, but I grew up and hung around with dudes that were my age or older that were killers, drug dealers, niggas that avoided eating, sleeping, and partying to be in the streets around the clock. When you really about something, you don't go out your way to prove anything to no fucking body by running your mouth. Every real nigga or man knows that your actions speak for you. Then he and his men had guns pulled out on me and not one bullet was fired towards me. That let me know right then and there, he wasn't what he so desperately tried to preach. I pulled the fucking trigger without having no fear in me. If he was for real about it, he would have done the same. All he did was sneak me with the gun he had. If it wasn't for Sage, that bullet would have hit Ricardo, because my aim wasn't going to be off.

Sage wants me to let it go and let her handle him because she's possibly scared of the unknown, and from my time being with her, everyone including her knows I would do anything she asked of me, but not taking out Ricardo is just going to have to be an exception. Her breaking up with me is hurting a nigga real bad. I can't even lie if I wanted to on that, but I lied to her. My mother always told me that if you truly love a woman, then there would never be any reasons to ever be untruthful to her. I thought maybe if the lie was something for the good and better of her, then what's the harm in that, but lying without a doubt is harmful, and I regret that I did lie to Sage, but I can't change or take it back now. I have to face the problems that I caused between us. Whatever we'll be from here on out, I have to accept it. Will she ever forgive me? I wish I could have the answer to that, but she's a woman that doesn't trust easily, and no matter which way this problem between us is looked at, it'll still come down to the fact that I lied to her for weeks.

Turning away from her, I keep on driving until I make it up to the gates. I punch in the new code to access it. As the gates slowly start to open, I can't help but think that it's a good thing Jabari and Sia's unique gate code changes every six months. When Cliff came to Jabari's house that day with Ricardo, it's possible he looked what he had punched in. The only reason Cliff even knew the old code is because he sometimes would

give me a ride home from work when I was all the way exhausted to the point walking back to the house would have had me falling out, and then other times he just came to hang out and talk with me and Jabari.

I cruise through the gates heading towards the house. I look down at my hands and they're covered in dried blood. I take a glance to my white button-up shirt, and there's blood also on it. I haven't even had the chance to think about the way I'm looking. If I head into the house, I might scare Saint and Silas and the rest of the kids in there. Pulling up into the driveway, I park my car right beside Jabari's new black 2019 Lincoln Navigator. I cut the car off, keeping the key in the ignition. I move my seat back and take the seat belt off. I start unbuckling my shirt, and then hear the clicking sound of Sage taking off her seat belt, but the sound of the door opening doesn't follow. Pulling the shirt off my arms, I throw it in the back seat, and I inspect the white wife beater I have on, and there's blood on it as well, but not as bad as the button up one, it's just more so drops of it. I take it off and throw it right in the backseat as well.

“This is nothing but déjà vu with you, blood on your hands and all. I was so motherfucking angry that you lied to me, telling myself that if it weren't for you, none of what happened tonight would have occurred; but the whole way back here, after you pulled over, I realize that I shouldn't be directing any anger towards you. It's nobody else's fault but mine. My fucked-up choices in life got you beating up people and wanting to kill them for me, when honestly, I deserved every fucking bad thing that came my way in life. If I just would have chosen to do things different with Ricardo, Rahil, or even my got damn father, none of the shit that happened to me would have happened,” Sage says, breaking the silence between us. I turn in my seat, and I'm met with seeing tears sliding down her face. I move my hand over to her face, but then quickly pull it back. I want to wipe her tears away, but with the blood on my hands, it's not a good idea to do. She moves her hand up to her face instead, wiping away the tears herself.

“Sage, look at me.” She moves her head back up with tears in her eyes. “I hope you’re not serious about what just came out your mouth. There’s no way in hell that you dead ass believe that idiotic shit. You didn’t deserve any of the shit that you endured in life. Ricardo preyed on you, and you were a teenager that fell into the wrong damn arms, believing that it was real love and genuine comfort, when the reality of it all was just your mind had got twisted from a grown man. Moving to that nigga, Rahil, he deserved that ass whooping, and I ain’t even know you back then, and I still knew what the fuck he was doing was wrong, but when you gave me your little history with him, he wanted more than what you were giving. A real man don’t go around slapping and beating up a female when he don’t get his fucking way with her, or she does something that he ain’t rocking with. If a woman wasn’t talking to me or whatever the case might be, I would just leave her alone because to me, the ball would be in her court to make the next move of doing whatever.

“Lastly, the man that helped create you, I can’t even get with the fact that you named him and believe there was something that you could have done differently with him. All that you have shared to me about that man, I feel he was only keeping you and also your mother alive, just to have targets that he could take his aggression and hate out on for what he decided to do before you were even thought of. You told me that your mother had met him at a bar, when he was visiting here with some of his friends. They clicked and eventually your mother got pregnant with you and then she discovered that he was married, by one night picking up his phone and it was his wife calling. His wife ended up divorcing him and she moved on to another man with your half-sister, Shanice. Yet, regardless of their divorce, he stayed faithfully in Shanice’s life, but mostly keeping you two separate when you were born. He had your mother wrapped around his finger, and he couldn’t get with Shanice’s mother anymore, so, he settled for having your mother, and that’s how she ended up in Mississippi with him.

“I fuck with your mother, but she was blindly in love with him even after finding out she was the other woman, and then

when you were born, you mentioned to me plenty of times that's where the nightmare with him began. I can't ever be a hundred percent sure on what a dead man's thoughts were during the times he did what he did to you and your mother, but with what you told me, I believe he hated y'all because y'all two weren't Shanice or her mother. Y'all were just two people that reminded him on the daily of a selfish act that he committed, and it ruined his marriage and life. Then fifteen years go by, and your mother had enough and y'all got away from him, but he didn't at all try to find y'all or anything, because eventually, he and his ex-wife got back together and ended up married once again. He probably figured there was no reason for him to come looking for either of you because he got back what he always wanted, so therefore, Sage, I don't feel there was anything you could have done different for the man that was supposed to be your father. You might not have ever gotten any love from him because he didn't have any love to give to something that he hated. You weren't Shanice, and maybe to him that was his only daughter he was going to claim and give all his love to."

A tear trickles down her cheek and she doesn't wipe it away, she just lets it keep on going down her face till it reaches down to her neck. "You stay wanting to uplift me and shit, but I'm just a walking disaster. Nothing I do will ever change that. I don't even know why people love me or want to even be around me, because it's forever some shit with me." She grips the side of her purse, and her bottom lip drops a little. I would kiss her right now, but with the terms we're on it's kind of hard to feel I'm in a position to do so anymore.

"You and I both know that you're not a walking disaster. A lot of shit happens to the best of us. There's nothing but love for you out here from your family, close friends, and so many people here in Charlotte, especially the niggas you keep fresh, and the women that be out here saying you slayed their hair. You shine so much light into this world, but with the darkness of your mind, you ain't going to be able to process that you actually do. Where the fuck did the Sage that I fell in love with go?"

She chuckles sarcastically and shakes her head as she opens up her purse, taking my gun out. “Here, Chance, because I’m sure you’re still set on taking out Ricardo, and you’re going to be needing this or even more to deal with him and whoever the fuck else. Do you even have a fucking plan? Or are you just filled with so much anger that you don’t even care about that?” she asks me questions of her own to avoid answering mine. I take my gun from out of her hand and lower my other hand down to the handgun safe that I installed under the seat the moment I got this car. It’s well hidden and I rarely keep it locked, for obvious reasons of having to get to it quick if needed. I pull out the safe tray and lay the gun down inside then slide it back shut.

“My anger only fuels me more to get him, that’s it. Ain’t nothing blinding me on making sure I find a way into them gates and do what else is needed.”

Sage looks to be disappointed, but I can’t tell her anything different. I’m going to stand on what the fuck I plan to do.

She turns from me and opens up the car door but doesn’t get out. “Chance, please don’t end up getting yourself killed by doing something stupid. You don’t know what Ricardo’s about. What you’re doing could put everyone that you love’s lives in jeopardy,” she says to me with her voice slightly cracking as her back is still turned to me. She’s still trying to convince me on something that ain’t going to happen. The way she’s still pushing me to stop is letting me know that Ricardo has put major terror in her. This seriously ain’t the Sage that I’ve come to know, and the fact that it only took one encounter with Ricardo to get her this way, is the reason why I’m so heavily set on killing him.

“Sage, just go into the house, aight,” I say, keeping it short with her. Too much time has already been wasted, and now I’m ready to get this shit started. It’s already 8:11 p.m. I have to have a plan and people to ride out with me back to that damn mansion. The best time to do so is in the wee hours of the morning.

Sage steps out of the car and shuts the car door, and heads to the front door of the house. She rings the doorbell and waits

for someone to open the door. Within a few seconds, the door is being opened and out comes Jabari. Just the person I'm needing to see at this very moment.

He's exchanging some words with Sage, and his eyes dart right over to my car but then look back to her. He puts a blunt up to his lips and takes a brisk pull from it as Sage walks by him going into the house. He's peeking his head inside and I have no idea what's going on up in there. After about fifteen minutes of Jabari standing in front of his door, he begins striding over to me and takes a look back over his shoulder. He makes it to my car and opens up the passenger door, hopping inside and shutting it. His eyes leisurely examine me, and he tilts his head a little as he looks right at my hands. "Yo, my nigga, help me piece some shit together. Sage's make up is ruined like a motherfucker, all that black ass shit running from her eyes, and I caught a glimpse of some blood on the bottom of her dress in the front when she walked through the door. She told me to ask yo' ass what the fuck happened... So, what the fuck happened?" Jabari asks me as he gets comfortable in the seat, taking some more pulls from the blunt. He holds it in for a minute and then exhales the smoke. I keep quiet not saying anything to him. "Come on now, nigga, you going to tell me or what? Because I see why you weren't all behind Sage. You have blood on you, and it's good that you both ain't walk up in my house together. All the kids were in the living room, aside for Jai, he knocked out sleep. Once Sage stepped up in the house, she burst out crying. Saint and Silas ran to her scared and confused. Sia calmed them down the best she could and made all the kids go upstairs into the rooms for the night, and then she disturbingly asked Sage what happened. I couldn't make out a single word of what she said with all that damn crying she was doing," he continues and ashes the blunt in the car ashtray.

In the heat of the moment, I had told Sage that me and her both were going to tell everyone about Ricardo being her kids' father, but with me being more levelheaded now, I can't repeat this information back to nobody because it's not my business to tell. That's something for her to come out her own mouth and say, so that was wrong as fuck for me to tell her that I

would. Going to Sammy at first was the go-to since the nigga is a living street legend, but I can't ask him to help when that means telling him the reason of why he would want to help with no hesitation, because one thing about him, he don't play when it comes to Sage or Mandisa. When everything is all said and done with Sage, I can be there for her if she needs or wants a shoulder to lean on.

“I have to take a motherfucker out tonight, and I'm not being on no funny shit with you. I'm being dead ass serious on what the fuck I'm saying, Jabari. I'm about to roll through my cousin Taz's hood and see if he hanging around at his crib. Nigga be so heavy in the streets that I barely seen him since I been out. I have to at least see if he is there, though, but if he ain't, I'm going to need you to come through for me and hit up some of your old niggas. See if they down to ride with me. You forever got respect out here, street soldiers still be willing to do shit for you. If not, all I need is some guns and I'll do it all my damn self, because I can't let his ass get away. I know you have your wife and kids, so I'll never ask for you to be out there with me, and besides, I ain't got time for Sia ass to kill me, for letting yo' ass get killed over my shit.”

He offers his blunt to me, but I shake my head, turning it down. I don't have time to be doing no smoking or downing any liquor. This mind of mine has to stay nothing but sober.

Jabari moves his hand to the ashtray and presses the blunt down inside of it, putting it out, he then places the blunt behind his ear. “I can always tell when you joking or on some serious ass shit, but murkin' a nigga? The only time you had murder on your mind, was because of yo' brother. So, who the fuck is this nigga and what has he done to make yo' ass out of all fucking people want to kill?”

“It's Ricardo, he's the motherfucker that got to go. Him coming back around wasn't for anything good. He claimed to be a potential investor for me and Sage, but that was a lie; he ain't nothing but a fraud. Time is ticking and I have to head out to Taz.”

Jabari strokes his chin and raises his eyebrow. “You holding out on me, Chance. We've known each other since we

were little niggas. I don't know too much on Ricardo, just that was Cliff's estranged son and yo' godbrother, which to be for real I don't even consider him that for you. Because when you don't really even know someone, they can't claim no spot in your life as being anything. Plus, when you not fucking with someone heavy, and they turn out to be a fraud, that shouldn't come as no surprise to a nigga like you. You ain't never been no cappin' ass nigga, so the shit you just said ain't bring no clarity as to why you so badly want to end ole boy's life."

I stay silent because I can only speak on what I can. I'm not going to take it there speaking on who Ricardo is to Sage. I'm not even tempted to do it. I done hurt her enough, and spilling her past pain and even current pain from those times, I would be a real fucked up person.

I crank up my car and go ahead and put my seat belt on, putting my hands on the steering wheel. I look at the dried blood and I'm going to have to make a quick stop to my apartment and clean myself up. The fuck was I thinking that I can just really go from Jabari's house to Taz's and not be noticed with how I'm looking?

"I'm just letting you know what's up, the best I can, because if I hit you up in the next hour, that'll mean Taz didn't come through for me. If you make a couple of calls now, I'll have some niggas that'll be ready for whatever. I have to get out of here now, though, and go to my place first to clean up, pack up some all-black clothes, and I have to get a black ski mask."

"You want to kill him because of Sage, don't you?" he asks me in a confident tone, as if he already knows the answer to his question before me telling him.

"I ain't never been no killer, we both know that, but for her, Jab—"

"Jabari! Chance! Get y'all motherfucking asses up in here right now!" Jabari and me both look over to the house front door and see Sia standing in the middle of the door frame with her arms crossed under her chest. "Ah, shit! Whatever the fuck yo' girl done spilled to mine now got her ass all riled up.

Come on, nigga, let's get up in the house right quick, and figure out what the fuck we both going to do," Jabari says to me, opening up the door.

"We? There ain't about to be the both of us out there into some shit, and besides, Sage no longer my girl...she broke up with me."

"Man! You telling me in just some hours of y'all being gone, you now want to kill, Sage is a hot ass emotional mess, and then on top of that, y'all done broke the fuck up too. Whatever the fuck occurred, Sia's hothead ass is going to be out for blood as well. I can tell by the way she fucking yelled, and I know how her ass gets with Sage. She's really her big sister and she's forever going to be a ride or die for her."

Sia is looking annoyed as hell that Jabari and I are still sitting up in the car. I then see Sage walking up behind her, and she takes her by the arm, pulling her back into the house. "Jabari, I'm dead ass, there's no we. I just need some niggas that you know can handle themselves, if it comes down to it," I say back to him, not addressing anything that he has just said.

He waves me off with his hand. "Shut that shit up, I ain't about to have you going out there to kill someone for the first time alone. Even though I have trust in those other niggas that I'm going to call up, I don't trust them or any other nigga enough to have your back like I would. So, you might as well kill all of that talking about going to see your cousin, Taz. We ran together plenty of times side by side in the streets when were younger. He a cool nigga, but he's now a nigga that loves to brag about the shit he do. He done turned into fucking O-Dog from *Menace II Society*. I never thought the nigga would get older and resort to some shit like that, but niggas sometimes start loving the attention more than the money because they reach a certain level where money ain't a thing to them, but they eventually fuck their own selves up by doing that. You don't need nobody like that to help you handle anything, because if that nigga ever slips up and mentions your name, he'll be leading a trail right to yo' ass to get caught. That's if we pull it off and come out alive. Whatever the full

story is with you, Ricardo, and Sage, I ain't even got to know it right now to understand that Ricardo fucked up big time, and we going to get his ass. So, come the fuck on into the house, get cleaned up here, and I'll get you into a black fit of mine and I'll use my burner to make those calls. I'm going to need the address where he at too, so I can get one of my niggas to stake out the area and place."

Jabari is forever going to be my motherfucking brother, my true brother. He's for real willing to come out of retirement, all just to help me out. I would prefer for him not to, but he's a grown ass man and he's made his choice. This isn't the first time he's come through for me. I mean, he gave me a place to lay my head when I was fresh out of prison until I got on my feet, and helped me with other things as well. Since we were kids, we always looked out for one another, and now being grown men, that hasn't changed, and it never will.

I nod my head at him and kill the engine, taking my key out of the ignition. We both get out my car at the same time and start striding to the door. It's already wide open and Jabari walks on in, but I pause for a second before following along behind him. As I walk into the house, my eyes go straight to Sage and Sia sitting down on the grey carpet living room floor. Sia has what looks to be a cotton pad in her hand, and she's wiping it around Sage's eyes, which are closed.

"I can't believe that I let my boys witness me breaking down the way I did. They've never seen me so low like that before, but just the sight of them when I came into the house triggered that whole break down. I can't lose them, Sia. What if Ricardo ends up being the type of man that I've heard and seen on movies and shit that'll do anything to tear down the mother of his children, doing shit like planting drugs in my car and all of that, to get sole custody of them just to be spiteful towards me. This shit is scary, and it's like he has me backed up into the corner and there's no esc—"

Sia turns her head from Sage and sees that Jabari and I are in the house. She looks back to her. "Shhhh, Sage, we'll talk more on that when Mandisa gets here," Sia says, cutting her off. She keeps on cleaning off her face and the black makeup,

and whatever else kind of makeup products on her face is coming off and onto the pad. Sia stops wiping her face and throws the cotton pad into a brown grocery bag and takes out a clean one and drenches it with some liquid in the bottle.

“Y’all two took y’all sweet fucking time getting up in here,” Sia says sassily to me and Jabari as she’s wiping on Sage’s face again with a pad.

“We standing up in here now, baby, so why the fuck were you doing all that hollering outside like a banshee?” Jabari asks Sia as he heads over to the both of them and takes a seat on one of their modern white leather sofas. Sia has refurnished half of the rooms in the house and even did so with the kitchen and remodeled it. Some of the furniture in my house I had got from them, and I was thankful as fuck for that. Even everything that was down in the basement they let me take with me when I moved.

“Just give me a second, bae, and we’ll all talk about it,” Sia says back to Jabari.

She finishes up cleaning Sage’s face and gets up off the floor with the bag in her hand, tying it shut and walking out of the living room, making her way to the kitchen. Sage opens up her eyes and straight away, those alluring, dark-brown eyes of hers meet with mine. Sia comes back into the living room, and Sage quickly tears her eyes away from me and gets up off the floor. “Sia, I’m going to go take a shower and then check on Silas and Saint. They might still be worried about me, but are just scared to come out the bedroom,” Sage wearily says to her as she stands up off the floor. She no longer has her heels on, and those long locs are pulled back into a bun.

“You sure you can’t hold off on your shower, just for a little? I wouldn’t want to tell something that involves you without you, you know,” Sia responds back to Sage, but she just shakes her head. The mental torture that’s reflecting in her eyes from everything that’s happened is breaking me, but I’m keeping a blank face.

“You can tell them without me. I don’t care who shares what about me. I just need a moment to myself, and I can do

that while taking a shower. Later on, Mandisa will be here and I have to go through it all over again, telling something that I kept from everyone.”

Sia nods her head as she gathers up her dark-brown, curly, long hair and places it over her left shoulder. “Okay, I’ll bring some new clothes of mine that you can sleep in, into the bathroom.”

Sage walks over to the stairs and ascends them. I watch her until she’s no longer in view. I turn back to Sia and Jabari, and the both of them are staring at one another. It’s just completely quiet in this house, and that’s not normal. I can just feel the appalling energy in the air of everything that’s gone down tonight. It’s so bad that even the children are dead silent.

A door shuts upstairs and then the sound of running water in the bathroom breaks the silence.

“Aight, now that Sage is gone, I just want to say that I know what the fuck is up now. Ricardo is Saint and Silas’ father, right?” Jabari says, being the first one to talk out of us three, and he’s looking only at Sia, so he’s directing that question to her.

“Yeah, you heard her talking when you came back into the house, but unfortunately, that’s not the most fucked-up part about it. I was screaming for y’all because she told me that he had people watching her, something about them having pictures since the twins were two years old. She said the picture he showed her, I was with her that day with the twins, and I even had Mickey and Layla with me, that bitch, Tamila was there with her kids. He’s still having people stalk her, to this day, and he threatened her about Chance,” Sia says, and then turns to me with a sympathetic look. “Sage told me everything, Chance, and I just want you to know that I don’t hate you or anything like that. I still have love for you as my brother-in-law. I get where you were coming from, but it just went all the way left and to keep it real, that’s what happens when it comes to lying. Sage said she doesn’t hate you either, but she felt that you betrayed her trust, but then she also felt how could she be so mad when she never told you a name. I’ve known her since we were teenagers. I was there by her

side the entire pregnancy, and not once did I know that motherfucker's name either, so nobody in her life could have ever known that she had her babies by him. I hate to see y'all relationship suffer from this shit, but she said breaking up with you was for the best. She also told me you were going to go back to where he was living and kill him. It shows you're still all the way in love with her and he most definitely got to die. Sage ain't going to never be the same until he is. I ain't never known you to be no gangsta, but you know how Ja—"

"It's already about to be something put in motion for that, baby. Me and Chance spoke and Ricardo's going to get dealt with," Jabari cuts off Sia as he's gets up off the sofa. He pulls her into a hug and picks her up off the floor, and she wraps her legs around him. "Just this one fucking time, Jabari, that I'll give you a pass to be the man that I met before you went to prison. If there's retaliation for his death, as Sage is scared about as well, then, of course, you'll have another, but that will be it. I don't even have to worry about that, though, because if it does come about, then you and Sammy, when he finds out, and even Chance, won't let anything happen to any of us."

"You damn right, but I without a doubt won't let anything happen to yo' fine ass. I would never be the same if a nigga came and took you away from me and the kids. Go ahead and lay some kisses on me, with them sexy ass lips of yours," Jabari says to Sia with a smile on his face. She leans into him, and they start sharing kisses with one another.

Leaving them in the living room to have their moment with each other, I head for the bathroom that's down here to wash up.

I get in front of the bathroom door and twist the door knob, opening it up. I cut the light on and shut the door behind me, locking it. Standing in front of the sink, I turn the water on and make sure it's entirely hot. I recurrently pump the bottle of hand soap in my hands and place my hands under the water and start roughly scrubbing the blood off of them.

Sage feels that ending things with me is for the best, and like I mentioned before, I respect that. It just ain't the right

time in our lives to fully be together. All it took was one wrongdoing to unravel our whole relationship. I don't feel we'll never not be together again, because I strongly believe that we are meant for each other, it's just wrong timing. And I feel deep down, Sage is holding on to that too. Sometimes when it comes to two people that're in love, they got to see how their lives will be without each other after having the experience of being together. It'll give them the chance of figuring out if they really can't live without each other or make them realize that they are better off being two people that just have old memories together, never giving it another thought to make new ones.

I don't regret the time that I shared with Sage. Together, we did do a lot of healing from our past, even if Sage is thinking that Ricardo has set her back, but maybe we have to take however long this time will be of us apart to heal more on our own and discover things that we've never known about ourselves. Some people probably feel that she and I moved too fast with being together, but I won't be able to ever get behind that statement. We crossed paths in this life for a reason, and when you know, you just know. It doesn't take years on top of years for a man to love a woman and know that's who he wants to wife up and be with for the rest of his life. Sage is the woman that I will marry one day, and I ain't being on no hopeful wishing shit either with saying that. Any niggas that she might fuck with while we're not together, won't ever compare to me, so there'll be no tripping on that for me. If I end up giving these females the time of day as they been wanting since I got out of prison, it won't change that Sage is the woman that'll be my future wife.

“**I**t broke my heart, though, Sage, that you felt you couldn’t come to me about Ricardo, knowing that out of all the people around you, I would have understood you the most on what happ—”

“Will you just hand me that damn blunt instead of hogging the fuck out of it? I don’t mean to cut you off on a serious moment like this, but you been fucking up the rotation between you and me,” Mandisa says to Sia, cutting her off from talking, and I can’t help but chuckle with my lips pressed down on the flute glass that’s halfway filled up with Pink Moscato. I take a sip from the glass and sit it back down on the table in front of me. Leave it to these two to even have me cracking a smile or a laugh at times like these.

It’s three something in the morning, and there hasn’t been any word back from Jabari or Chance. Sia isn’t showing much worry, but it could be because she’s on like her fourth glass of Moscato and smoked on two blunts before this new one she’s smoking, and she’s been the main one that’s gotten the blunts before down to roaches. That’s why Mandisa is so fed up with her ass, but it doesn’t bother me. I’m more of a drinker than a smoker, so the only blunt that I really had hit was the first one that Mandisa rolled up. The glass I’m sipping on right now is literally my fifth one. The wine is helping me get through this whole talk with Mandisa and Sia.

“Bitch, I only hit the damn thing twice; you just feenin’ the fuck out of it. Here!” Sia responds back to Mandisa as she

extends her arm out to her with the blunt between her fingers. Mandisa snatches the blunt out her hand, and the ashes from it fall onto the black, wide, linen, symmetrical sectional sofa that we're sitting on that's down in the basement. She wipes it off the sofa and begins hitting the blunt.

“Back to what I was saying, before I was rudely interrupted. I was lost for words when you came into my house breaking down crying, and I had to at first piece everything together through your cries after I had got the kids upstairs. It was so much pain from your past that you were finally letting go of it for everyone to see, and I couldn't believe you held on to that much pain. When you could have released a lot of that with me, because I also became a teen mother from a very horrible situation. Like, I never kept any secrets from you or Mandisa. When I met Mandisa and Tamila, I was thirteen years old with a baby, living a few houses down from them with my grandmother on my father's side. My triflin' ass mother sent me away from Chicago to live in Charlotte because I had my first child, my baby girl, Mickey, with her husband... the man that was my stepfather is the man who's the father of my first child and my mother's first grandchild, but she didn't give a fuck about me. She knew that man was molesting me from the moment she let him come into our lives, and that was at the age of nine. Then, when I became an eleven-year-old, that's when the raping began and lasted until I was thirteen. So, I might not would have known your exact pain, but I've had my share of pain with an older man violating me as well until the ending result was me being pregnant too.

“I don't want you to ever take what I'm saying and make you feel like you not telling me was wrong, because that's not what I'm getting at. I can understand where your head might have been at during those times having to stay quiet with that secret, because my stepfather fucked my mind up too, and even my mother did because she knew, but yet she kept letting him do it as if that was right. She used to threaten me when I told her what he was doing, manipulated me into thinking that was his way of showing his love to me and that I needed to be grateful that a man like him came along and gave us a better

life after my dad left her to go back to Charlotte where he originally was from. When I got pregnant, though, she felt I became a ticking time bomb that could destroy her entire life with my stepfather, so I had to go. She chose that man over me, and I haven't seen or heard from her since. If I have siblings out here due to her, I will never know. I'm strong and healed enough to where speaking on any of that don't even bother me, I couldn't care less. It's just something that's a part of my story, and after all of that, I grew up and found happiness and a man that loves me and my children to the very end. Everybody that knows me from back then, knows that Mickey isn't biologically Jabari's daughter, but one thing about that man, he'll stomp the fuck out of any got damn body, if they let that shit come out their mouths. Mickey, Layla, and Jai are all his and a part of him. He don't give a damn about none of that DNA shit, he's their dad, and he's the best damn dad to them and the most amazing fucking husband to me," Sia heartfully says, wearing a huge ass smile on her face. Just seeing her smile makes me do the same, it's so contagious. She grabs up her flute and begins drinking some wine.

Before even telling Sia about Ricardo, I knew for a fact that she would at least be hurt, but at least she gets how gone my mind was when it came to him. Sia's mother was a Cuban woman, and her father was African American. When he left her mother to come back to Charlotte, she had lied to Sia when she was old enough to understand and talk, and told her that her dad never gave a fuck about her. She made it seem to Sia, that her father never once reached out to her to see how she was doing or anything, that he never communicated with her. Sia's father didn't cut off any communication with her mother, it was her mother who cut off all communications with him. Sia and her mother moved out of the place they all lived in together, so her grandmother had revealed to her as she moved to live with her, that her father stayed trying to reach out and check up on her, to send money for her, along with wanting to have the time to spend with her. Unfortunately, Sia also learned about her father's demise once she moved with her grandmother. He was murdered three years after he moved back to NC. She told me before that she likes to think, that she at least had one of her biological parents love her, and that it

was her father. Sia's grandmother died about two years ago, but she considered her as her mother more than anything. All she has left is her in-laws and she's very close with them. Sia certainly deserves the life she has now and even more.

“I should have come to you and everyone else afterwards, Sia, that I'll have to admit, because maybe I wouldn't be this woman now with so much sorrow still existing in my heart. During the times with Ricardo, he was such a puppet master. He would always make me feel so strongly on protecting him and what we had. He even scared me into never wanting to say anything about us to you, Mandisa, or Tamila, because not only would he get in trouble, but he stayed bringing to my attention what people would think of me if we got exposed. Telling me that he wouldn't be mad if I said anything, he would just only be concerned because he felt that people were going to portray me as a fast ass little girl, nothing but a hoe and a slut. He stayed using reverse psychology on me. That man even got me to record three sex tapes with him. He told me that they were for him to have when he was lonely and missing me, when we couldn't get the chance to sneak around with each other.”

Mandisa's mouth drops with smoke coming out, as she passes the blunt back to Sia. “He was on some fucking R. Kelly shit with you, Sage, and then, Sia, with you bringing back up yo' traumatic past, this shit is tearing up my heart, mind, and damn soul. Like, y'all two don't understand how much this is pushing me to tell my own shit, because I've kept something to myself for a very long time, just like Sage. The only two people that know about what I've kept hidden are my father and Tamila, whether she keeps on lying to this day or not. Everyone always wondered why me and her have so much hatred towards each other, and honestly, it's so much, that I could write about ten long fucking books on our horrible sister relationship. Since we were little, Tamila always showed or expressed in little ways that she hated me for a sister. I feel like when I was born, she might have felt that the spotlight was taken off of her, and she just became the daughter in the shadow.

“So, she stayed acting out and be malicious in order to get some sort of attention, when from my point of view, we were both getting equal attention and love from our mama and dad. Then our mama got hooked on crack, and things from there got even worse. We began fighting all the time, like straight beating the shit out of each other, like niggas do when they brothers, that’s how rough it got. I caught Tamila, so many times giving rocks to our mother so she could get high. She claimed that she was doing it because she loved her, and that she didn’t want her to suffer from the withdrawals, but I told her every time that she was just killing her. Soon enough, our mother abandoned me, Tamila, and my father, and a year after she did, my father got a phone call from one of his corner boys, telling him that she was dead in an alley with a crack pipe still in her hand. Right then and there, I told Tamila she had our mother’s blood on her hands. It was wrong of me to tell her that, but that’s how I felt at the time, knowing she used to help her with getting high. After our mother’s death, our dad was on the streets hustling and providing for us even more, and Tamila took advantage of the moments he was doing that. When he was in the streets, so was she, doing everything that she shouldn’t have been. Especially trying to fuck with our father’s corner boys, but none of them dared to do anything with her, knowing that if they did, they would have to face my father. So, she started fucking with niggas outside of Lincoln Heights.

“A lot of damn trouble came with that, because she was fucking niggas that saw our father as competition. Things got real bloody, but our father still tried to see the good in her, because he figured he wasn’t the best example of a parent with the lifestyle he chose. So, he started to be even more strict on her, trying to steer her in the right direction, but the more he did that, the more shit she ended up doing. Fast forwarding from there, y’all two probably still remember by the time she was seventeen and I was sixteen, our father kicked her out of the house, she dropped out of school, and everyone in our family including our father cut all ties with her. It was because Tamila never really stopped fucking with dudes that wanted to see the family drug business, that my father had started, crumble. The nigga that was her boyfriend at the time, she

helped him and his people one night hit up three of our father's trap houses. I guess she wanted to hurt our father because he finally was done putting up with her shit, but she wasn't done that night. Our dad was out handling the aftermath of the trap houses, and Tamila had sent me a text while he was gone to come outside into the backyard of our house. So, I decided to go out of the house because I wanted to hear from her myself on why she went that damn far, in fucking with the trap houses. Once I came out the house, all I saw was her boyfriend and some other nigga, but not that bitch. I didn't see her with them. All I had on that night was a black tank top and some red sleeping shorts. Those two niggas had grabbed me and threw me to the ground, ripped my clothes off... and they both took turns raping me. They stole my virginity that night. I couldn't scream because they covered my mouth, and I couldn't fight off two niggas. The wooden fence in the backyard, hid everything that was happening to me.

“When they were done with me, they dapped each other up and laughed. The nigga that was Tamila's boyfriend said ‘I done now fucked both of Sammy's daughters. That nigga think he and everybody around him is untouchable, well that little bitch on the ground just got touched. Let her be another message for him to come at me. It's time for that nigga to get knocked the fuck down. Charlotte going to be my motherfucking city.’ They ran out the backyard and closed the gate. Tamila was still nowhere in sight, but yet she sent me a text to come out the house...she set me up to be raped. I'll forever remember what that nigga said word for word, while I was cold and naked laid out in the damn grass, bleeding like crazy between my legs. I gathered myself up off the ground, went back into the house and took a shower. Hours later, my dad finally came back home and walked into my room, finding me sitting on my bed with a towel wrapped around me. I was still bleeding heavily between my legs, even after the shower. I broke down and told him what had happened to me, and he immediately made me get dressed and took me to the hospital to get checked. Every motherfucker that ran with Tamila's boyfriend got killed quickly, but for him and that other nigga, my dad told me they died slow and painfully.” Mandisa stops

talking and grabs the bottle of Pink Moscato, pouring her a glass. She drinks the whole glass in only three gulps.

Sia and I both turn to each other, with stunned looks on our faces, then look back to Mandisa, who's pouring herself another glass of wine. I'm so lost that I don't even know what to even think to say to her. I'm not the only one who's been keeping past shit bottled up inside. Never once did Mandisa seem off about anything in life as we continued getting older. She's the one out of the three of us that stays having the most fun, turning up, and living life without worries. She's in her last year of college, meeting all the goals that's she set for herself. I've never not seen her smile when we're together. The only time that she might not do so is when somebody really pisses her the fuck off, and that would always mainly be Tamila.

I'm not shocked about anything with my family or my favorite and only uncle, Sammy. The drug business and all that isn't anything new, to me or Sia, but I never was one to want to hear or be involved with any of that kind of family business. What's clearly shocking the fuck out of me is, Mandisa telling us that she got raped, and not by one, but two niggas, and Tamila is the one that set that up and even helped the niggas fuck up trap houses before that happened. I never knew any of that. When Tamila got kicked out, she told me that she was just back on her bullshit with a nigga that Sammy didn't like. All the family members that's in the business, don't speak to anyone outside of the inner circle, so if you not involved hands on with it, you ain't getting no information, and with Mandisa being Sammy's daughter, she had to follow the rules too. She's broke a rule now, but what she spoke on was years ago.

I stand up from the sofa and walk over to Mandisa, giving her a hug, and Sia slides over on the sofa, coming over to us, wrapping her arms around the both of us. "No, no, no, no! Y'all need to get on from me with this hugging and sentimental shit. I ain't sit here and tell y'all all of that for you two to feel sorry or bad for me. Nothing of that sort, I just ain't want to be the only one that had something hidden, you know. The three of us are fucking sisters, and I love y'all to death. So, don't feel sorry for me on something that happened to me

at sixteen. Like, I've healed so much from that day. I have a therapist, I'm doing wonderful in college, a fine ass man has come my way, and he's checking a lot off my list, because you know them hood niggas, I had to let go of them. Life is real good for me, y'all, especially with my father's money," Mandisa says, and then laughs at me and Sia as we're backing away from her. I go back over to my spot on the sofa, sitting down.

"Okay, one question about what happened to you, and I'll leave it alone," Sia says to Mandisa and then takes a pull from the blunt, passing it back her way, no longer holding on to it like before.

"Go ahead and ask your one question, so I can be done with reliving my past."

Sia presses her lips together then says, "Why the fuck is Tamila's ass still breathing? Sammy knew about what the fuck she did to you, and I get that she's technically always going to be his daughter too, but I can't believe he let her keep on living after that."

Mandisa takes a quick pull from the blunt. "Because I told him not to. My father was a big gangsta out here, the man not to be fucked with. Even to this day, people know not to try him. Back then, he would kill a nigga if they looked at him the wrong way, but when it came to him being off the streets, and being a dad at home, he took care of us as a single father, and his heart was so full of love for me and Tamila. Where did it really go wrong for Tamila to be who she is, I can't say. Maybe people are just born fucking evil, but our father will always have some sort of love for her. He might not ever say or let anyone know that, but she's his first born, and I didn't want him to go the rest of his life having the thoughts or visions of killing his oldest daughter."

Sia slowly nods her head. "I feel it, but that's some wild shit. Like, the strength you had over the years to be in the same room with that bitch. I mean, I always said there was something deeper with how y'all do each other, like all that fighting and fussing like cats and dogs. There's also been

moments, though, when y'all actually talk and laugh. Like, what the fuck was up with that?"

"You don't know nothing about asking a person one question, huh?" Mandisa snaps jokingly back at Sia, and she just shrugs her shoulders. My ears are wide open, waiting for Mandisa's answer on that, because I really want to know as well. Tamila and Mandisa have shared little sister moments since that happened. Also, Mandisa is forever was telling me to stop fucking with Tamila, and with everything I've learned now, I see why she took every chance she could to tell me that.

Mandisa flips her natural curly hair and leans back on the sofa. "Even after all these years, she denies that she ever set me up, but that's a lie. It came from her phone, the niggas automatically just knew where we lived, and they were just standing right in the backyard, waiting on me. Plus, if they wanted to send a real message to my father, I would have been dead as well, not just raped. She most likely told them to leave me alive, her way of a good deed, I guess. As for being around her years after that, I wanted that bitch to see me happy and how much I'm thriving in life. I wanted her to know that what the fuck she did to Mandisa Royal Lovett ain't destroy nothing about me and what I have planned to accomplish in life. So, yeah, I talked to the bitch, so she could hear from out my mouth how amazing it is for me to be alive and living every fucking day like it's my last, and I bet for her those laughs and smiles were fake every single time with me, because inside, the bitch was fuming. Look how glamorous my life is and then look how hers is going. A bitch like that, you have to pray for and keep it fucking moving. My niece and nephews, I love them, but after she pulled that shit with being with Rahil, I couldn't handle her no more in my life at all, so, once her children get over eighteen, I'll make sure to be in their lives. She done cut off our father from seeing them. He only talked to her for them to come and spend time with him, but since that wedding shit about him walking her down the aisle, she took the kids away out of spite, but my father just said he'll love his grandkids from afar."

Sia, with a proud look on her face, starts clapping her hands loudly, and Mandisa purses her lips up. "Okay, sis, I

know that's fucking right. You a high-class boss ass bitch, so, I see where you coming from and why you did it. Fuck that hoe, she ain't gon' never have no good damn luck in life. Bitch really thinks all the shit she did in life is going to lead her to being happily married and everything else that's good."

"Period! I ain't breathing no more life into that bitch. Life is too damn short, as we all know, so I ain't about to waste my precious time dwelling on anything that I can't change." Mandisa hands the blunt to Sia, and then she turns to me offering it. I shake my head, silently declining.

"You sure that you don't want to hit it at all, Sage?"

"I'm good on that. I've been drinking and drinking, you two can keep on mixing two effects."

The sound of an iPhone notification goes off, and the three of us grab up our phones from the table. I look at my phone screen, and it's not my phone. Ain't nothing new on my lock screen, and I want to slap myself for even hoping that it would be a text or something from Chance. I'm dumb for thinking that, because it's not like I'm the first person he would really be texting as of now. I look over to Sia and see that she has her phone laid face down on the sofa. I check over to Mandisa and she's cheeing hard as hell, just typing away on her phone. Somebody has her geeked as fuck about them. Because the speed her fingers are going, that's the type of energy you only give to a nigga that you're really invested in.

Mandisa presses her thumb to her phone one more time, and then lays it back down on the table. She turns to look at me. "Anyway, Sage, back to yo' ass. I can't believe that I used to cover for you to go and sleep around with fucking Ricardo. I only remember a little bit of him though. The club director before him had died, so, he came along and took his place before you were even here in North Carolina. All the girls that were going to the B and G club thought he was so fine, and he just looked like a typical ass Hispanic to me, so I was very confused on what the hype was all about with him. It's lowkey really blowing my mind, because he didn't even make it a year of being the club director, and out of nowhere you stopped going, then weeks go on by and he just up and left. Everyone

was wondering where the fuck did he dip off to so fast. Years later, and the answer to that is, he knocked yo' ass up and went ghost.

“After you no longer were going to the boys and girls club, I stopped going because I had a little boo thang doing my own little shit on the low. Sia stopped going as well because of her grandmother not having the strength to watch Mickey any longer than a school day, and the other bitch stopped because she got caught fucking in the bathroom. From what I shared earlier, obviously I wasn't doing any fucking with that old boo thang, because my father stayed trying to keep eyes on me, and I didn't want to get caught and have to deal with his wrath. Plus, he taught me to never let any nigga sweet talk me into letting them put they hands in my cookie jar, because all they wanted was a quick treat to help die down the cravings of their sweet tooth. Then they'll be on to the next thing that looked tasteful to them. I listened to him until it was no longer in my control to give it up, because a motherfucker wasn't going to treat me as just one treat. I'm a bitch that's the whole damn bakery or fucking candy shop. What the fuck did Ricardo even whisper into your ear to get yo' honey, Sage?”

I let out a hurtful little laugh, taking a quick sip again of the wine. The four of us sure did stop going after I was the first one to do so, and, of course, we all had different reasons, but for me it wasn't really my choice. I was just doing what Ricardo demanded of me. The times when we were even going there, we sometimes would separate. Sia, Mandisa, and Tamila had other friends before I moved here, and I wasn't a social person outside of the three of them, so that's how Ricardo really was able to get close to me. If I just had stuck with either of them the whole time when we used to go, I bet he wouldn't have had a chance to sink his claws deeply in me.

No young girl should ever go through and experience all that I did with him. Sadly, I'm just one out of a million and more women who dealt with a man or men using and abusing them while younger. Older men take full advantage of younger girls, manipulating their minds that haven't fully developed into a grown woman. It's almost like build a bitch, and that's

real blunt for me to state, but it's true and that's how I personally think.

An older guy gets you at a young age, makes you fall so hard in love with him to the point you're obsessed with him, and you believe what he created in your head to be love. You're turned into a girl that will do whatever it takes to be everything he ever wanted and needed. Then, after that, his true intentions are revealed, but you're so blinded by the love for him that you don't even realize that he's doing his very own grooming process. He tells you what he likes and what he doesn't like. Teaches you how he wants you to act as a woman for him and making sure you please him and fulfill his every desire. It's almost like you're his personal android that was programmed for him and him only, and whatever demands he barks your way, you have no control over saying yes or no to him. It'll always be a yes, and he made you that way for his own personal reasons. He made you believe and feel that you needed him to keep on surviving in this world, because it'll just kill you if you weren't with him. Possibly even made you feel that no one else in this world would love you and do the things that he does for you, whether it was good or bad.

"Sage? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you cry again with talking about him. I shouldn't have said anything about yo' honey," Mandisa says to me, snapping me out of my deep thoughts. I stretch forward, grabbing my flute from the table, and I down the rest of the wine in the glass and sit it back on the table. I lie back on the sofa and curl up in the light blue, fluffy blanket. Taking my hand out from under the blanket, I touch my hand up to my face to see what Mandisa is talking about, and it's wet from tears. "I didn't realize that I was shedding tears again. I've been crying so much that I guess I can't even tell if I am anymore. I was just having my own inner thoughts involving Ricardo, but it's nothing. I'm okay," I say back to her as I wipe the tears away.

"You're not okay, and it's okay to not be. You're going to get through this, and better days are coming after this shit. Trust me when I tell you that this isn't going to completely break you. The strength I have witnessed you having over the years, ain't no way in hell you going to let some motherfucker

who's the ghost from the past come back and have you waving the white flag to surrender to him. You done been through worse battles than this and came out victorious, so the battle that might be ahead with him ain't going to be nothing to you. You got yo' damn crown slipping and tilting a little bit, because you have that less than a man poisoning your mind again. He's making you forget that you're a strong black queen, but I'm here for you and I ain't gon' never let you forget that's what you are. Sia won't let you either and everyone else that's been here for you since day one, is going to help make sure that crown of yours is right back in the center of yo' damn head sitting pretty and high. We got you no matter what, Sage." Mandisa moves from where she is on the sofa to come over to me. She sits next to me and wraps her arms around me, giving the tightest, much-needed hug ever.

"I know you and everyone else got me, it's just mentally been so much that I wish there was a way to just shut my brain down. To not function again until I want it to, because the more it's functioning the more it's producing thoughts of Ricardo. Even with me and Chance, I was so happy. I mean, the happiest I have ever been in my life when it came to a man, and it's not like he broke up with me. I broke up with him. So, I just hate that I'm sad over something that I made happen. I love him... I love him so got damn much, but I can't get myself to regret breaking up."

Mandisa moves her arms from around me and leans back in the sofa, pulling the blanket that's around her up. Sia scoots over next to Mandisa and reaches her arm over her body, taking my hand.

"When I was outside with him and Jabari before they were getting ready to leave out, I, of course, was kissing and hugging on Jabari, telling him to be safe and everything. Chance was in Jabari's car, but after I was done doing what I did with my husband, Chance had stepped out the car and stopped me before heading back in the house, and he told me to tell you that he loves you and the boys, and that he ain't going to never stop loving y'all. He said that if anything was to happen that you'll at least remember that much of him."

Mandisa kisses her teeth and rolls her eyes, and then turns her head to Sia. “Why the fuck would you even say that? That ain’t uplifting, that made me sad as hell just hearing that shit. Now she probably sitting here really thinking those last moments with Chance are for real the last moments of them together. Talking about if anything happens to him. I hope you don’t be responding all the time to your nail clients when they venting to you while doing their nails, because you clearly at times don’t be knowing the right things to say. Chance and Jabari are both going to make it back, no ifs, ands, or buts about it. We really know why you might not be worried about Jabari. That nigga is like a damn cat with nine lives. He been shot, stabbed, hit by a car multiple fucking times, that you would think he would be you know what, but I ain’t going to say it.

“I’m just stating that he be having many lives; I swear. Them niggas going to be back, but we ain’t about to be waiting up for they asses. We going to get our beauty sleep, and sleep in because it’s Saturday. So, we might as well start cleaning up down here, and then I can crawl into that big ass, soft like a cloud bed in the guest room and knock the fuck out. I’m very happy all the time when I come through to Sia’s house because the bitch looked out for me by being a guest of hers with getting an eight-bedroom house. Some bitches won’t even have no bedroom for you to sleep in. They’ll have your ass on the couch.”

We all take looks at one another and start busting out laughing, sharing some heartfelt ass laughs together. I’m thankful that I have these two amazing women as a part of my life, because this is, I believe, the hardest thing I have ever encountered. Yet they’ve also been through such horrific events in their lives, but they’re living proof that it’s possible to overcome what was supposed to end your life or fuck you up to the point being happy would be something that’ll always be unreachable.

CHANCE

Jabari kills the car lights. As he turns onto the road that'll lead to the mansion, he starts flooring the gas. The road to the gates is out of sight from ongoing traffic, but with it being early in the morning, there's none of that anyways. It's 3:43 a.m. and we're riding in a black 2011 DTS Cadillac with tinted windows and a fake license plate. This car ain't nothing but a disposable. After we're done, it's going right to the junkyard to be smashed up. We're getting closer to the mansion, and I begin sliding on my black gloves. I bend over in the seat, reaching down into the black duffle bag between my legs, and grab up the black ski mask that's laid on top of two Mossberg 500 tactical shotguns. I go right to putting the mask on my head and pulling it over my face.

“Aye, nigga, throw mine to me,” Jabari says, and I pick up another ski mask and throw it over to him. He take his hands from the wheel and swiftly throw the ski mask on, then places one of his hands back on the steering wheel. I turn to the backseat of the car, looking between Dijon, Lucius, and Pharaoh. They all have some sort of choppa laying in their laps. We're all blacked out with our clothes. I have on a black hoodie and black cargo pants that Jabari let me have, and on my feet I still have on my black and white Adidas from earlier.

Jabari called up these three niggas to help. I've known them from back in the day myself, mostly grew up hanging with the oldest one, Pharaoh, before their mothers moved the three of them out of Lincoln Heights. I should have known that Jabari was going to call up the Levert brothers. All the shit

that he stayed doing with them even after they moved out the neighborhood, he did more with them than my cousin, Taz. Don't let their last names fool you, though. They ain't on no singing shit, as ones might know the late singers Gerald Levert and Sean Levert for doing. The only thing that has these three brothers being involved in singing is doing so with their fucking choppas. Pharaoh has a black walnut complexion, dark brown eyes, a goatee, and a triangle box braids hairstyle with the sides faded. With him being the oldest, he's like the leader of the pack when it comes to his brothers. I mean, it's his birth right. Majority of the time, he calls all of the shots and keeps the two youngest in line, being the father figure that neither of them had.

Then there's Dijon, the second oldest brother. He's the true definition of a real ass killer. He got more bodies on his track record than the other two. He ain't nothing but a silent ass nigga that likes sitting back to observe and calculate on shit, and it's true when they say the quiet ones are the most dangerous. His complexion is carob, he has dark brown eyes as well, his black hair is cut into a high skin fade with kinky curly twists at the top, and his thick beard is cut into a ducktail style. Lastly, with the youngest, Lucius, he's more than fucking book smart. The nigga is a genius, a thug ass genius, I'll call him. If he didn't step into the world of drugs, I'm sure he would have been some inventor making shit for the future to come. Unlike his brothers, the dark genes skipped him, because his skin is the color of rich caramel, but he has the same eye color as they do. During the time we were planning to take out Ricardo and his men, he asked me to cut his hair for him, and I did. He's rocking a fresh fade with a crispy clean surgical line on the right side of his head. He and the other two are over six feet tall, a couple of inches taller than me and Jabari. If they wanted to, they might would have had a chance of being ball players in the NBA.

Lucius has a jammer device in his hand, and he looks up to me. "Everything is down, the security cameras, the phone signal is knocked out from this area as well. All that's left to do is for me to pick the lock at the security guard house, and y'all four would be good to go through," he says. As he places

the jammer back down in a bag, he takes out a black pouch that I believe to be the lock-picking tools.

Jabari slams down on the brakes and I look back ahead and see that we're in front of the gates. One of the back doors of the car opens and shuts, and then I see Lucius running over to the guard's house, with his IMI Uzi machine gun, and I no longer can see him.

"You for real ready to look a nigga in the eyes and take his life, Chance?" Pharoah asks me as I'm leaning down, grabbing up one of the shotguns.

"Man, I looked him in the eyes when I pulled the trigger the first fucking time on him. Don't worry about me, there ain't going to be no choking up. Ski mask going to be off, so my face can be the last fucking face he sees before leaving this world," I respond back to him, and then the gates begin opening up. Looking over to Lucius, he's inside of the security guard house, waving his Uzi for us to get going. He's staying behind at the gates to be on the lookout for anything that might come our way. Better safe than sorry.

The plan is to get in, kill up every motherfucking body, and get the fuck out. We don't have any room for fuck ups. If something is to go wrong, though, we all let it be known to each other that if you can't keep up, then you going to get left. It's no point for all five of us to get caught up or die. Jabari doesn't feel the same way on that. He said that he and I came together and we're going to leave together. This is the first of me ever doing anything like this, but if I'm right on Ricardo being all talk with a lot of things, this will be my last, if I have anything to do with it.

Jabari drives through the gates and picks up speed. Flying down the path, he's going over ninety. Taking a glance back to Dijon and Pharoah, they're pulling their masks down. In no time, the big mansion is in my view again, and there's no lights on from what I can see through the windows. The car comes to a stop not too far from where the mansion is but keeping out of sight, and I rapidly hand over the other shotgun to Jabari. The four of us hop out the car and avoid heading down to the front doors. We split up in two's, me and Jabari

run off to the left, and Pharoah and Dijon run off to the right. Holding my shotgun up straight, I turn on the flashlight that's connected on top of it. I don't see anybody out here. His men must not be ones that stand outside guarding twenty-four-seven. By the looks of it, Ricardo ain't that damn important. Earlier, I saw the outside layout of the mansion from the camera drone Lucius flew out here, and they were out here walking around. There's a side door that Jabari and I need to get to, and he knows how to do all that picking lock shit, and the other two will be going through some back door.

We make it to the door and Jabari starts sticking two metal pieces inside the doorknob keyhole. Less than five minutes later, he gets up off his knee and twists the doorknob and opens the door. He goes in first, holding his hand back, gesturing for me to wait. I see him cautiously looking around, then he gives me a move forward hand gesture. I step alertly into the house, taking glances around, and this must be the den. This place is as nice as it looks on the outside. Quietly as I can, I move the door back, closing it. Jabari and I walk around and come across a flight of stairs, unhurriedly going up them one by one. So far, it's nothing but silence in this damn mansion. It's so fucking quiet that it almost feels that no one is in here. Getting to the top of the stairs, there's a door. Jabari walks up to it and presses his ear, then pulls down the door handle pulling it open. The both of us walk out into a hallway, our shotguns raised up and our fingers on the trigger, but we're met with nobody. We begin wandering around, going in bedrooms, bathrooms, closets, every fucking thing within this mansion.

Thirty minutes later Jabari, Pharoah, Dijon, and I are standing around in the mansion's foyer heated as fuck.

Nobody is here, the mansion is empty, not a single drop of clothing, shoes, jewelry, just anything that would be personal to have in a place that's considered home.

“So, y'all telling me, we did all this planning, gathered up everything we needed to blast some niggas, but yet there's no fucking niggas here to blast? I went out of my way to do this shit, and my time done got wasted. I don't like when my

motherfucking time is wasted. The time I wasted here could have been put to making money,” Dijon says furiously. He shakes his head in disgust as he directs a look at me. He heads off from us to the front doors of the mansion. He unlocks the door and swings it open, leaving it wide open as he’s walking, most likely going back to the car.

“Damn, you know it’s bad when the mute motherfucker has to talk some shit. Chance, I thought you said Ricardo was going to be here?” Jabari asks me, and I walk over to a table that has vases and other glass made things, and swing my arm, forcing everything to fall on the floor, smashing into pieces.

“He told me this was his home, and then Sage after what happened she told me in the car that he wanted her to spend the night. He was supposed to be here! Now there’s no telling where the fuck he’s at, and how long it’ll be before I have another opportunity to kill him.” I start going over to other things, breaking and smashing them, tearing off art work, pictures on the walls, smashing the glass frame.

Jabari comes over to where I am, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Chill! Tearing down everything in here ain’t going to make shit better for you. We need to get the fuck up out of here. Soon enough, it’ll be breaking dawn, and we all black dressed in damn black, so the police are going to be all over us when it gets light. I don’t have no more words to say on this. I mean, ain’t not a soul that we were supposed to take here.” I stop myself from breaking anything else and lower my shotgun. I turn around and start making my way to the front door, but Pharoah presses his hand on my chest, stopping me.

“Look at this way, Chance, maybe the man above saved you from a lifetime of having another man’s blood on your hands. I ain’t going to lie, when Jabari hit me up to lend a hand with this, and he said that it was for you, I laughed my ass off. You ain’t never been no gangsta, thug, or whatever else folks be out here labeling us niggas, that’s really about this shit. You fuck with us type of niggas, but you never fucked with the shit we did. I listened to you before we came here and you was just driven by anger, a hint of revenge, you still is. Don’t let none of that fuck up what you’re trying to

build for yourself, from your career, your life, and to getting that woman of yours back.” He drops his hand from me, and I start back walking. I hear what Pharoah is saying. I’m not the type of man to indulge myself into plotting to kill people, but if someone else stepped into my shoes on what I’ve learned about Sage and seeing the man who did it, I don’t believe they wouldn’t do the same things that I have. Just thinking about her is making me miss the fuck out of her. I just need to hold her, especially when I tell her about Ricardo and how it looks to be that he’s gone again.

CHANCE COOLEY

Pulling the basketball shorts up on me, I bend down, putting on some black socks and sliding my feet into some slides that I'm glad I forgot here while I was packing up to move. I wipe away the fog from the mirror and look right at my reflection. It's time that I give myself another edge up and shape up my beard. Turning away from the mirror, I grab up the towel and the washcloth I used and throw it in a grocery bag, along with the black clothes that Jabari let me have. I open the bathroom door and cut the light off while waking out. I'm down in the basement, the place I once laid my head for some months, and it smells like straight weed down here.

Seeing a USB cord on the floor makes me realize that my phone is still in my car, and it hasn't been checked in hours. I drop the bag down to the side of the bathroom door and pick up the cord and lay it on the table that's positioned in the middle of the long sectional sofa. I head upstairs, cutting on some lights as I make my way into the kitchen. I head straight to the drawer where I put my wallet and keys before I had left.

Pulling the drawer out, I pick up my keys and head to the door, stepping outside. Getting in front of the passenger door of my car, I insert the key, unlocking it and opening it. I quickly grab up my newest and updated iPhone, and it's on fifty percent. I shut and relock the door, going back into the house.

I shut and lock the front door behind me and slide my phone down in one of the shorts side pockets. I then begin walking back towards the kitchen to cut off the lights, but suddenly I hear the sound of the ice maker going off in the kitchen. I see Sage making her way out of it, with her head tilted back drinking from a glass cup that's filled with ice and water. She lowers her head back down and stops drinking the water. She's wearing a mustard yellow tube top and some black velvet shorts, and there's a long purple bonnet on her head keeping her locs secured inside.

"Hey," she says placidly to me, with relief in her eyes. I'm surprised that she's even speaking to me.

"What's up? You having trouble sleeping?"

"Kind of, but then kind of not," she says as she tilts her free hand back and forth. "I got some sleep, but not too long ago I woke up and my mouth was dry like a damn desert. I checked on my boys, and they're peacefully sleeping, thankfully, and then I came down here to get some water, as you can see." She chuckles, and it's amazing to hear the sound of that, but I wonder will she be able to do that ever again after I tell her about Ricardo.

I lick my lips as I look at her. It's a sin for her to be this damn fine. Even with just stuff to sleep in she'll put any other female to shame. "I haven't gotten any sleep yet. I got done with my shower not too long ago." We're standing here with each other, avoiding the real questions that we're wanting to ask or talk about.

"Where are you even going to sleep at? Me and Mandisa took the two guest rooms."

I walk by her and say briskly, "The sofa down in the basement. Jabari gave me pillows and a cover before he went upstairs to his bedroom." I can hear her soft footsteps follow behind me. Seeing her drinking that water, now has me wanting some water, but not ice cold like hers. I get to the case of Pure Life water and pull out a bottle from the plastic.

"You going to tell me what happened, or are you going to make me ask instead?" I turn to her and walk over to one of

the counters and lean back on it. When Jabari and I had got back to the house, everyone was knocked out sleep, and he said that it was best to talk about what happened later on today. Sage is awake, and I don't think I should wait any further, when I have the moment of us being alone to do so.

“I didn't kill him because he wasn't there for me to blow his damn head off,” I say to her, cutting straight to the point.

Sage doesn't look startled by the news. Instead of giving me any expression, she downs the rest of the water and walks the short distance to the kitchen island that has a sink and dishwasher. She throws the ice into the sink and cuts on the water. She begins cleaning and rinsing the glass cup out with the running water and dish soap, then dries it with a dish towel and places it back in one of the cabinets. She cuts off the water and tears off paper towels from the roll in the holder to the side of the sink, drying her hands. If only I had the power to read minds, I'll be hearing Sage's thoughts, instead of me waiting for her to say something. The man that did all of that shit to her is still alive in this world, and can pop back up at any given time. There's no way she's not feeling some sort of way about that.

“None of the people that we saw with him were there either. Me, Jabari, and the rest of them looked high and low within that damn mansion and even kept lookout for them if they were hiding somewhere outside as we were driving out. Still, there wasn't a sign of anyone,” I continue talking as her back is turned to me. She then looks back at me with a blank face. With all the crying she has done over him, I ain't even going to be shocked if tears are about to come.

“So, ghosting again is what he decided to do. I guess that's just his thing. I didn't think he would just disappear that soon, not saying you killing him is what I would have wanted. That's just confirming to me how unpredictable this man can be, but I'm not going to be afraid of him like I was before. I won't shed anymore tears because I'm all cried out, and I'm done letting the hurt from my past consume me.” Not a single tear drops from her eyes, they're not even watering up. She's really not letting Ricardo break her any more than he already

has. This is the woman I know. The one I had seen earlier, I have never met until all this transpired, but she looks to be long gone.

“I strongly believe that he’ll be back and whenever he does, I’m going to make sure I get him.” Sage moves closer to me and raises up on her tiptoes, planting a kiss on my cheek. She places her soft hand on the side of my face, and we just stare at one another.

“I love you too,” she says to me, and I’m confused on her response, but then I can’t help but smile. She’s the first female that I have ever felt this deep for. The one before her was just young love, and the others were just to get a nut in prison, but with her, I learned how real love can get, and how much it’ll have you wanting to die for the one you love. She grabs my hand with her other one and intertwines her fingers with mine. “Sia delivered the message to me, the one you gave her before you left, and it was something that I already knew. What I didn’t know was if you really were going to make it back alive or not. Even with the reassurance from Mandisa and then Sia that you would before we all went to bed, it only helped me from not worrying a little. Once I had laid down in the bed, in the dark, the haunting thoughts of you not returning flooded my entire mind. How for the rest of my life I would have to carry the regret that I didn’t, for the last time, tell you that I loved you back with my own words.” I move my face closer to hers, my lips slightly brushing against her top lip. No longer being able to hold off my eagerness to have my lips on hers, I tenderly press mine against hers, and the both of us intensely start kissing. I pick her up without any trouble, she’s so damn light. She wraps her arms around my neck and her legs around my body. I turn us around with my hands gripping her ass, and press her up against the wall, breaking our lips away from each other’s.

I go to giving her kisses from her neck all the way down to her collarbone. I pull her tube top down a little to release one of her breasts, and I begin sucking and nibbling on her nipple. “Wait...wait...Chance, we can’t...this doesn’t mean we’re,” she says to me through little breaths and moans. I stop sucking on her nipple and glance back up to her. She catches her breath

as she takes her arms from around my neck and presses her hands up to my broad chest. “I love you, that is very much true, and you’ll forever be the one I’m in love with, but we can’t go any further than this, or even do this again. We’re not together, and I don’t ever want us to become friends with benefits or anything of that sort. I learned my lesson on that and I don’t need a redo. Also, we’re better than that to even settle on doing that shit. We can just simply be friends; well, I at least hope you can be that with me and we just grow and learn things on our own with life for some time. If we’re soulmates like I believe in my heart for us to be, then there’s nothing in this whole wide world that’ll stop me and you from being one again.

“So, fuck Ricardo and all the bullshit that comes with him. Neither of us is going to give him the satisfaction of thinking about him on the daily. Looking over our shoulders, wondering when he’s going to pop back out of his hole like a mole to fuck with me or you. Wherever the fuck he is and what he might do, it don’t matter to me, until it’s presented in front of me, and I strongly suggest that you don’t let it matter to you either until then, if it’s to even happen. And if the people he hired are going to keep on stalking after me, then so be it. I won’t give him no control over me, and the only way to do that is to keep living life for my boys, me, and my career. Along with making sure you and I keep on climbing up to secure a real investor or get to the point we’re racking up so much money to where we both can put towards a building and start our business ourselves. Will we keep the same name of the barbershop and hair salon, I have not a single clue, but regardless, we’re going to build that shit up and get it running.” She unwraps her legs from around me and I place her back down on the floor. She pulls her tube top back up.

She had deaded the plans of us working together, but I’m glad to hear she’s back with it. We had put a lot of thought and time into that business plan. “I agree on everything you said. I thought the same thing with us finding and learning ourselves more than we do. I just couldn’t resist not kissing you, but I apologize for that and from here on out, I’ll fully control myself with you and be a friend. This might be too much to

ask of you, but could I possibly still be in the boys' lives, like continue taking them to the basketball court, fishing, just doing things with them in general?"

She looks down from me, being quiet and deeply thinking I presume. Lifting her head back up with a cute smile, she nods her head. "Saint and Silas love you, so, of course, I'll allow you to still have time with them. Ricardo told me to dead everything with you, that includes being around them also, but I will not let that man come back and call the shots and believe he'll have a family with me. Those boys up there are mine, they came from me. What I do and how I raise them is my business and nobody else's. It's also best if you and I take the time to talk with Cliff, so he can be introduced to his grandsons."

"I love them as well, so, I thank you for letting me continue being in their lives. As for Cliff, I'll get on that. I haven't had the chance to talk with him about Ricardo, but I bet it'll crush him, because he might feel he's to blame, but he isn't. Once he knows of Silas and Saint, though, I guarantee his old ass is going to be happy, after knowing how they were conceived though."

Sage brightly smiles, and that beauty of hers is straight radiating. "Well then, we'll get to that, this afternoon, together. Cliff, my mother, and uncle are the only ones left that need to know about all of this. So, good morning to you and I'll see you later on," Sage says and then walks away, leaving me in the kitchen. I hear her climbing up the stairs. I cut off all the lights downstairs and proceed to the basement.

The strength, hopefulness, and ambition that Sage has will forever be admirable to me. A woman like her can inspire and motivate so many other women and people in this world. Sia had mentioned that Sage isn't going to be the same until Ricardo was dead. I agree on that. We were both wrong. With him dead or alive, Sage ain't going to ever be the same because she's going to be better than ever before. Together or not, we can still be a dream team out here, and then when the time comes, recruit other dope ass barbers and hairstylists. As for Ricardo, I won't go against her again when it comes to

him, but I am going to stay alert like I do with anyone or anything, so if he comes at me one day, I ain't going to have no choice but to do the same shit, self-defense. Knowing Sammy, he's going to put protection on Sage and everyone around her, so it's going to be difficult for Ricardo to get to her without some kind of backup. More than anything, though, I feel he's no serious threat. Him not being at the mansion just showed how scared he must have been. If he were true to his words and had some sort of power, nobody would have gotten him to go anywhere.

SAGE

THREE MONTHS LATER

T*he pain, the stressin', ain't in me no more. The girl that they used to know done changed.*

The doorbell to my house goes off, ringing loudly over Kelly Rowland ft. Eve's "Like This" that's moderately playing from the Philips Bluetooth system that's in my home hair salon, as I'm evenly parting Grace's hair to do another chunky box braid. I'm soon to be done with her hair, so, in about the next hour, she'll be good to go. It's Saturday and it's already the afternoon. I have three more clients to do after her, but all of what they set appointments for me to do to their hair won't go over more than two or three hours. On weekends I do less heads than during weekdays because I be needing some sort of break, instead of being on my feet the whole entire day, seven days a week.

I place the orange rat tail comb down on my white Lucian double-mirror wall mount salon styling station, that has a variety of hair supply items and equipment on it. "That got to be Cliff and yo' brother," I say to Grace, who's sitting in the grey hydraulic stylist chair, singing along to the song.

She stops singing and turns her head to look up to me. "Hell yeah, it's Cliff, and, without a doubt, Chance. His ass ain't going to never miss an opportunity to see yo' fine ass, friends or not. Once you open your front door, he's going to be standing right there on your porch next to Cliff, making him look like a damn leprechaun compared to his height, when he could have just sat in whichever car they pulled up in and

waited for the boys to walk to the car with Cliff. I'll be thirsty to see yo' ass too, though, if the bitches I'm talking to or forever surrounded by are hideous as fuck. Like, the females that be all on his dick, just ain't it. I just be sitting back from afar shaking my head, because I be so disappointed," she says to me with such deep agony and a critical look, and I can't help but to start laughing. Her serious ass face is killing me.

Grace and I have a great friendship, even after Chance and I broke up months back. She ain't switch up on me in any way, and neither did Ms. Rosetta. They're still my hair clients and all, they have nothing but love for me, and it's vice versa. So, it's safe to say I'm the ex that's always welcome to all the family events. Grace is only a year younger than me, and within these past months she's been hanging out with me, Sia, and Mandisa on the regular, tagging along on whatever our adventures would be those days and nights, and she's forever vlogging. She's a YouTuber. She and her boyfriend, Nelson Bond, have their own channels, but they also have their couple channel, and then the family one with their baby girl, Nevaeh. Grace is such a supportive person, just like a lot of others, when it comes to me or Chance, and our careers as well. She even has me on some of her YouTube videos, and her boyfriend has Chance on his, and then conversely, I be on her boyfriend's and Chance on hers, showing off our skills of cutting and doing hair or just normal enjoyable content. I really fuck with Grace the long way, like I do with Mandisa and Sia, and that's saying a lot for a person like me who didn't care back then to really let anyone new into my life. So, I personally think she might just be downing the females that're in Chance's life because of us being so cool with one another, or she for real does feel that way.

Either way, I don't have any hateful shit to say when it comes to Chance and his single life. He was once a man locked down for seven long, consecutive years, and then we got in a relationship not long after he was released. So, whatever it is that he's doing, I'm more than happy for him, because he's living it up. We both honestly are out here in Charlotte just having the time of our lives, doing our own things, but keeping in touch for the boys and then having times

of talking about the business and how far we've come along in these past months. That's very minimum compared to how we once were seeing each other on the regular and calling or texting twenty-fourty-seven when we were apart. As for my single life that I can talk on, all I have to say is that a lot of men have tried to talk with me on a serious level. So many have flirted and asked to take me on dates. All of that is peaches and creams, but I've been off limits because I have fallen in love with myself. So, lowkey, my status isn't single, it's just me in a relationship with myself. Not to be mistaken, though, I do my little flirting here and there, but it's just for fun. Especially in a social setting or dancing environment, like I will be in tonight with my girls and all the rest that will be there in a V.I.P. section at Club 51 Degrees.

“Don't do yo' brother like that. His taste is not that horrible like you're making it out to be. The females I've caught glimpses of on his Snapchat at times when he's out turning up be cute. The one I saw him at the club with about two weeks ago was a whole baddie, and she wasn't letting up on him. She must have wanted everyone to know she was there with him.” I chuckle lightly, and Grace gets out of the chair with the black long hair cape on. I head into the bathroom and quicky wash and dry my hands. I saunter to the door of the salon room, and Grace is following behind me.

I've been hustling nonstop and building myself up even more than I already was in Charlotte. My Facebook business page is booming, but my Instagram is doing so even more. I have exactly 11.8k followers and my hair business page is forever getting mad love. The success that has come to me, I earned it. I've been putting in the work on regular basis, but I'll be lying if I said I did it all on my own. I had help from those in my life. My mother and Brad even helped me out, giving me half of the money I needed to make this home salon. I was struggling at first to get it accomplished and then finally, I had put my pride to the side and stopped acting like I was someone that was too good to ask for or take up on an offer for a little help. All the money that Brad had given me, I made that back and more, and instead of it being a handout it turned into a loan that I paid back, not a dollar short. Sia had helped

me a lot with designing out and building the salon in the large-size room downstairs with a bathroom. She helped me with the steps needed to having my business from home legalized and for the salon to be up and running with passing all inspections to safely run the salon out of my home. Because the times before having the built-in salon, it was illegal with me doing hair. The bigger I've gotten, the smarter I had to learn how to move, and not have anyone or anything fuck up me and my money.

“You talking about that bitch, Chanel. Girl, she ain't ugly or anything, but she ain't no baddie either. From what Sia told me a week back after the couple's dinner with my man, hers, and Mandisa's, ole girl was one of the female COs my brother had bustin' down on him while he was behind bars. She probably seeing him doing real good now, and most likely just a damn groupie. You know they be flocking to niggas with that bread.” I open up the door and walk into the hallway, where family pictures are hanging on the walls. My mom had it like this when she was living here, so I decided not to take pictures down, just add more on these walls and around the house.

Grace is her brother's keeper. She don't play no games with these females or even niggas when it comes to him, so when she's settled on not liking anyone around him or more so wanting to be with him, it ain't nothing that will make her change that. Sometimes with sisters and brothers, whoever they're talking to, it ain't going to matter at all if they're good or bad for them, because they automatically think and feel that no one will be good enough for their sibling anyway. Grace might just be team me, and no other bitches that fuck with her brother, because Chanel to me is a baddie, and me being Chance's ex, I don't have no trouble admitting that. If she looks good, then that's what it is.

“You're such a trip, I cannot with you. Whatever it might be with her, Chance is doing what he's doing. And you know me, I don't speak on none of your brother's personal business.” With Mandisa dating Chance's cousin on his father side, Omari, who goes by Kasimir, who moved back here from Houston, Texas; Sia obviously being married to his best friend; and Grace being his little sister, it's difficult at times

avoiding anything with Chance. I don't have any jealous or hurt feelings with anything that they slip up and tell me at times about him. It's just me not really caring to hear anything about him because I don't take no time out of my day or night to try and keep up with him. When we talk, we *talk*, when we see one another, we just *see* each other, and then at times I have a little talk with my sons after they come back from spending time with him, because they love sharing with me. They know that Chance and I are I guess friends and nothing else like what we were before, but other than that, I don't be speaking on Chance.

“You right, my bad girl, but moving on to what's going down tonight. The club is the move for everyone that's everyone tonight. Some of my homegirls I grew up with are going all out with their outfits, hair, and makeup. Talking about some rappers and their entourage are going to be there.”

“Oh lord, bitches better have their wigs glued down with cement, and keep napkins or whatever's close to it around them, because drinks and wigs are going to be flying in that bitch tonight. When niggas that got some sort of celebrity status come into clubs, or appear at events, the ratchetness comes out of females even more than usual. Then the niggas be on some plotting ass shit, whether its beef or they're trying to do a lick. There've been too many rappers who've gotten their jewelry and money snatched from being too damn flashy, so, tonight's about to be full of entertainment.” Years back, I stopped going to clubs, due to witnessing someone being murdered right in front of me, but things have changed since then. Mandisa is the one who pushed me the most into getting back out and enjoying myself. When I started back going to clubs, I was having major PTSD. The first few times of being back in one, my anxiety was at an all-time high, but eventually, I let everything go and became free. Dancing, drinking, and enjoying the music. I done even went to festivals and concerts, just experiencing all that life has to offer. Life is so damn short and us humans don't have an actual life clock to see how much time we have left here, so for me, I stopped missing out on things that will have me creating memories for forever, capturing them for eternity with videos and photos.

“I heard you on that, but long as me and mine good, there won’t be no problems out of me tonight.”

Getting to my front door, I unlock it and open it to see Chance and Cliff, and what Grace said about Chance standing on the porch next to Cliff having him look like a leprechaun runs through my mind. I laugh to myself and wave my hand on for them to come inside my house. Moving to the side, Chance and I catch eyes with one another, but I look away from him. As they both get inside of the house, I close the door.

“What’s up, Sage,” Chance says to me, smiling. And no lie, he’s still to this day the finest nigga ever in my book. He done got tatted up even more, and his hair is grown out now, having kinky curls but keeping it shaped and lined up. He still has that sexy ass, neatly shaped, thick beard, and that smooth honey complexion. Bitches were fighting for his attention even when he got out of prison, but now, I’m sure they’ll be ready to kill a bitch just for his attention to be on them only.

“Hey,” I say back to him, keeping it cute and short without eye contact.

“How are you doing today, Sage?” Cliff asks me, and I look towards him.

“I’m doing wonderful, just working and getting to the money. You’re enjoying your early retirement?”

He nods his head pleasingly. “Si, I was too damn old to keep doing all that back-breaking work, with these old bones of mine. It’s real nice to finally sit back in life and not work and have no worries for money. Then with mis nietos, they’re making retirement even better. I thank you for letting the both of them even come spend weekends with me.”

I smile at him and let out a little laugh. “Trust me, whenever you want Saint and Silas, you can have them, but no, seriously, they absolutely love going with you, meeting the other side of their family and just being with their grandfather.” When everything with Ricardo was revealed to Cliff, my uncle, and my mother, it went exactly how I expected it to with each of them. They all wanted to murder him, just like everyone else. Cliff was emotionally torn up the

most with Ricardo being his son, and he expressed how could he have helped create such a monster as him, when he learned of how my sons got created. He said if he were to ever come near him and the boys, that he would kill him. With my mother, she flipped the fuck out over Facetime, and she mainly believed that it was her fault why Ricardo had gained that sort of access to me. Because of how much she worked, before Brad, and never even trying to get me or her help on dealing with the trauma from my father. The reason she worked so hard back in the day was because she never got into the drug business some of my family were doing, she wanted no parts of that, and that was one of the reasons why she had left and moved to Mississippi with my father before I was born. I had let her know that it wasn't her fault in any way. When we got to NC, she was broken, and a broken person can't really help fix someone else when they haven't fixed their own selves yet, but we moved on from that talk and we both have a therapist.

Lastly, it came down to talking to my uncle Sammy. All hell was broken loose. He wasn't hearing any of that shit of me not caring about Ricardo and if he came back. He and my family tore Charlotte up trying to find him, but there was nothing to connect him to anything that indicated he was here or in Texas. The mansion had turned out to be a mansion that anyone could rent out on Airbnb if they had the money for it. Also, if he was this big, bad man that he presumed to be, there wasn't anything to find on that either. Ricardo just turned into Casper the ghost once again, and even with my uncle and his people not finding him, that didn't mean they weren't still on the lookout for him. I'm very well protected, there's always a man or men around securing my safety. One of them is an old friend from high school, whose name is Beezy.

"You would be over here, getting that big ass coconut head done," Chance says to Grace, snapping me away from my little trip down memory lane. He pulls her into a brief hug, and she gives him a fake ass smile and lifts her middle finger up to him.

"You've seen yourself in a mirror before, so, that long ass tank head of yours, should have you never speaking on anyone else's damn head. Anyways, hey Dad," Grace says as she then

waves to Cliff, giving him a hug. Grace's father was a Mexican man, and from what was told to me, he tried his best to trap Ms. Rosetta. From the time Grace was conceived, he was pushing marriage down her throat. Long story short, he was an undocumented immigrant, and Ms. Rosetta wasn't ever going to get married again after Chance's father died. So, Grace's father took off, and they never learned what became of him after that. With Cliff already being in the picture as Chance's father figure, he's Grace's father as well, because that's the only man she's ever known.

"Oye, mi hermosa hija, tu cabello se ve muy bien," Cliff says to Grace, returning her hug. She steps back from him and puts her hand on the top of her chest, looking flattered.

"Vamos hombre, ella ya es lo suficientemente engreída," Chance chimes in, speaking Spanish as well, and it's sparking up sex flashbacks for me. I remember all the times he would be speaking Spanish to me while we were fucking or making love. He and I used to have such breathtaking ass sex together, and I can't ever lie on that phenomenal ass dick of his, because what he's packing ain't nothing but the truth. So, the ladies that are having a go with it now have practically struck gold.

"En primer lugar, Chance, soy hermosa como la mierda, así que puedo permitirme ser eso. Getting back to you, Dad, when it comes to my hair, Sage stays having it slayed to the gods. So, of course, it's looking good," Grace responds back, moving her hand away from the cape. I want to be bilingual so bad, but learning different languages just ain't for me. I took Spanish classes back in school and I barely passed them. I only know a couple of Spanish words if that, so, at times like this when they're speaking it, I'm lost as ever until some English comes about.

"Yeah, aight, Grace," Chance chuckles, and they fall into a conversation of him talking about some on-the-rise-to-fame person that's become a new client for him.

I bring my attention back to Cliff, and he's tranquilly standing with his arms behind his back. "Let me go ahead and get the boys," I say to him, then head off to the stairs.

“Saint! Silas! Your grandfather and Chance are here!” I yell with one of my hands to the side of my mouth, projecting my voice enough to where they hear me all the way upstairs. I’m standing at the bottom of the staircase in my house, and I’m surprised that they aren’t already down here after hearing the doorbell go off.

I hear the sound of footsteps, and then both of them come into my view and they’re running down the stairs like a pack of hungry, wild dogs.

They had their birthday last month, so now I’m a mother of two eight year olds. It’s like the older they get, the prouder and happier I am of putting my all into motherhood and raising them the best I can, along with help. It’s extraordinary to me to see them becoming who they are, but also sadness sometimes finds a way to creep into my mind, because my babies aren’t really babies anymore. In the next two years, they’ll be hitting the double digits. Not much has really changed with them, aside from Silas wanting to grow locs like his great uncle, so his hair is going through that process. As for Saint, he’s holding on to the way he’s been having his hair cut, and recently, he wanted Chance to start cutting his hair, and I went ahead and allowed it. At first, I didn’t because my hands are the only hands that have been on his head, but I then understood how he might want to spend more time with him, and I just caved in, knowing how much they look up to Chance and want to be around him.

Saint shoves into Silas, and he stops for a quick second on one of the stairs and goes to pushing him right back. They’re most likely doing a race down the stairs to see who’ll win first as they tend to always do, but these two are so competitive with one another at times, that something so simple as a little race can turn to an all-out war. Saint comes to a complete stop on a stair and pushes Silas once again, and next thing I know, they’re having a rough ass shoving match that is bound to turn into a huge fight. I swear, raising boys is never going to be meant for the weak. “Hey! You two better stop it and come down the rest of those stairs like you got some sense. If not, y’all aren’t going fishing and y’all will not go stay with yo’ grandfather this weekend,” I snap judiciously at the both of

them, and they freeze up, looking my way, and I give them the ‘serious’ look, to get them straight on acting out.

“Yes, ma’am,” they both say in unison as they stop pushing each other and start walking down the stairs normally. They both have their big book bags on their back that are filled with clothes, another pair of shoes, and a bag with their toiletries to stay the two nights with Cliff, but before they do that, they’ll be going fishing with, Cliff and Chance for however long they’ll be out at Lake Norman. Cliff mentioned that October is the best time of the year to go bass fishing, and I don’t know nothing about fish, but he loves fishing. That’s where Chance learned to fish to even suggest back then to take the boys fishing for the first time.

Saint walks off the last stair first and I place my hand on his head, and then do the same with Silas as he comes along walking past me.

“You two going to miss me when y’all gone?” They turn back to me, nodding their heads, as I’m walking behind them making my way back to the front door.

“I’ll be missing y’all like crazy too, even though at times y’all drive me crazy. You two don’t go giving your grandfather any trouble, okay?” They slow down walking a little for me to catch up with them and walk in the middle of them.

“I won’t at all. Fishing is real fun to do, but I can’t wait until we’re at his house and can play the drums and guitar,” Saint says to me, and I can hear the excitement in his voice. Cliff is a man of many talents. He’s giving these two lessons with instruments that other parents have to pay thousands for.

“We will, Mom, we don’t ever give him no trouble,” Silas says innocently to me, and I glance at him and chuckle. That’s a damn lie, but Cliff keeps up with them perfectly fine.

“Abuelo!” Saint and Silas yell together and run over to Cliff, giving him hugs.

They have a three-day weekend from school, so I won’t be seeing them until Monday evening.

“Hey, hijos! You two have everything? Because last time I had to turn the car around,” Cliff says to them with a beaming smile. He’s always so happy to see them. He told me once that he sees his late son, Adriel, in both Silas and Saint. The three of them have such an unbreakable bond, and it goes to show that I indeed made the right choice of letting them meet their grandfather.

“Yes sir, we have everything packed in our book bags. Mom checked behind us with everything as well,” Silas says to him, and Saint nods his head, agreeing.

They then go over to Chance, giving him some hugs as well, and exchanging a few words with him before standing back in front of Cliff.

“Well, we better get going, we have that drive to the lake. Sage, I’ll be in touch, and whenever they want to use my phone throughout the time with me to talk with you, of course, I will let them.”

I raise my hand up to him. “I know you will, Cliff, it’s okay, you don’t have to repeat that you will every time we do this. The first time of them staying the night with you, I was just a nervous wreck. It’s been months now of this. Y’all have fun and send me pictures and videos as usual.”

Saint and Silas head back over to me and give me hugs and kisses on my cheeks, and I give them kisses right back. “I love you both so much. You two enjoy yourselves and then when you get back, you better be ready for another school week,” I say to them, giving them some more kisses on their cheeks and then giving them both big bear hugs.

Cliff opens up my front door and heads out with both Saint and Silas, leaving the door wide open. I see the little Halloween decorations that I have out on the porch. I’m not really into this month, but my boys are, so, every year I make sure to decorate and do things with them to celebrate Halloween.

Chance continues standing in my house, not leaving with them. Grace clears her throat as she's looking up to Chance, but he's looking directly at me.

"Is there something that you need, Chance?" He snaps out of whatever it is, and he licks his lips.

"Your business cards. I ran out of them, and I need about at least two more stacks." Chance has continued to pass out my business cards, as well as I still do it for him, because at the end of the day, we're working towards doing actual business together.

"Damn, you really passed out all of the cards I gave you not long ago?" I ask him, surprised. I literally gave him like a good size box of my business cards, and now he's standing here and doesn't have anymore. Wow, I mean, I am getting a lot of new people wanting bookings. Even when I checked my phone earlier it was just rising more than usual. I figured it was more so from the exposure Grace has given me, but I see why I can't keep up now. I might have to get an assistant soon to keep up with all of this. The salon only has two of everything, so it ain't like four or five people can be in there at once and I'm working on all of their heads either.

"A lot of doors have opened for me and now that I got my foot in them, it's only right I keep elevating you as I'm doing so as well. You deserve to shine, and I don't know why you so surprised that I'm putting you on. I forever got you." I bite slightly down on my bottom lip, and for the first time in a long time, my heart is skipping a beat because of Chance. I immediately stop myself from gushing over him like a damn middle school girl with her first real crush.

"I'm forever appreciating it. Let me hurry up and give them to you," I say as I begin walking away from him, and I can hear Grace chuckle. Knowing her ass, she is just loving this whole moment. This is the first time in months that Chance has been in my house this long.

Walking through the door, I'm back in my salon and I head over to a closet that holds a lot of supplies and other things in it. Walking over to the stack of boxes, I pick it up and it's

heavy as fuck. Chance comes into the closet and grabs the box. His hands graze over mine and I swear I feel a fiery spark going off with us, and he looks at me as if he's feeling the same as well. I let go of the box and he easily holds it up in his arms, as if it's light as a feather.

We stare at each other, and I begin feeling those fucking dumb ass butterflies in my stomach. This can't be happening, like, hell no. I turn my head away from him and walk out the closet. I bet that Chance is having his cake and eating too right now, with these females, with how much he has risen and made a name for himself more than Chance the felon, or Chance the once high school star basketball player. His cousin, Omari, is a damn music producer that's well known in the hip hop game, and he doesn't care for the scenes that come with that no more, with dating Mandisa. But Chance is single and very much still new to all of it, so he might feel that he's living the dream. That spark, whatever it's indicating, it can't happen.

Grace is sitting in one of the shampoo chairs, watching on faithfully with me and Chance.

Chance comes out of the closet and he looks at me, but I just look away, as I notice I'm forever doing with him. I shut the door back and quickly say, "Thanks, Chance, for doing what you are for me." I walk back over to the chair I have Grace sitting in to do her hair, and I pick up the black braiding hair.

"You're welcome, but you know there's no need for the thank yous."

"You going to 51 tonight, Chance?" Grace says, and I believe she's trying to help subside the energy within this room.

"You already know, little sis, that I'm going to be up in the building. I heard it's going to be all the way packed tonight, but with the names that are coming, I ain't surprised about that one bit."

"Aight then, cool, me and Nelson stay having our section reserved, so knowing you and your little new crew, V.I.P is

reserved for y'all too." I look over to the both of them, and Chance laughs and his mouth is opened up a little wide, and I get a glance of some diamond open-face grills on his bottom teeth.

"Hell yeah, me and my niggas don't never miss out on going to any of the hottest clubs. Shit getting real old to me, though, but I'll catch y'all later," Chance says back to her, and then he heads out of my salon. Within a minute, I hear my front door close. I don't even have to go look and see if he locked the door behind him because I know he did. He always locked it behind him when he was leaving here when we were together, so I doubt that changed.

"Yikes, no wonder the two of you avoid being around each other for too long. Don't get mad at me or snap at me, but, hunny, my big brother is still madly in love with you, and you're still in love with him too. All the bitches that I've seen in his face since y'all broke up don't even matter, because the way he looked at you, I haven't witnessed that yet with none of the them. The juicy and red apple of his eyes is without a doubt still you, the other bitches are just the rotten ones." I stay quiet, not responding back to her, but a smile is tugging a little on my lips, but I refuse to smile with hearing that.

"It's okay to break that smile out, Sage. You ain't got to hide it from me... I know how it is. Nelson and me done did a break from each other before too. We knew each other since we were twelve and got together when we were freshmen in high school. Neveah was only about five months old when we decided to take that break and see if we needed to find ourselves, as people kept on suggesting, since we were so young, but, baby, when I tell you I couldn't fight it no more with him, I really just couldn't. I was so in love with my damn man, and I ain't want to keep on wasting away time missing him when I could just be with him, us living, growing, and loving each other. I'm not saying what me and Nelson had is identical to Chance and you, but we said fuck that growing and learning apart. We took time doing it for a little, but we learned way more when we were back together than we did apart. Some people think it's just for YouTube, but it's not at all. I honestly loved him since I was twelve, and I'm in love

with him to this very day.” She widely smiles, and just her speaking on Nelson is the cutest ever. I witnessed the love between them plenty of times, and it ain’t at all for the cameras, and they also don’t even bring no sort of mess to their channels. It’s all positive, good, and loving energy, none of that drama for views.

Grace gets up from the shampoo chair and comes back over to me, sitting in the chair in front of me. “I hear what you saying, Grace, but I just don’t know if my journey alone is done yet, and I don’t want to cut it short because of my love for your brother. Plus, who knows if he’s even ready to stop doing all that he is with females and everything else. I won’t stand in his way, because he’s been respectful with keeping his distance from me. I don’t believe I can just be like, let’s get back together, and he’ll do it,” I say, being open for the first time in a while about Chance and how the love is still very much there for him.

That damn spark done lowkey done something to me. How is it even possible for a ten-second touch to ignite these strong feelings? Not long ago, I was thinking and feeling differently about what Chance is doing, but that fucking touch... just, why?

“You know I would love you for a sister-in-law. I love you as a good friend of mine, and to know that my brother would have you as his wife one day, girl, he’ll forever be winning. I’m not saying that just because of our friendship either. Chance loves you, and I feel if you did tell him that, y’all will be right back together, as if y’all never stopped in the first place. As for all that he’s doing, he did say that clubbing shit was getting old. He has a good fanbase now, so I believe he might be in there to keep up getting good exposure, more than anything. Nelson and I have to keep up with a lot of that too, at times, but not always at clubs. I’m so happy for Chance, but it’s also so funny because his fanbase is real good, but I just know that half of it is made up by females. These bitches seen him with Omari, and everything just fell into place for him, and those females just think he’s the finest damn thang ever. They be posting him on those cute ass boys type of IG pages.”

I laugh with thinking what the comments are even like under Chance's picture on that page and any others. He has become a very desirable man for the ladies here and even outside of North Carolina, if he's on the internet.

"Let's stop talking on this. It's going to have my mind going on overdrive if we do," I say and then chuckle lightly.

"Okay, off that subject. Soon as you finish my hair up, I'm going to Facetime Nelson to show him how fine his baby momma is, as always."

I grab up my iPhone and scroll through my music playlist in Apple Music. Since the boys are long gone from this house, I can now blast my explicit music. As I'm scrolling through the playlist, my thumb stops on Megan Thee Stallion's "Big Ole Freak," and I press down on my phone screen and the song begins playing on through the stereo system. I raise the volume up with the remote controller, having it blaring since it's only me and Grace.

"Ay, big ole freak. Big booty, big ole treat, I'ma make him wait for the pussy," Grace raps along with the lyrics, moving her body in the chair.

I dance a little as well, feeling the song right along with her. A smile breaks through and forms on my lips, and it's not just because of Chance and the what ifs with him, it's just more so me being happy, just because. The young Sage could have only imagined a day to be happy for no apparent reason. She's never seen herself making it further into a life where she'll be all grown up. The old Sage is resting peacefully now, because there's no need for her anymore in my life. I said my goodbyes to her the moment I made peace with every horrible event in my life. I forgave everybody because it wasn't at all for them, it was all for me, and that's what I had to learn. And when I did, there was nothing holding me back from soaring like a bird high in the sky.

CHANCE COOLEY

Three months have gone on by and it doesn't even feel like it, and that's probably because everything for me has just been one big ass blur. One minute I was getting ready to kill a man, but then that went out the window when he wasn't anywhere to be found. Sage and I became friends, but more so we're lowkey strangers who just have a lot of trust in one another to carry out what we had planned, and for me to be in Saint's and Silas' life. It's confusing to be honest, so to really put it into words, it's kind of hard for me to do. So, I'll just focus on all that's happened with me, and not so much me and Sage. Life has a way with surprising me, and not like how it was when I got locked up for years. About four days after what occurred with Ricardo, my cousin, Omari, who goes by Kasimir to the music world and other people who he don't fuck with to say his real name, had hit me up and told me that he was moving back to Charlotte. The first and main reason he told me why, was because he had fallen in love with a woman, and that woman was revealed to be Mandisa, Sage's cousin.

If that ain't a motherfucking coincidence I don't know what is, but once he moved down here, that's when my life these past months just sped the fuck up. If it wasn't one thing it was another, but not in a bad way. I was already getting a lot of recognition from being a barber within Charlotte. I was on my grind, heavy, but once Omari stepped back into the city that he was born and raised in with me, he took me to a whole different level, by just simply hanging around him and us

being family, and me not being a leech as he claimed other family members of ours to be just wanting to fuck with him for the fame and to get his money. With how much respect in the rap game he has with producing beats and knowing this person and that person, it opened up doors for me that I didn't even fucking think were possible to open.

I started gaining so many followers on IG, which is a mixture of my personal and business life, Twitter, and then my personal Facebook and business one just took off right along with it. I started going to parties that a lot of celebrities were hosting, and just getting into events that a nigga like me would have never thought of seeing from where I came from months back. I even started doing little shit here and there with Grace and her boyfriend on YouTube. I ended up quitting the construction job Cliff had given me, and he was not mad or anything. I mean, he retired and left the business to his nephew, so he was proud as fuck to hear that I had quit, because it meant that I was on my way up. I fully became a mobile barber, and my clientele is full of people that a lot of others could only dream to be around, let alone have their personal number. I started flying out at times to different states with Omari, and he just really showed me that it was more to Charlotte and life in general than what all I was dreaming to accomplish and see in prison.

I worked on a few music video shoots, getting niggas' heads right for the video, and that shit was lit. I be clubbing and hanging with folks that bitches be screaming to the top of their lungs for, and niggas respecting or envying them. Everything has been a wild ass solo ride, and I'm very grateful for God looking out for me that night when I was about to take a soul. Because it was too much hate in my heart to have a clear mind. If Ricardo was there that night and I would have killed him, nothing I'm blessed with now would have happened, I feel. Ricardo had me mistaking him for someone to help get my foot through the business world door, but God was like hold on, let me show you who really can help you do that. Hanging with Omari, my intentions were never to get some sort of clout. He was my cousin, my second brother, with Jabari being the other. So, I hung with him the first two weeks

of him being here, and never once passed out my or Sage's business cards or talked about my career at all with the people he brought me around those weeks. But after that, he had looked me dead in my eyes one night while we were out at some get together, and he told me that this is my time to network. From that night and on, I networked like there was no tomorrow, and my skills with a clipper spoke for themselves, and that was the rise of Chance Cooley. People fuck with me as a barber and then they just do so because I'm just so real. I'm a laid-back person, and for a lot of females, they let it be known how fine and sexy they think I am, and how they want to fuck. More so, though, I have a story to tell and a lot of them heard it, and they labeled me as someone that's inspirational. But as they were doing that, I was making sure they discovered that there was another person like that, which was Sage. Even with how we've been these past months, I never let up when it came to her and making sure that she rises up too.

"Chance, your line is tugging," Silas says, breaking me away from my deep thinking. I sit up in the boat and grab up my fishing rod, and soon as I have it gripped tightly in my hand, I start trying to reel the fish in, but this damn fish is a tough one.

Cliff and Saint are in another boat not that far from us, and I can see them both standing and talking, and it seems that Cliff is reeling in something himself.

I stand up in the boat, and I start slowly trying to guide the fish along, making it feel like it's the one in control. Soon as I see a little ripple where my line is emerged down into the water, I start reeling in the fish fast as I can, but then stop as it tugs back because I don't want my line to break. With letting a few seconds pass by, I go on back to reeling again, and I keep on doing that over and over. Once the fish is close to the boat, I yank it up out the water. That motherfucker is big as hell. It's a green bass fish, and it's true when it comes to this time of year, these fishes just be eating and eating and get swell as fuck like this.

“Ohhh, a gun! Cool,” Silas says, and I drop the fish rod out of my hands. The fish drops back into the water, having some of it splash up on us, and the rod is disappearing into the water. I turn to Silas and see him holding my gun in his hand, and he’s pointing it. It must have fell out when I was yanking the fish up. “Silas, give me the god damn gun,” I say to him with agitation, and he goes to pointing it some more, acting like he’s shooting.

“Boy!” I snatch the gun out of his hands, careful to not hit the safety out of it. I swiftly place the gun back in the waist band of my pants. I glance over to Saint and Cliff, and they are still occupied with fishing.

“What did I tell you to do, Silas?” I say to him, sitting back down in the boat. He looks down at me and frowns his face. Him looking sad or crying isn’t going to get him out of anything with me. I’m not about to let up on him when he feels a gun is a play toy.

“You told me to give you the gun back,” he says back to me as he’s fighting back from crying.

“So, you heard me tell you that, but why didn’t you give it back?”

He shrugs his shoulders up at me and I shake my head. “Nah, that’s not an answer. Speak with words and tell me why.”

He looks up to me and tears are dropping from his eyes. “I ignored you, because it was fun, and I wanted to act like I was shooting. I’m sorry, I won’t do it again, please don’t tell my mom.”

Even after all this time, carrying a strap with me is a must. I feel naked when I don’t carry one. I should have had it secured more, but it’s no excuse for Silas doing what he did.

“Nothing about a gun is fun, Silas, you don’t play with guns. Fake or real, you hear me? I don’t ever want you to become another Tamir Rice. ”

He wipes his tears away and nods his head at me. “Yes sir, I’m sorry, I really am,” he says as he moves over to where I

am, and I place my hand on his shoulder.

“When I tell you something serious like that, Silas, it’s for your own good. If that safety wasn’t on, you could have shot real bullets, injuring yourself and others. I get that you’re sorry, and you’re still a little boy, but you knew better. So, next time when you see a gun, metal or plastic, don’t think about picking it up and thinking it’s something to play games with.”

“Yes sir,” he says again to me, and I pat down on his shoulders two times before dropping it back down to my side. I lean over in the boat, looking down at the lake water, and my damn fishing rod is long gone. Cliff’s going to be pissed. That damn fishing rod he had for over ten years is now somewhere at the bottom of this lake. I can give him the money to replace it, but it won’t replace the history that rod has been through with him fishing.

“I didn’t mean to say ‘damn’ to you either, it was just the heat of the moment of seeing you with the gun. I’m sorry for that.”

“It’s alright, I’ve heard worse with my uncle Sammy, but I won’t ever do it again.”

I hold my hand out to him, and we dap each other, and he smiles. “I’m still going to have to tell your mother about this,” I say to him, and that smile of his goes right back to upside down.

“You thinking the gun is going to kill me, she’s going to kill me if you tell her.”

Throwing my hands up, I shrug my shoulders. “I got to, and you know that. She ain’t going to kill you. She might chew yo’ head off a little, but you’ll survive.”

He lets out a deep breath and then twists his mouth up. “You right, I will survive, because real men can stand against anything and still not break. Instead of breaking, they’ll rise up to something bigger and better. You told me that before.”

I chuckle and nod my head, agreeing with him. “That I did, little man, and that is very much true, so hold on to the wisdom that I’m teaching you, aight?”

“Aight, I will,” he says, and then goes back to where he was sitting and grabs up his kid’s fishing pole.

My phone starts vibrating in my front pants pockets and I take it out, looking at the screen. It’s Chanel calling me on Facebook messenger. I let out an annoying deep breath before declining her call, and placing the phone face down in my lap. I done blocked about four different Facebook pages of her, but yet she keeps on trying to contact me, and doesn’t even try to hide the fact that it’s her. I refuse to go out my way blocking her ass once again, so she’ll sooner or later have to get tired of trying to reach me. Chanel is a female from my past days of being in prison. She’s one of the female COs that I was fucking a lot, after my ex, Lavonne, broke up with me. I learned nothing about her really, because I didn’t give a fuck to. I just wanted some pussy. We first started messing around my third year in prison and we stopped fucking around my fifth year because she ended up quitting. So, she was somewhat around me at the time that I had nothing and to the world, I was someone that ain’t amount to nothing.

A month ago, I saw her at a club one night and she came up to me, and I recognized who she was, and I chopped it up with her for a little. The next day after that, she followed me on Facebook because I exceeded over the number of friends, blew me up with calls on Facebook messenger. It’s almost like ever since that night I saw her again after years, she been popping up everywhere I be when I’m out turning up and anyone can get in at least. Two weeks ago, she had followed me everywhere in a club, so I just kept it cool and turned up because of how my life is going. I’m building a brand and I can’t be caught on no video cussing a bitch out or anything else that can have me tarnishing my own self. She’s mostly just being a thirsty ass bitch who’s looking for some sort of come up, but it ain’t going to be no come up off of me. My phone begins vibrating again, and I lift it up expecting it to be her again, but it’s Jabari. I flip the phone over and answer it, pressing it up to my ear.

“Yo, what’s up, my nigga?” I say into the phone, and I hear him laughing.

“Shit, nothing man, seeing what the fuck you up to. The both of us been so damn busy, that we ain’t hang or did nothing too much anymore with each other. So, I’m calling to see if you’re going to be at Club 51 Degrees tonight. Sia wants to go out, and she’s claiming that I need to take a step back from working for at least a night.”

He’s right on that. We haven’t hung too much like we used to, and it ain’t because either of us switched up on one another. It’s just with him in the works of opening up another restaurant while working at the one he already has, and me building up brick by brick still as a barber and then one day being an entrepreneur, free time is something we don’t be having to chill with each other like we used to. From cutting hair, clubbing, and other shit, it be a lot of networking that goes into that honestly, and exposure on social media, but for tonight I feel I can have a moment to pause and just be in the club just to be in there.

“Yeah, I’m going to be up in there tonight. My sister is going as well, with her boyfriend, Mandisa with Omari and, I ain’t too sure about Sage and if she coming out tonight.”

Silas stands up in the boat and throws his fish line into the water, then pulls it right back out of the water. I chuckle to myself. I done told him like two hours ago that fishing is something that you have to be patient with. He’s wanting the fish to just hook on, and he pull it up it like those fishing magnet toys. I don’t believe fishing is for Silas; as for Saint, he loves everything about fishing.

“Sage will be there. Sia got off the phone with her like a minute ago, and she had her on speaker, as always. Everyone knows by now that me and Sia going to tell shit to each other either way. You and Sage still on that hi and bye type of shit?”

I nod my head as if Jabari can really see me. “Yeah, but when I was at her house earlier, we spoke more to each other than we have in a long time.”

“I guess you can call that progress, nigga. Sia still be rooting for y’all. Honestly, I can’t even lie, I’m doing the same, just not in no bitch-like way. It’s just I can’t see no other

female coming into your life and taking the place of Sage. Then, with this success you're having, why not be with the woman that was there with you before it all? She was with you when you ain't have nothing. She showed you that having money or not, she was down for you, so why not be up together?"

"Yeah, no female can replace Sage," I say, letting that slip out my mouth too damn fast.

"Well, nigga, if you know that, then take the initiative and step to her like a real man, her fucking man. I bet you haven't even fucked nobody since her. You fuck any other bitches?"

I look up over to Silas, and he's now sitting back down. "Nah...I ain't see no point to, when I knew she was and would forever be the best I ever had. Plenty of females done wanted me to take it there, one almost had me, but it felt wrong. I don't know how it did, because I am single."

"It did, because not only is your heart still loyal to her but, that dick of yours is too. Same shit happened to me with Sia. They might just have that witchcraft ass pussy. The moment you slide yo' dick up in it, the bonding spell was completed. Anyway, man, I'll see you at the club tonight, and by then, you better have some motherfucking hair on your chest and base in yo' damn voice and get your woman back. Shit, Sia knew what it was with me, ain't no damn breaking up and making up shit. We was locked in for life the moment she gave me that pussy, so if a damn spell was casted, it worked."

"Aight then, I'll catch you there," I say to him while laughing. The call ends and I slide my phone back into my pants front pocket.

Jabari might be on to something with that, because I tried to get Sage out of my head when it came to other women being around me, but if they weren't her, I gave no fucks about them. I remember when I told Sammy that *it's only, Sage, and it'll always just be Sage*, when he asked me on how many females I had fucked after I got out of prison. Life is good, but it'll only be better and complete once I have my baby back, and yeah, I don't give a fuck about our current title. That's my

motherfucking baby. When we were in her home salon, in the closet, I felt something between us, something that ain't never really left, and it had to be that passionate ass love between us. I already done learned that I can't live without her, that I don't want to go another day down this path without her by my side. I feel she's my twin flame. I heard my sister talking about that once, when it came to explaining some shit to me about Nelson. That a twin flame relationship is both challenging but healing, and that explains a lot with me and Sage as well. Fuck it! I need to have a talk with Sage tonight at the club or wherever, long as we talk. I need to get this shit up off my chest.

“**O**h my god, Shanice, she’s so damn precious. Look at all that beautiful hair. You both definitely went half on her,” I say to my older half-sister as her husband, Martin, is holding the phone up to her as she’s sitting up in the hospital bed, with my beautiful newborn niece, Sahara, who’s cradled in my sister’s arms. Sahara is wrapped up in the hospital blankets, and she’s sleeping like an angel. Baby girl done came into the world and is drained. She’s going to get that rest. Shanice looks up to the camera and I see tears rolling down her face as she smiles.

My sister and I never really had a relationship with each other, due to our father and what had happened when it came to our mothers, so naturally, us being against one another was going to happen. Me even having envy towards her because of the way she was treated better than me came into play, and with her side of things, she felt like I came into the world and took her dad from her, making him a part-time dad instead of a full one. We were pointing fingers at each other, when honestly, we were kids. What transpired with our parents was out of our control, but yet we hated and blamed each other for this and that, when this and that wasn’t even our damn problem. As for the abuse I got from our father, she and I had a virtual therapy session with my therapist, and I got a lot off my chest when it came to that. Because I was painted as a liar for many years, when it came to her and her mother, along with my father’s side of the family. Shanice finally heard me out and didn’t shut me down like times before, accusing me of

being a liar. She, for the first time, fully heard me out and understood why I didn't love our father or go to his funeral. I didn't have the strength that I do now to go back to a place that I honestly wasn't supposed to make it out of alive, and seeing the person who would have made that happen.

After Shanice had delivered the news to me of our father's death and I declined in going, I honestly didn't speak to her anymore. I avoided everything with her, because at that time, I felt that was a spit to my face knowing our history. During the time after everything happened with Ricardo, I took a mental step back and realized that she also was blinded when it came to our father. To her, that was her protector, the first person a daughter would love is her father. To her, she would go to war for someone who treated her like a princess, so her first instinct was to stick up and defend him. She apologized and I apologized, we healed, and now we're building a sisterhood.

"She's my miracle baby. We tried for years to have a child, miscarriage after miscarriage, and now here our bundle of joy is, a true blessing to us. Sahara Sage Brown, that's her full name."

I lean back in the passenger seat of the car, completely lost for words. We've been on such great terms since the therapy session two months ago, but for her to give my niece a piece of me such as my name isn't anything small. I go to blinking my eyes repeatedly, not wanting to start crying and fuck up my makeup.

"Oh my god, that is something, that is major, Shanice, like wow. Looking back from where we were to where we are now, girl, who would have ever thought with us. I'm so honored you used my name with her," I say with fanning my eyes. The power of letting go and forgiving is very real. I don't feel mentally drained or have so much weight on me pulling me down. Everything is just right. Now, if I never would have forgave and reached out to her, this wouldn't be happening.

"She has a name from a woman that is as strong as they come, and that's you, my little sister. You're a phoenix that has risen from the ashes, you're an unstoppable woman, and I love

you. I wish I would have told you those three words sooner, but better late than never.”

Shanice is looking really tired and after being in labor and pushing out a human being, I know how it is with wanting to get some sleep.

“I love you too, big sis, go ahead and get some rest. That body of yours done been through a lot. Congratulations on motherhood, you never gave up, and you deserve it,” I say to her, and she looks back down to Sahara and then back to the camera.

“You’re right, I have to get all the rest that I can. When she sleeps, I need to be sleep. Be safe out there, Sage, and twerk some ass for me at the club, because I can’t do so at this very moment.” We both share a couple of laughs and I nod my head, smiling. “I’ll be twerking all night long just because you can’t. Whenever you make your way out here, or I come to Mississippi, we have to do some turning up of our own.”

“Yesss! Shots being thrown back, especially after not being able to drink for a whole nine months, but alright, sis. I’ll be texting you whenever,” she says, putting her hand to her lips and blowing me a kiss. I wave my hand, telling her bye, and the Facetime call ends. I glance at my phone screen and read the time, it’s 12:42 a.m. The club closes at two in the morning, and I’m fine with that. Clubbing is cool now for me, but being honest, I’ll still pick laying in my bed over going out, but I’ve been doing different things. The fact that I’m experiencing more is good, but I can’t lie; I like the laid back me, and staying out of the way.

I unzip my white, quilted, chain crossbody bag and drop my phone inside, zipping it back up. Looking over to the left of me, Sia is driving with her seat all the way up to the steering wheel. The life of being a short girl. I’m riding with her and Jabari to Club 51 Degrees. I was going to drive myself, but she insisted on her coming to get me so we can ride together.

The music is off due to me talking with Shanice, but Sia hasn’t turned the volume of the radio back up, and I don’t

mind the silence.

“Your sister wasn’t lying at all, Sage, when she said that you’re a phoenix. Just with you speaking with her and y’all being cool with each other, just shows the type of heart you have,” Sia says as she looks in her rearview mirror then turns her left signal light on, switching lanes in the road.

“I didn’t want my heart to keep on beating with hatred in it, having all of that hate and pain running through my veins. I also found out that my father wasn’t so great to Shanice’s mother either like she made him out to be. It wasn’t as bad as what my mother endured, but abuse is abuse, and mentally, he did so with her. I mean, fifteen years of being divorced because he cheated and then getting right back with him and married again, she was strong for leaving him, but eventually, she was the rabbit that got caught back in his trap again. I hope she finds some sort of peace in life too, even though she couldn’t care less about me.”

Looking out the car window, I see people walking all down the sidewalks. It’s Saturday night, so everyone out trying to see what the move is, or already found it and making their way to it. “I’m so proud of you. It takes a lot out of a person to do what you’re doing. Healing is necessary, but it’s a lot of damn work too, so if one is wanting to heal, it should never be taken lightly.”

“You all the way correct on that. Healing ain’t no walk in the damn park, but it’s the most rewarding thing ever when it’s all said and done.”

Sia survived a lot, so, once she knew all that happened to me, she finally was able to be there and help me with a lot of healing I had to do. Even with how busy she has been these past months, from doing nails, to her nail salon still being built. She wants everything to be perfect, and it’s her dream, so she’s putting a lot of herself into it.

She comes to a stop at a red traffic light, and it’s so quiet within car, aside from the sound of the car engine. With excluding the engine noise, I listen more closely and I’m hearing snoring. I turn in the seat and move my head back to

look in the backseat, and Jabari's ass is fucking laid out across the seat, knocked the fuck out.

“Wooooow! Sia, yo' husband is in the back sleeping, phone on his stomach,” I say and begin laughing. He is too damn tall to be stretched out like that. Sia's Hyundai Sonata car ain't so big.

As I turn back around, the traffic light turns green and she goes back to driving, but she's taking glances back at him and then back to the road.

“Bae! Bae! He cannot be serious right now,” Sia says, laughing herself at the sight of Jabari. Poor him, he's out here working so much that even when stepping back from work, he don't want to turn up. He wants to just be turned down in a bed somewhere. Being honest, I don't even fault him. Being in my bed sleeping is sounding better than us heading to this club.

“Let me pull into this damn gas station. We're literally fifteen minutes from the club,” Sia says as she takes another look back at Jabari, then focuses only on the road. Turning into the gas station, she drives the car straight into a parking space and puts the car in park. She unfastens her seatbelt and climbs back into the backseat. “Baby! Wake yo' ass up.” Looking back to the seats, Sia begins shaking Jabari's body, but he ain't waking up. “You can't be serious right now, Jabari.” She gives him a few more shakes, and then he rises up from the backseat, like someone from the living dead would do from a casket.

“The fuck! What, baby? Why you shaking me and shit?” Jabari says sleepily as his eyes close and open.

“You know, if I knew you was this dog tired, I wouldn't have cared if I missed being at the club. We could have just stayed home and watched one of those horror movie marathons. We done paid your little sister to watch the kids, and you out here sleeping before going into the club. Where they do that at?” Jabari leans closer to Sia and plants a couple of kisses on her lips.

“Man, fuck that club. I ain’t got it in me no more, baby. Shit, I’m doing way too much to be wasting time out here at twelve something in the motherfucking morning. A nigga pushing thirty, but it’s feeling more like sixty. Clubbing takes a toll on my body. I thought I could get through tonight and hang, but fuck all of that.” Sia shakes her head, but I hear a couple of chuckles from her. Jabari is a trip, but lowkey, he ain’t lying. When going out on the regular, it eventually has a toll on your body. Well, I’m noticing that it does so to mine.

“Okay then, fuck it, no club... Well, at least for us,” Sia says back to him as she’s turning her head towards me. “If you still wanting to go, Sage, I can drop you off there. I’m sure everyone else that’s there will give you a ride back.”

Shit, Jabari has me not caring to club. I was looking forward to it, but with how packed it most likely already is, I’m sure fights and everything else are breaking loose. I don’t even want to waste my energy. A chill night sounds far better than being around sweaty ass people scrunched up dancing.

“I’m good with skipping out on the club too, shit. Whatever we’ll miss, we’ll see on social media most likely anyways.”

Sia turns back to Jabari. “Well, back to home it is, then. I done wasted getting ready and doing my makeup, but it’s all good. I just figured it would be nice for you and me to get out, but next time we have time together, I won’t pick no club.” Sia starts climbing back to the front seat, and Jabari gives her ass a quick slap. She smiles and then gets back seated in the driver’s seat.

No lie, wasting makeup can be the worst. My makeup isn’t something I went all out doing, but it’s makeup that I can’t get back. All I have on is some foundation, false eyelashes, and lip gloss, but I’ll wipe the gloss off before I get to eating. I can’t stand eating with lip gloss on. What I have on is where I somewhat went all out with it. I have on a mint-green, cowl-neck, open-back, cropped halter top, a black, solid, button-up skirt, and some minimalist, chain décor, stiletto heels on my feet. My jewelry is simple, just some golden hoop earrings, with a golden chain necklace of me and my boys’ initials. Me

showing off my back goes to show how much confidence and love I start having for myself. I stayed hiding my back, not wanting people to see my scars, but that insecurity of mine has gone away.

“Shit, we already paid for my little sister, Faelan, to watch her nephew and nieces. I’m going to get my money’s worth of her babysitting. Let’s go to Waffle House. I’m hungry as fuck, and I want me some waffles and I don’t want to be the one to cook the damn waffles. Let’s go to the one on Queen City Drive, though. That’s the only one I fuck with, and I know all of the cooks there,” Jabari says as he grabs his phone off the car floorboard. I can’t help but crack up laughing in my head. The way he says waffles sounds like fucking Donkey from the movie *Shrek*.

“Okay then, baby, just know you footing the bill for me and Sage.” Sia backs the car back and then turns the steering wheel and begins speeding off away from the gas station.

“Really, Si, you tried me as if I’m a nigga that never does that for y’all. It’s Waffle House, I could afford a thousand and up checks for y’all like it’s nothing elsewhere.”

Sia rolls her eyes and chuckles as she makes a right turn onto a street. “I was just saying, and you over here got energy for food but not the club.”

“Food gives yo’ ass energy, don’t it?” Jabri barks back, and we all take looks at one another and bust out laughing. Like, Sia really can’t say nothing on that.

I suddenly start hearing a sound of a ringing phone, and I look back at Jabari and he has his phone pressed to his ear. Turning back in the seat, I press my head back against the head rest.

“Aye! Yo, Chance, you already at the club?” Jabari says, and I lift my head back up and sit straight up into the seat. Sage and I look at one another from the corner of our eyes.

What in the hell is Jabari trying to do?

CHANCE COOLEY

“**D**amn! These bitches acting up in here like it’s fight night. Bitch just body slammed her ass,” Omari says to me, and then starts to laugh as he has his arms around Mandisa’s waist. We’re all standing in our V.I.P. section, just looking at all the chaotic shit going down at the lower floor of the club. I shake my head, as I keep my phone pressed up to my ear. I’m on the phone with Jabari, but I can barely hear him. The music is booming up in the club.

Yo Gotti ft. Lil’ Baby’s “Put a Date On It” is playing, and the crowd of people up in here is either fighting, dancing, or drinking. Shit is crazy, but phones are out capturing everything with videos and pictures. Covering my left ear, I go back to paying attention to what Jabari is saying to me.

“Sia, me and...Sage...Waffle...man, never mind that... music,” Jabari says to me as I’m trying to make out whatever words I can.

“You said, the three of you, waffles, and what, nigga?”

Grace is coming my way, maneuvering around others in the section. She has a shot glass in her hand, and it looks to be filled with some brown liquor. “I... you...I’ll text yo’ ass, damn.” Jabari hangs up on me, and all I’m really caring about is him mentioning Sage. She’s not here in the club. Removing my phone from my ear, I slide it back in my pants pocket. I’m wearing a white, solid, round-neck tee, black, flap-pocket cargo pants, some white Air Force One shoes, and around my

neck is some diamond-cut Cuban links. I'm making money, but that don't mean I'm going to ball all out and be broke in the next week, trying to keep up a false image. My bank account numbers are rising, and the only thing I'm worrying about maintaining is my new apartment and car. I like my style to be simple, so going all out for designer shit, isn't me.

“Chance, that crazy ass bitch is here. Why you ain't tell me about her from jump? She had everyone last time she was around thinking that she could be yo' woman, with how much she followed you around like a damn puppy.” I look over Grace's shoulder, and I see Chanel up in someone else's section, but her eyes are on me. It's getting to the point I might have to get my sister to handle her ass, if she tries some funny shit. I don't hit no females, because my sister is always on go for me.

“Long as that bitch stays where she's at and doesn't breath a word to me, I'm good,” I say as I'm leaning closer to my sister so she can hear me over the music.

My phone vibrates and I take my phone back out, and there's a text message from Jabari.

Jabari:

Me and my lady is with Sage at Waffle House, is what I was trying to tell you. I was calling to see if you was already at the club, but you are. I might be done with the club scene, man, or at least not go to one for a good ass minute. If you want to slide thru, we at the usual Waffle House, nigga.

Sent 1:03 a.m.

I finish reading the text and look up to see Grace's nosey ass all up in my phone, reading the message. She throws the shot back in the glass and scrunches her face up, that liquor burning down her damn throat. She's only throwing back liquor because this is her first year of being legal. She don't even like liquor for real. If anything, she needs the type of drinks that it's hard to taste the liquor in if she wants to get real drunk. She clears her throat and hits her fist to her chest a little bit. “If you're about to dip out, I'm dipping out right with you. I read Waffle House and I'm more down for that than

being here any longer. This shit is as ratchet as I knew it was going to be,” Grace says, bending down and putting the glass on a table.

I shoot Jabari a quick text back, letting him know I’m soon to be on my way to the Waffle House that’s on Queen City Drive. That’s the only usual house I know of.

“We just inviting ourselves now? Who the fuck said that you could roll up there with me?” I say back to Grace, putting my phone back up. She playfully pushes me in the chest.

“Don’t play with me, and of course you about to go. You read Sage’s name and said fuck this club.”

I cover my mouth with my balled fist and laugh. I don’t even give a fuck to hide how much I do want to see Sage. If she were all the way across seas, I’ll be getting to her as fast as I could, and this club ain’t hitting on nothing anyway. Looking to the side of me, I see Mandisa moving over to us with Omari tailing not far from her. My cousin is in love, and I believe Mandisa is in love with him. They’re already getting situated to live with one another. Omari is a six-feet-six nigga, with a brown sugar complexion, dark-brown, almond-shaped eyes, a faded haircut, and is tatted as much as I am. He has tats on his hands, little ones on the side of his face; he’s heavily inked up. My father’s side of the family genes run strong, so, me and Omari can pass for being brothers rather than just cousins. When he was first introducing me to people, the first thing they had assumed was that we were straight blood brothers.

“What y’all two birds over here chatting about?” Mandisa says, and Grace looks toward me with a grin on her face.

“I’m about to head out to Waffle House. Sage, Sia, and Jabari, are there,” I briefly say to Mandisa and also Omari, as he’s standing next to her.

“Ohh shit, you and my cousin are cool now?” Mandisa asks me, and I’m not sure how to approach that. Sage and I still ain’t nothing. Do I want us to be, yeah, but it’s all on her. Ball has been in her court since the moment we ended.

“That I can’t say, but what I can say is, that I hope me and your cousin do be real cool again, and more.”

Mandisa nods her head and Omari wraps his arms back around her waist. “Don’t worry about it, cousin. My baby filled me in on you and the rest of her crew, so Sage and you will be rockin’ with each other once again. Damn, it seems to me you two are the only motherfuckers that are single. I just realized that shit,” Omari says, and just by the way he’s talking, that nigga is high as a kite off that good ass weed.

“Yeah, but I’m about to dip, though. Grace said she’s coming along with me, which means Nelson too,” I say loud enough over the music.

“We coming along too then, shit. I haven’t seen my cousin in some weeks too. Let’s get the fuck up outta here,” Mandisa says back to me. She and Omari head over to the black leather couch, grabbing up their things. Grace goes over there doing the same, and I see Nelson coming up behind her. Nelson is a real cool nigga. I approve him with being with my little sister since he treats my sister like the queen she is. When it comes to my niece, Nevaeh, that little girl ain’t nothing but a daddy’s girl, and Nelson spoils the hell out of her. If she would demand him to go get all the stars in the sky for her, that’s what he would do for his daughter. It’s no limits to the love he has for my niece, and even my sister. Nelson stands about six feet two, with a russet complexion, brown, hooded eyes, and his hair that was done by me is cut into a high taper fade with a line-up and curved part line in the front of his head. I believe that Nelson is thinking about marriage with my sister. Every time he and I hang with each other without her, he be dropping hints with talking about marriage and everything that comes with it.

Five minutes pass and we’re all heading out the front doors of the club.

“Chance! Chance!” a female voice is yelling my name. I glance over my shoulder, and it’s that bitch, Chanel. I turn my head back around and keep on walking to my black, 2017 Land Rover Range Rover Sport car. I got a month ago, but it’s not paid in full, because I ain’t balling nowhere near that. The

old car I had was starting to break down on me, and it was no reason to waste money on fixing something that was bound to keep breaking.

“Chance! I mean, it’s clear you hear me!”

Getting to the driver’s door of my car, Chanel is walking towards me, but then my sister steps right in her way, stopping her. “Bitch! If you don’t leave my motherfucking brother alone. It should be *clear* to you, that he ain’t fucking with you. If you say another fucking word to him, I’ll break yo’ damn jaw,” Grace says to Chanel, and the both of them stand in place for a good second, before Chanel finally decides to walk off and heads right back into the club.

Grace turns around and begins walking back to Nelson’s car. “These bitches out here are so motherfucking weird,” Grace says to me as she’s walking by.

Taking out my key fob, I unlock my car and get in, shutting the door.

I ain’t never have a female stalk me before. I didn’t even think bitches were still on that shit to keep on trying to talk to someone that don’t want to be bothered by them. Why is Chanel going so motherfucking hard when it comes to me? What we were doing back in prison, it wasn’t that deep for her to be on some shit like this, and if it were something important, she would have come out and said it already by now, right?

Pressing my foot down on my brakes, I push the start button down, cranking the car up. My phone connects to the Bluetooth, and I go touching the screen, finding music to play.

Moneybagg Yo’s “Bigg Facts” starts blaring, and I take my car out of park. I smoothly pull off out the parking lot and start driving down the road. Traffic is a little bit heavy out here, but it’s Saturday, so this is normal.

You went about it the wrong way, so we can’t fix that. She mad at you, so she come fuck me for get back.

I whip my car with one hand as I go into a right turn, bobbing my head to the song. I glance to my left side view

mirror, and see Nelson's car riding behind me. I direct my eyes back to the road ahead of me. Everyone knows exactly which Waffle House to go to.

I'm scrolling sideways through my Snapchat, and I'm clicking on folks' snaps and seeing most of them at Club 51 Degrees. I click on another person's snap, and it starts playing. There's two females fighting and one of the damn females body slams the other. I shake my head and just exit out of the app. That's enough ratchet shit for me to witness, so it's good that I didn't go. I ordered a chicken and eggs breakfast and a classic waffle about five minutes ago, and I might not see my food for the next twenty to twenty-five minutes because Waffle House be taking they time when making food so, hopefully, I don't lose my appetite. Jabari had called Chance before we even got here, and I'm not sure if he'll be here or not. Why did Jabari end up calling Chance? I have not a single damn clue.

Sitting in my booth chair, I go to looking around the Waffle House. It's not as full in here, but once everyone is done with clubbing, and whatever else that might have them out at this time of night, I'm sure they'll be on their way here to grub. I look to Jabari and Sia, and they're sitting across from me having their own little conversation, and Sia is smiling and moving closer to Jabari, giving him kisses. I'm a whole third wheeler. This is why sometimes I don't be doing stuff with everyone, because everyone close to me is literally boo'ed up. I feel I'm intruding on their couple time. Seeing them together, they're cute, but with being the only single person, it's just things I try to avoid from witnessing.

Why did I say yes to coming along? I should have just told Sia to drop my ass back home. Now I'm missing things that I shouldn't be letting myself do.

A waitress walks by with a plates of food, and I catch a whiff of the smell of bacon, and it smells good as hell, but I stopped eating pork. I look back to Sia, and she has a disgusted look written all over her face. I place my phone back down in my bag and place it in the empty spot of the booth to the right of me. "Sia, what's wrong?" I ask her, concerned, and she raises her hand up.

"Hold on, hold on, baby... I'm about to th—" Sia starts to gag and places her hand over her mouth. Jabari stands up rapidly from the booth, and Sia gets up, running to where the bathrooms are located, and Jabari strides off behind her. With his long legs, he catches up to her in seconds. "Oh, my fucking god! Baby, I just threw up all over myself!" I hear Sia yelling from the bathroom. Her throwing up had to come from the smell of the food, and if that's the case, I think it's time for them both to get some pregnancy tests, because baby number four might be on the way for the Hairstons.

I glance out of the window next to me, and my eyes meet with Tamila's, her real ones that are dark brown, and not fake ass contacts like she stayed wearing. She's holding on to Rahil's arm and he's looking at me through the windows as well, and he's not daring to look away. They continue on walking, making it to the doors and coming into the building. Tamila keeps her eyes on me, and I do the same, not feeling no type of intimidation from her. A waitress greets them, and Tamila doesn't say anything to her, but Rahil does. She's looking at the empty booth in front of me, and then her eyes meet back to mine. I'm really hoping that she's not thinking of sitting in this empty booth in front of me. The waitress lets them know she'll be with them in one moment and sure enough, Tamila is dragging Rahil over to where I am, and they take a seat in the booth in front of me. Rahil's back is turned to me, but Tamila is sitting on the other side of the booth table. The waitress comes back over to them and begins getting what they want to drink and writing down their order. She walks away from them, and the tension between me and Tamila is so

thick, that a knife wouldn't be able to cut through it; it'll just break trying. I've done a lot of forgiving, I really have, and I don't let little shit get to me, but the way Tamila is still fucking looking at me, is definitely testing me. Especially with learning months back on what she did to Mandisa when she was younger, the fact she's still breathing is all by the grace of God and Sammy's deep, *deep* down love for her as his daughter. I only have seen her once or twice since she announced her engagement to Rahil at Sammy's house, but nothing to the point where we have to be around each other for more than a minute.

"Bitch, can I help you with something?" Tamila says venomously to me, and I just chuckle at her. Of course, she can't resist speaking to me. When bitches hate on you that bad, it don't matter if you're quieter than a mouse and haven't done a single damn thing to them. They're going to always want to try you and talk they shit.

Rahil turns around and looks at me, and with seeing him up close, he has a black left eye and what looks to be fresh nail scratches on his face. I then look back to Tamila, and she has bruises on her arms and a cut on her right cheek.

"Hey, Sage, it's been a good ass minute since I last saw you," Rahil says, bringing my attention back to him, and he then gives me a half smile. I just keep my face straight, not saying anything to him. I never thought I'll see the day of him being this low in life. He really made a good life for himself, but trying to be malicious, he let everything he had crumble. I had stopped Jabari and even my uncle back in April when he put his hands on me, to not have niggas that they know run him out of Charlotte or kill him. I gave him a second chance at life by doing that, but yet he chose to be useless with it and do a get back at me by getting with Tamila.

These two together are very toxic, and a lot of gossip gets around about them. They have a domestic violence relationship, and they're doing some hard drugs. Rahil has hit rock bottom, and who knows if he'll ever climb back up from it. He's lost everything when it came to dealing with Tamila, and do I feel sorry for him? Hell no. He always talked shit

about her to me, and how I needed to stay away from her, because it's true when everyone said Tamila destroys everything she touches. Her baby fathers had literally hit a huge lick off Rahil, and after that, he didn't recover from it. Rahil's whole plan talking with her and getting engaged indeed turned out to be because of me. He had let me know himself and I have the receipts to prove it in my business IG DMs. And from what he's become now, it's evident that it backfired on him. I do forgive him for everything he's done to me, but other than that, I don't care for these two.

He must have forgotten himself that Tamila isn't someone that you can take with you when your life elevates. It's typical for people to not follow what they preach.

“Rahil! Are you going to turn the fuck around or are you going to keep being disrespectful right in my damn face?” Tamila yells, and people within here are looking her way, but she's not a person who gives a damn about being classy and poised when it comes to being in public or in general.

Rahil lets out a deep, annoyed breath and turns his whole body outwards, and he places his hand under his chin, continuing to look at me. Tamila stands up out of her booth chair, and she takes a seat in the booth chair across from me, where Sia and Jabari were sitting. This bitch has some fucking nerves to come closer to me.

“It's better to be talking to and looking at her than having to talk to and look at yo' stanky and dirty pussy ass, all the fucking time,” Rahil frustratedly says from behind her. And then comes a Heinz ketchup bottle hitting Tamila against the side of her head. She picks it up off the floor and turns back to him, throwing the bottle and hitting him in the face.

This is just honestly sad. They have to be high or something right now, because there's no way in hell they're acting out like this being sober. The workers in here are just looking from afar, while continuing to serve and cook for people.

“Nigga, this pussy of mine stay squeaky clean. Don't sit up in here trying to play me, like you don't be eating my pussy all

day every day. Now try me again, Rahil, with being all in this bitch face. She forever wanting attention from my men, but you ain't about to give her no fucking more." Tamila turns back around and cuts her eyes at me, and I keep on sitting here, with a blank face.

Attention from her men? Never in my life have I ever cared or tried to get attention from anyone she's dealing with. Those drugs are really killing her brain.

"Bae, go tell them we have to get our food to go, because I have to get the fuck out of these clothes. You wiping it off with water and paper towels only did so much. Oh, this is just nasty as hell." I know Sia's voice when I hear it, and I turn my head back to see her and Jabari looking right in the direction of where Rahil and Tamila are.

"The fuck is this triflin' ass bitch sitting near you for, Sage?" Sia walks up to the booth, and Tamila rises up out the booth chair, like she's ready to fight.

"Hoe, if you don't step the fuck back from me," Tamila says, shifting all her weight onto one hip.

"Or what? What're you going to do to me?" Sia snaps back at her, and Tamila rolls her eyes.

"Slapping the fuck out of you is what I'll do," Tamila counters back.

"I wish this dirty ass, coke addict and shooting up bitch, would touch my motherfucking wife up in here. I'll air this motherfucker out," Jabari says, getting in between the both of them.

Rahil raises up out of his booth chair, and Jabari steps to him, figuring that he's about to do something, but Rahil is walking the fuck away, and then out the door he goes. Snatching up my bag, I get up from my booth chair and stand off to the side of Jabari and Sia. "Baby, go get our food like I said. This bitch ain't going to try nothing with me, she knows who the fuck I am," Sia says as her eyes are all on Tamila. Jabari gives Tamila a stony once over then heads from us to get the food to go.

“Who exactly do you think you are, bitch? Because the both of you bitches think y’all really got it going on, but you bitches are lames, with a motherfucking capital L,” Tamila says as she takes two steps back from Sia. At least she knows when to be smart, because Jabari don’t play about Sia. He never has, and he never will.

Sia begins walking off, not giving her a response, and I turn around and walk backward, following along right behind her. I don’t trust to have my back turned to my cousin. Tamila is a bitch that I have come to believe will for real stab me in the back with a knife, because metaphorically doing so can’t hurt me. She’s walking along with me, and from head to toe, she looks really terrible, and that’s why Sammy is fighting so hard now to get his grandkids away from her. If she and Rahil are both here, then who really is watching the kids?

“You got my daddy out here putting protection on yo’ ass. You ain’t no motherfucking innocent got damn angel, so I don’t get why he’s wasting his time doing it. I see right through you, Sage, and I know everything about you, trust and believe that. I wish you had never moved to North Carolina. I wish you had just stayed where the fuck you was at. I hate you more than imaginable, and I hate how I had to hide that for so long.”

There’s no point of me wasting my breath on Tamila, so I’m not about to say anything to her. Everything with us was dead the moment she started hating me out of nowhere, but now I know for certain that she has always had that hate for me, but just started showing it this year. That’s a long fucking time to be a fraud with someone.

Walking out of the Waffle House door, she keeps on being near me instead of just going on about her business. I’m about to break my silence, because she’s inching closer and closer, getting all in my personal space. Like, she hates me, so get the fuck from around me.

I plant myself up against the building, my back pressing up to the glass. Sia and I have to wait on Jabari to come out. Sia is on the phone, standing over by her car, and she looks over to

me. She says something into the phone, and then places it back in her purse, heading over to me.

Tamila gets so close to me that she steps on my left high heel, crushing my toes underneath her dirty ass shoes, and my toes begin stinging in pain. I shove her away from me and take a step over.

“Tamila, just go the fuck away from me,” I say, finally breaking my silence with her.

“Make me go from you,” she says, as she’s coming back up on me, and then she moves her hand up to my hair, flipping it back, really trying me. I slap her hand away, and I take a quick breath. I’m not about to let her get the best of me.

“You heard what the fuck she said to you. Get to steppin’, bitch, or I’ll show you what the fuck will,” Sia says, as she’s standing by my side and sliding her hand in her purse and leaving it in there. We always carry us a Glock around. I have one in my bag, but I’m not about to do nothing that can jeopardize everything I have.

“Pipe down, Sia, a gun don’t put no fear in me. This ain’t got nothing to do with you, so fall the fuck back. I told Sage to make me move, and that’s what I’m waiting for her to do.”

“It’s alright, Sia, bitches like her are just miserable as fuck. Don’t pull that shit out.”

Jabari comes out of the Waffle House, and he comes right over to us. “You right, this bitch mad that we doing damn good for ourselves, and she the only fucking one that decided to not do anything with her life. Even with the father she had, she still kept doing wrong, but with all she has done, the bitch deserves to be going through everything that she is now and more.” Sia takes her hand out of her purse, and she’s holding her key fob.

“Y’all, let’s get up outta here. Ain’t nobody got time to keep talking with Wanda from *Holiday Heart*. The bitch ain’t that damn high, to not know that even if she’s feeling froggy, she bet not leap. Shit, I got to text Chance,” Jabari says, taking his phone out. He and Sia start walking to her car.

Turning away from Tamila, I hear car engines and I start walking behind Sia and Jabari, but suddenly, the strap on my bag is being pulled and it's yanking me back. Spinning back around to Tamila, she has the strap in her hand, continuing to pull on it, and as she's doing it, I just think smartly and let it go, and she falls on the ground. I walk over to my bag that has landed some inches away from her. I stand back up straight and see three cars pulling up into parking spaces in front of me, and it's Chance in his car, Grace is in Nelson's car with him, and Mandisa is in a car I don't recognize with Omari.

Tamila gets off the ground and glances at all three cars. "And here comes the other bitch that I despise as fucking well," Tamila says, and Mandisa gets out of the car and crosses her arms under her chest, and Omari steps out of it as well.

Grace, Nelson, and Chance make their way out of their cars also. I had sworn Jabari just let Chance know, but he must have let everyone else know as well that we'd be here.

I then see Beezy leaning on his car that's parked just a little further from where we all are. One of his arms is behind his back, so his hand is most likely already on a gun. I rapidly give him the hand signal that he and I only know about, letting him know that I'm good. He's ready for whatever. Protecting me is his duty, but Tamila I can handle with no problem, so, he can just sit back and relax, but I'd rather it not go there. She just needs to stop fucking with me so I can leave. Looking away from Beezy, I spot Rahil sitting over on a sidewalk. He really don't give a fuck about Tamila at all and just stays with her because nobody else wants him. Her baby daddies fucked up and stole everything important where he laid his head at, and he lost his job because of her, so now he's laying his head at her house, and broke. The only reason Tamila keeps some money in her pockets is from getting checks for her kids, and God knows what else, because drugs ain't cheap. I hope and pray that Sammy can get his grandkids soon, because those children deserve far better than what I hate to even imagine all of what they have to endure with her being their mother, since I stopped seeing them.

I turn back to everyone, and they're looking around bewildered, and promptly, everyone begins talking, trying to piece together what the fuck is going on. Sia and Jabari are having questions coming their way. The only person that's at the root of this issue is Tamila.

"Yo, can everyone just shut the fuck up so we can get to the bottom of what the fuck is going on? Everybody can't talk at once," Chance's soothing, deep voice breaks out the most throughout the commotion, and everyone goes completely silent. "What's going on, Sage?" he asks.

"Well, Mr. Felon, me and yo' bitch is in the middle of something. Until she makes me do what the fuck I told her to, she ain't going no got damn where, and that's on me," Tamila says to Chance, answering his question to me, and everyone's face is just covered in irritation with her.

I start laughing, and it's not a something is funny laugh, it's out of pure anger. Because Tamila is out of her damn mind, if she really thinks she's going to keep me here. I can't believe I tried to see the good in her back then, being the one there for her when everyone else in our family wasn't. She's the Devil's daughter.

Tamila steps to me, too close for my damn liking once again, and gets directly into my face. "Why you laughing for, bitch? You think I'm funny? I'll show you how motherfucking funny these hands can get." She goes to pointing her finger all in my face, and her breath just smells like pure shit.

"Look, now! You're going to stop waving your fucking finger in my face. I done let you slide too many fucking times. You either back the fuck up, or I'll give you what the fuck you begging for." I can feel the rage building up inside of me. Like, this isn't what she wants. I don't want to give her the satisfaction of having me come out of my character, but it's getting real hard to not do so anymore.

"Show me then, Sage, show me what the fuck you about." She starts bumping her body up against me and mashes her hand roughly in my face. That's fucking it. I'm not about to take no more shit from this bitch.

Balling up my fist, I punch her hard as fuck in the face, making blood leak out. Then I go to pushing her ass right in her motherfucking chest, and she falls to the ground, hitting the concrete. Like, I understand to not kick people while they're down, but when that person keeps coming for me when I didn't send for them, it's a fucking problem.

“Hold my bag!” I yell, not giving a damn who the fuck I'm telling to do so. Someone snatches it away from me, and I go to quickly taking off my heels, and I'm ready for her ass. Tamila stumbly gets back up, and then she's running back up to me. I raise my tightly balled fists up, ready to sock that bitch dead in her face again. I go to swinging my right fist on her ass, but Chance slithers in her way, eating the punch to his mouth instead. He picks me up and presses me back up against the building. “Sage, come on, you done worked too hard and have too much to fucking lose to be stooping to a bitch like her level,” he says to me, and his breath tickles against my neck. He and I haven't been body to body in so damn long, that even in this moment, my pussy is throbbing, along with my damn fist.

Rahil comes out of nowhere and wraps his arms around Tamila's waist, pulling her away from all of us. Even with her trying to fight him, he's not struggling. “I'll fuck all y'all up! Sage! I will get you, bitch, mark my motherfucking words,” Tamila says, and Rahil gets her to her car and opens up the door, throwing her in the passenger seat. He runs over to the driver's side, getting in the car and stopping her from getting out. In just a minute, Rahil has the car running and is driving off.

Chance lets go of me and I step away from him, pulling my skirt back down. It's a good thing I have panties underneath. I look at him and he's bleeding from his bottom lip from my punch.

“The shit that be going down at Waffle House, man. Something about these motherfucking places just be bringing the fight out of everybody,” Omari says and then chuckles, and I glance to him and Mandisa is looking up at him, shaking her head.

“Baby, just keep that mouth on mute,” Mandisa says, and he lowers down, giving her kiss.

“My fault,” he says, putting his hands up, showing he meant no disrespect.

Looking around, I see that Sia is the one who has my purse.

“I know we too grown for this shit, but I was ready for you to tear that bitch’s head up some more,” Sia says, handing me back my bag, and I just shake my head.

I really just want to find a hole to crawl into and cry. I’m so got damn embarrassed right now. I’m so angry that I let her take me there. Now I’m standing out here like a damn fool. Chance is right. I have worked too fucking hard for where I’m at in life, and I done let that bitch bring back out my old ways, but she just kept going and going.

My phone starts ringing in my bag, and I unzip it and take out my phone. Oh lord, it’s Sammy. I answer the phone and before I can get it to my ear, I’m already hearing him yelling. Pressing the phone to my ear, he’s going the fuck off on me. “Sage! You know that you’re fucking better than that, causing a got damn scene out at a Waffle House, like you don’t have no damn elegance or self-control. People like Tamila, you have to walk the fuck away from. She shouldn’t have been worth it to you. I told you since you were young that once a person gets you out of character, no matter if you whooped they ass or not, you lost from the beginning because you gave them that much control over you to do it in the first place. She don’t have shit to lose, and you have everything to lose; therefore, being provoked by people is always going to happen, because they don’t want to see you winning if they ain’t!” my uncle yells to me, and it’s causing me to break into tears, because he’s right about everything. I let her control me by my anger instead of my conscious mind.

“Hand yo’ phone over to Chance.” I pull my phone from my ear and look at it like he done lost his mind. I press it back up to my ear. “Why do I have to do that?”

“Sage, give that man yo’ damn phone.” Tears flowing down my face, I hand my phone over to Chance.

Glancing around, everyone is looking on trying to figure out as well why the fuck Chance has my phone. After about five minutes of having my phone, Chance hands it back to me and my uncle is no longer on the phone. He then takes me by the hand and starts guiding me to his car. “What are you doing?” I say to him, but he doesn’t respond back to me.

“We’ll catch y’all later,” he says to everyone, and once we get to his car, he opens up the passenger door, but I don’t get in.

“I’m not getting in until you tell me where you’re taking me.”

Chance closes his eyes and takes a quick deep breath. “If you don’t trust me, at least trust yo’ uncle,” he says to me with pleading eyes, and it must be something he can’t say out loud for any of the others to hear.

I get into his car, and he shuts the door and walks behind the car, getting to the driver’s door. He gets in and starts the car up. He looks back as he’s backing up, and then speeds away from the Waffle House and everyone that is still standing there. I go into my bag and take out a pack of pocket tissues. Pulling some of them out, I lean over to Chance and begin wiping the blood from off his lip and chin the best I can with them. I move back into my seat and just put the bloody tissue in one of the cupholders. He’ll have to clean it out later to make in sanitary again.

“I’m sorry about yo’ busted lip,” I say to him, and he looks at me from the corner of his eye for a quick second.

“You straight, I’m the one that stepped in front of that bitch to get it. You know how to throw a good motherfucking punch too. I thought that you were Laila Ali for a second.” We both start laughing, and this is our first laugh together in so long. I missed this with us.

I stop laughing and become serious again. “What is it that my uncle said?” I look to Chance, and he’s just looking

focused on the open road.

“He told me that Tamila can be a wildcard and he don’t want you ending up in harm’s way, because there’s still no sign of Ricardo, so he’s just taking extra precautions. He wants me to take you to one of his old safe houses and keep you there at least for the rest of this weekend, or longer if needed. He’s having people watch her. She done did so much that he knows when she gets fired up, shit can get ugly, and if it does, he said this time he won’t let her being his daughter stop him from killing her,” Chance says, and his phone goes off. He picks it up and back and forth with looking at it, he’s punching in an address on the screen in the car. Once he’s done typing it in, the navigation starts telling him directions.

“I’m not scared of Tamila, so turn this car around and take me back to my house. I’m not about to run and hide from her, or anybody for that matter. You heard this from me before, Chance, with Ricardo. Also, I wouldn’t dare leave Saint and Silas to go to some safe house, even if they are with Cliff. So, turn your car around, or I’ll get out and call me a Lyft or an Uber to get me back there.”

“The boys and Cliff are very well looked after no matter the day or time, just like you, and Cliff even lives in a gated community. Sage, yo’ uncle was already pissed the fuck off that Beezy sat back and let what happened at the Waffle House happen. He was supposed to get you in his car and leave the moment he saw some shit with Tamila. The only reason Sammy knew what happened is because there was someone else watching after you too, and that was Pete. He had his phone out with your uncle on Facetime. While Sammy was talking to me, he made it clear with just his tone that he wasn’t going to take a no as an answer from you.”

That damn Pete. I can’t lie, he’s another one that I feel safe with while he’s watching me, but my uncle definitely be switching it up on me. I thought it was just Beezy this whole day looking after me. Beezy’s probably getting cussed the fuck out by Sammy right now, or worse.

“I don’t care, Chance, I’m not about to leave. There’s too much going on for me to up and disappear, and the same goes

for you. Just turn the car around.”

“Shit, aight, and when Sammy comes up on me ready to blast my ass, don’t be crying over my dead body.” I kiss my teeth. His first go to of why we shouldn’t disobey my uncle is him getting killed by him. Sammy would never do some shit like that to Chance; he actually cares a lot for him. It’s hurting my heart a little just to think of ever having to see him dead. Why would he even say some shit like that?

“Don’t say nothing like that ever again, okay? Joking or not, just the thought of that still scares me so much, just like it did with the Ricardo shit.” I am fully aware that we all have to die someday. I was once a person who wanted death more than anything, because I didn’t want to keep on going another day, with knowing that day was just going to be filled with terrible things that felt unescapable. My mind is no longer wired in that way, but the thoughts of ever losing my sons, Chance, and everyone else that I love so much before I leave this world myself, frightens me. It frightens me, because the go-to saying that others tell people that lost someone they love and care for, is that the pain of losing them never goes away, it just becomes bearable day by day. That’s so hard for me to grasp on to. What if it doesn’t ever become bearable for me, what if I can’t ever accept whoever’s death, then what? What would be the next thing, or direction someone could guide me to in making the pain and suffering stop? I don’t know if this is right or wrong to say. It might even be real selfish of me to even think, because I know life is a gift so many others that are dead in gone would wish to continue having, but I would rather go out first, dying myself before I’m left on this earth having to go on with unfillable holes in my heart, after he or she is six feet under.

“I won’t say no shit like that again, aight?”

I nod my head and Chance then moves his hand over to mine, and I raise my hand up some from my lap and let the palm of his hand press against mine. We intertwine our fingers with one another, our hands fitting perfectly together.

He looks in his rearview mirror, and then up ahead at the road. He busts a quick U-turn and we’re heading back in the

direction that'll lead to my house.

“I am going to get his little ass when he comes back from his grandfather’s house. I can’t believe that he didn’t give the gun back to you right away. Silas won’t be playing them damn games anymore or looking at no crazy shit on YouTube,” I say to Chance with him telling me what happened between him and Silas during fishing.

“I had talked with him, and he understood what he did was some real serious shit afterwards, but I did tell him that I had to tell you.”

I can’t believe my baby held a gun in his hands, he had a talk with Chance, but when he’s back he and I are going to have a serious one as well.

“Well, thank you for telling me and talking with him as well on it.”

He nods his head at me. “You already know how I be when it comes to him and Saint.”

“Yeah, that I do.”

Chance pulls into the driveway of my house and parks his car next to mine. I look around, being aware of my surroundings, and I then see Beezy is parking his car on the side of the street. He was riding behind us the whole time from the Waffle House, and then with Chance turning back around. Hopefully, my uncle didn’t go too damn hard on him with what happened with Tamila.

Looking over to Chance, he has his phone in his hand reading something, then he locks his phone up and looks towards me. We stare at each other, and I can't help but smile. Even if there's someone out in this world trying to get me or whatever, just seeing Chance right now, being in each other's presence, there's nothing stopping me from just smiling and being happy with him. He smiles back at me, and his bottom lip doesn't look too bad, it's just really a little split on his lip. His lips are still very sexy and kissable. Lots of memories flooded my mind the whole drive back to my house, and I avoided having that happen these past three months, so I wouldn't miss him as much as I deep down knew that I was. I had to achieve what I have achieved now on my own, without him, aside from his help with me doing hair. I felt that my love was so very strong for him that staying away from him was better, because I would have just caved back in after the first week of our breakup. I was right, because I'm so mesmerized by him, and how could I not be with a man such as him? I have so much that I want to say to him, and I don't think I can wait another minute without telling him. I begin opening my mouth to speak.

"You want me to walk you to your door?" Chance asks me, and I close my mouth back, pressing my lips back together.

"Yeah, you can do that." I grab up my bag and begin opening up the door.

"Aye! Hold on, you must have forgotten the kind of man that I am, Sage. Shut the door back," he says to me and lets out a laugh. He then goes to opening his door and getting out. I chuckle as he walks in front of the car. I shut the car door back, and within a second, Chance is opening the door up himself. I step out of the car, and we begin walking to my porch. Getting up the front steps, I go into my bag, taking out my keys.

"Sage!" I look over to the side of me, and Beezy is running over to my house with his phone in his hand. He walks up the steps, standing in front of me and Chance. Beezy has a mahogany complexion, upturned, chestnut-brown eyes, and he has locs that hang down to his shoulders. He stands about six

feet eight, has a muscled-up, built body, and when he smiles his two deep dimples are shown off.

“Yo’ uncle on the phone, and that motherfucker is mad, and with you being back at yo’ house, you know why. Nigga done cut my pay down, talking about for however long we got to keep looking after you, I got to earn that full pay back. I honestly ain’t too mad about it, though. It was good to see someone finally hit that bitch, Tamila, in that damn mouth of hers. I know protecting you comes first, but you was good, though, and Pete’s ass would just go and let it be known by video calling, with his bitch ass. I got the nigga on mute, by the way,” he says, handing his phone to me.

I put the phone to my ear, and I look to Chance. “Hello,” I say into the phone.

“So, you just decided to come back to yo’ house for what? Sage, Tamila... Tamila is a person that tends to do shit that I never understood why, or what drove her to doing the fucked-up shit she has. With her sprung out on drugs, and basically losing everything around her aside from that nigga, Rahil, she ain’t got nothing to hold on to and care for life. The person that don’t have shit to lose be the most dangerous. I won’t ever know where I went wrong with her. I gave her as much love as I did with Mandisa, and then you, you’re like a daughter to me. And I just don’t want to see you getting hurt, Sagy Sage,” my uncle says, and I head over to my porch swing, making sure I don’t knock over some Halloween decorations, and I take a seat. My mind is made up, and it always has been. When it comes to me ever having to hide or run away, I refuse to ever do that shit. I understand where my uncle is coming from, but nothing or no one is going to make me afraid in life ever again.

“Sometimes the person that has the most to lose, can be the most dangerous too, Uncle Sammy, because that means there’s no limits on how far they’ll go in protecting everything that means the absolute world to them. Just know that you ain’t got to worry about me when it comes to her or anyone else.”

I hear him let out a deep breath, and he might be thinking I’m crazy or making a mistake by keeping myself in so-called

danger, but I'm not. If anyone wants to come for me, then they just come for me. I'm not about to be in no damn hole hiding. What is life if I'll be doing that?

"I ain't about to even sit up on this phone and fuss with you. You over here having no damn worries, and I'm just trying to be steps ahead, but I feel where you're coming from. And fuck it, bullets get to flying, then that's just what it's going to be." Now I let out a deep breath. I don't think anybody who's sane would want that to go there, but my uncle is right. Glancing up, I see Beezy and Chance are both looking at me, and they are itching to hear what my uncle is saying.

"I love you, Uncle Sammy, and I'm going to hand Beezy his phone back now... and you should just give him his full pay back. It was my fault of why he didn't step in back at the Waffle House."

He starts laughing on the phone. "I have a soft spot for you, I do, Sage, but when it comes to this kind of shit, I won't ever take back nothing. The nigga didn't do what he was supposed to, so he has to deal with the consequence of that. What if it went the other way, and you wouldn't be talking to me right now?"

Fair enough, I guess, but me not handling Tamila, that'll be a day that'll never come. So, he can kill all of that *what if it went the other way* shit.

"Okay, whatever you say, big dog. I love you, Uncle Sammy, and I'll talk with you another time."

"Love you too, Sage, and tell that nigga, Chance, he must be on that leash of yours again," he says to me, and then hangs up the phone. I stand up from the swing and Beezy comes over to me. "The nigga going to pay me back in full?" he asks me, and I shake my head.

"Nah, but I mean, at least I tried for yo' ass. Can't never say I ain't never do nothing for you." He looks at me with a straight face, and I can't help but laugh.

"From now on, just know that whatever that nigga says, it's gonna have to go." I kiss my teeth and then chuckle. My

uncle is right with a lot of things in life, but me doing what he wanted me to do wasn't one of them.

Beezy turns from me and walks up to Chance, and they dap each other up. "Aight now, nigga, be easy," Beezy says to him, and then he walks off my porch and heads back to his car.

I walk back over to Chance, and he's looking so damn fine. "Yo' uncle was talking cash shit, I bet," he says to me, and I shake my head as I head to the front of my door, unlocking it and opening it.

"Nope, he didn't do too much of that. He understands where I'm coming from, and that was lowkey shocking, but I'm glad he's leaving it alone. I know he's been concerned as hell these past months for me and the boys. Hell, everyone has, including me, but I meant what I said back then. How life is for me and my boys, there's no stopping that. Hopefully, all of this will be over with soon, and nobody has to be worried about he or she and their intentions when it comes to me." I avoid telling him about Sammy thinking he's on my leash again. Chance has never been on no sort of leash with me. He ain't no motherfucking pit bull, and he never been pussy whipped. Everything he's done for me or shown me has always been out of love, that I can admit without a single hesitation. We haven't said we love each other in a long time, but with love, words ain't the only thing that are available to show and express that and more for a person. After all, there are five different love languages, and Chance is doing some without us even being together.

He nods his head and slides his hands in his pocket. "Sage, do you mind if I come into your house and we talk? I have some things that I have to get off my chest with you, and however it'll go afterwards, you know before it all I'll respect what you'll decide on wanting to do." I have a strong feeling that what he wants to talk about is exactly what I'm needing to talk to him about. I just didn't get the chance to initiate the conversation on that first myself.

I widely open my front door. "Come on in, it's best to talk in my house anyways. With eyes having to be on me twenty-four seven, I'm sure they be having they popcorn ready just

watching me.” He laughs, and my heart just completely flutters.

We both walk into my house, and I shut the front door, locking it back. I head over to my alarm system and activate it. We make our way to one of my sofas in the living room, the both of us taking a seat close together, and I lay my bag on top of the wooden table.

“So, what is it that you have to get off your chest?” I ask him as I cross my legs, eagerly waiting for him to speak.

He leans forward as he’s sitting and runs his hands over his kinky curls. Being this close with him again, is just feeling so damn right. I’ve been feeling free as it is, on my own, but with him it’s like I’m freer. A lot of woman with certain men, don’t have that sort of comfort or feel that they can be free with that person, but with Chance, nothing has ever made me feel he was pushing me to be someone other than myself or only do what he wants me to do.

He turns to me and grabs up my hands lovingly. We gaze into one another’s eyes, and my heart is beating so damn fast. It’s beating as if this is the first time of me ever being this close to him or looking him deep in his eyes, but in this very moment, there’s something so deep between us, I feel it’s way deeper than before.

“I can’t go another day without you, Sage. I want to give you everything and more, as your man. I tried to not step to you on this, because I knew how much you needed this break, and I told you before that I wouldn’t ever do anything unless you ask of me. I’m tired of playing around, though, and acting like us not being together isn’t fucking with me. And I might be a selfish ass nigga to even say some shit like that. It’s just after these months, being around other females, they weren’t as enticing as you are. They didn’t hold my attention because everything that came out of their mouths towards me was just wanting to fuck or for me to spend money on them. I really gave no fucks about those females because none of them would ever be you.

“The life I’m having now, the shit don’t seem complete or right because you’re not by my side walking along with me. I don’t even give a fuck if I come off as a soft ass nigga, but the shit hurt when I couldn’t just pick up my phone and talk to you about everything that was changing for me, or just conversating just because that’s what we did on the regular. The fact that me and you couldn’t sit back, chill, and laugh like we did back in my car, and even the way we are right now just not being able to be face to face, I hated the shit. When I’m surrounded by others, the only person I want to be around is you. I would rather be with you only than waste my time with others that can’t ever compare to what you mean to me. You were my lover, my partner in crime type shit, and when I didn’t have that anymore with you, I felt cold, because your love and warmth wasn’t close as it once was. You might feel that I taught or showed you real love first, but really, Sage, you’re who taught me how to love. Where would I really have ended up in life if I never came across you? If it weren’t for you, a lot of shit from my days in prison would have broken me the fuck down, but you was always there for me, baby. I told you plenty of times that my love is all for you, and ain’t nothing changed about that. Until the day I leave this earth, I won’t ever stop being in love with you,” Chance says to me, and a tear escapes from his eye and slides down his face, followed by a few more tears. This is my first time ever seeing the man that I love cry. His passionate and raw words are repeating in my mind, and I’m tearing up my damn self. Tears break from my eyes like a dam in a river, coming down hard, and I feel them dropping down to my chest with this low-cut top on.

I press my hand to his face, wiping away the tears, and I can no longer go another day without him either. My journey alone is completed. It has to be, because this heart of mine is speaking loud and clear to me that this man is my soul mate, so why in the hell am I being dumb wasting more days without him? I always knew I was created for him, but when we broke up, things really weren’t for certain like I portrayed it to be. Things can change drastically in a day, let alone months. So, I wasn’t sure he’d still be feeling the same, but for me, I knew my love and heart would forever be for him, and it’s vice versa

for him. The spark between us, it really let me know beforehand, but now he's let me know from his own mouth that he's feeling the same.

“I missed you so damn much, Chance. It was so hard for me to be separated from you too, but I won't regret it, because it had to be done. I overcame so many hurdles in my life. I had to piece myself together, instead of having someone do it for me. When we were together, I wasn't giving all of me, because all of me wasn't there; not when the past haunted me still. I'm finally whole, and therefore, I can finally give you my all and more. I love you... I have loved you from the very start of us, and since I'm the one who broke up with you, if you give me another chance to be with you, Chance, I'll love you to the very end. There will be no breakups or anything again, just us together and in love and living this life, and we continue doing what we've set ourselves to do.”

Chance licks his lips and begins inching closer to me, but then stops. “Why you had to go and be corny, with that ‘Chance if you give me another Chance, shit’? Baby, my love for you is real as fuck. I was just waiting on you, but I couldn't wait any longer in saying what I had to, to you. Just say the words and I'll give you what you ask of me.” The strong, good-smelling cologne of his hits my nostrils. The heat of his body is radiating and warming me up. He releases my hands and cups my face in his hands. My body shivers a little. I never want to go without his touch in life ever again.

I smile and bite down on my lip gently and press my small hands over his hands on my face. “Just kiss me already,” I say so lowly that it can be considered just a whisper.

He presses his lips up to mine, and it takes me into a bliss. His soft and moist lips on mine are instantly making me wet, and I want him right now. I want to just take off my clothes and have him take me right here on this sofa, but I need a damn shower, we both do. After having Tamila all up on me, I need to wash off anything that might have been left on me from her.

Standing up off the sofa, my lips are still connected with his. We're kissing so hard and it's like we've really been

starving to have each other, but I turn my head away, breaking our kiss. Chance stands up off the sofa, breathing a little heavy. “I do something wrong?”

“No, no, there’s nothing wrong with what we did, it’s just I need a shower. You need one too, because when you picked me up you got that filth all on you as well.”

He looks down at his shirt, as if I literally mean there’s something on him. He looks back up at me and laughs. “You talking about Tamila’s ass?”

I nod my head, taking his hand into mine, not wasting any more time of us being downstairs. I’ve missed him so much, and what I’ve missed as well is getting my fucking back blown out by him. Shit, I’m a woman, and I have my sexual needs too, and those sex toys don’t compare to what Chance has given me in life with that dick.

We walk up my stairs and head right into my bedroom. I take off of my heels, and Chance takes off his shoes.

“You fuck anyone else these past months?” I ask Chance, as I’m standing in front of him, and I start taking off his shirt. If he ends up telling me yes, I will not be mad at all. That’s in the past for all I care, but I do just want to know.

I throw his shirt down to the floor and move my hands down to his belt, unbuckling it.

“Fuck no. Could I have fucked somebody else? Yeah, plenty of times I could have done so, but this dick of mine, didn’t want no other bitches’ pussy. It’s all for you, baby.” He starts unbuckling the front buttons on my skirt, we throw every piece of clothing off of our bodies, and he picks me up and I wrap my legs around his body. Then he carries me into my bathroom. Our lips crash back onto each other, and my pussy is wetting up the lower half of his stomach with my legs being around him. We get over to the tub, and he leans down a little to start the shower.

I stop kissing him. “Grab the washcloths,” I say breathlessly to him, and he goes into the built-in closet, taking two washcloths out. He carefully steps into the shower with

me, as I'm still wrapped around him. I only have Dove sensitive body wash, but he'll be alright; ain't nothing wrong with that. I want to just fuck him right now in the tub, but I don't want us to be slipping up in this bitch, breaking our damn necks. This ain't no walk-in shower. I get from off of Chance and we begin washing each other down. This isn't the first time of us showering together.

Ten minutes go by of us being in the shower, and we're now clean, so Chance cuts off the water. We both get out of the tub, and taking me by surprise, he picks me up and sits me down on the bathroom sink countertop, our bodies dripping off water. He spreads my legs open as far as they're managing to go, and he gets right on his knees. His mouth finds its way onto my pussy, and he begins eating me out as if I'm the last meal that'll ever be served to him. Throwing my head back, it hits up against the mirror, and I begin grinding my hips on his face. His tongue is flicking on my clit, and then he switches it up and goes to sucking on it, but then in the next few seconds, goes back to licking and flicking on the center piece that matters the most. His skillful tongue is driving me up the wall. He slides two fingers into my pussy and on cue, my inner walls tighten around them. He begins fucking me with his fingers, and with just a few more licks and sucking on my clit, I'm cumming so damn hard.

“Shiiit...ohhhh!” I scream out loud in pure ecstasy, my legs uncontrollably shaking. He glides his free hand up from my stomach and grabs one of my breasts, squeezing it. Chance's fingers slides from out of my hole, and he licks his fingers and then places them into my mouth. I suck on them as he goes to kissing on my pussy, and I then feel his wet and warm tongue licking the inside of my thighs, getting every drop that's meant for him.

In the next five minutes, he makes me cum with the quickness two more times from his mouth, and I'm not even drained. I want more and more of him. I'm done with the mouth, I just want him inside of me. I want him to have the pussy that's all for him and no other nigga. I grab his face up from between my legs, and I drop back down onto the floor. I turn around and lift my leg up onto the sink counter, Chance

wipes away the fog on the bathroom mirror and we're looking at one another in the mirror. He gives my ass quick slaps on each cheek then rubs his dick up and down the slit of my pussy lips. I'm so motherfucking wet that my juices are trickling down my legs. I get wet real easy when it comes to Chance, but for it to be this damn much, this is the first time ever. My pussy really has missed him, and it just has to show all out.

"Extrañé este coño de minas," Chance whispers into my ear, and then sucks on my earlobe. He slides his dick slowly inside of me, and I open my mouth up, gasping. Every inch of him, I'm yearning for. I don't want nothing nice and slow; I want it to be nothing but rough.

I move my hand back and place my hand on his ass, pushing him to go deeper in me already, and he picks up on it. He slides his dick as deeply as he can into my pussy, and I feel the tip of his dick hitting against my cervix, and it's painful but more than anything, pleasurable, and exactly what I'm wanting. He's pounding in me relentlessly and I'm whimpering for all the right reasons. We're looking up into the mirror and seeing our bodies pressed to one another, how beautifully our skin tones go together.

Chance removes my hair from in front of my neck and gives me light kisses, then starts sucking on the side of my neck like a bloodthirsty vampire. He slaps me on the ass again, and I lose it for the fourth time. My stomach is tightening up as I cum all over his dick. He takes my leg down from off the counter and spins me back around to face him. I move my hands up his abs, analyzing the new tattoos that he's put onto his body. Moving my head to his abs, I place kisses from them all the way up to his collarbone. I stick out my tongue and lick all the way up to his bottom lip. I take it into my mouth, and suck on it. He lifts me up on the counter and pulls me towards him, having me a little off the edge of it. He reenters his dick inside of me and begins stroking in and out of me slowly. We wrap our arms around each other, our sweaty bodies rubbing against one another. The panting and moaning we're both doing together, is like a very nice rhythmical song. He speeds his strokes up and then goes right back to pounding me. I kiss on his neck and then go to biting down on it, sinking my teeth

to where it's pleasing to him, the way he always likes. My stomach begins tightening and I know I'm about to reach my climax. Chance slows down, and he pumps in me slow and deep, and with the rotating a little with his hips, I'm about to burst. "Fucck...I'm ab—" Chance's dick stiffens in me, and instead of him pulling out, we're cumming at the same time, his cum deeply filling inside of me. We're both breathing heavily, and he drops his head down onto my chest.

"I'm no longer on birth control, Chance. I got off the pill. I wasn't having any sex, so I didn't see the point of taking them when that's all I had it for," I say to him, and he raises his head up and kisses me on the lips, then places a kiss on my cheek.

He presses his forehead to mine. "If you're to get pregnant, I told you before I wouldn't mind a baby, but only if you wouldn't either, because it is your body. Saint and Silas, they're my sons. I don't see it any other way but that with them. So, if you want to get back on birth control, do that, but if not, be ready for a baby, because I'm going to be fucking you like I just did for a good ass minute, and I don't care to pull out."

Moving my head back from him, I lift his head up to me and kiss him. "As much as I'll love to carry our child, you and I both know it's not ideal, at least not right now. Protection is on me, and then we still haven't gotten the business up. One day, though, it'll happen, but until then, back on the pills I go, and then take me a plan B. Mandisa left some over here about a week ago. I didn't think it'd come in handy for me, but look at God." I laugh and Chance bites his lip, looking at me. We haven't said the actual words of us being back together, and it's clear that we don't even need to. Everything is just picking back up where we left off, but we're different now, in the best way though.

He kisses me three times on the lips then backs away, pulling his dick out of me, and I get up off the sink counter. "You right, I deserve another fucking punch from yo' ass on just for saying that. Caught up thinking about our future, like we really in the clear for all of that. Eventually, something with Ricardo got to pop the fuck up. Even after these months, I

still feel that he ain't about what he said, and until some hard evidence shows up that he is, that's the only way I'll believe otherwise."

I nod my head, agreeing with him. "Yeah, once everything with him is put to rest, my life will be normal; well, our lives will be normal. Being watched over so much, that shit gets annoying, almost like I'm a little kid with babysitters," I say back to Chance, and looking down at his naked body, I just noticed, what clothes does he even have to put on that ain't dirty? Then it comes to me the two drawers I let him have to put some of his clothes in back then when he was staying over all the time. I never threw them out or gave them back to him, I just avoided opening those drawers. I'm sure he might know that some of his clothes are still here too. A phone begins ringing and it can't be mine, because I have my phone on silent and it's downstairs. Chance gives me a kiss on the cheek. "Hold on, baby, let me see who calling me. It could be the 'money' that's calling. Oh, you and me need to discuss about the barbershop and salon as well. I'm thinking about us taking a different route with that." He smiles at me, and it's so girlish to say, but why is my man so damn dreamy, and yeah, I'm back to claiming Chance, my *man*. He walks out of the bathroom, leaving me alone. I turn around and look at myself in the mirror, and my face drops down. All these plans in life to get started on or continue doing, it feels great, especially with me and Chance officially being back together, but nothing will ever be right or good in my life or anyone else's around me until everything with Ricardo is far behind me. I really hate to admit it, but that's the truth about it. I can't lie to myself on this shit. Whatever he does and whatever the fuck he is has to be revealed. I'm not with having niggas around me for the rest of my damn life having to protect me. Soon enough, that shit will drive me crazy. I've been good dealing with it, because there isn't really any other choice to pick, but this can't be the rest of my life.

At this point, I'm just wanting for Ricardo to just show up, get whatever it is over and done with. That might sounds like I'm possibly asking for a death wish, but I'm not afraid, and I said that a whole lot of times and I meant it every single time.

If he really wants me, then he just needs to come at me, and whatever it'll be, I'll fight to keep on breathing, as I did with everything else in my life. I ain't trying to act or think like I'm the biggest and baddest person in the world, but like I told my uncle, the person that got the most to lose as well, they'll go to whatever measures needed in order to protect and keep everything they value more than their own life. People having their lives at risk for me because of the unknown of Ricardo, it has to end. How will it end...that's the question I can only ask when I get there.

CHANCE

A MONTH AND A HALF LATER

Sage and I have been going strong ever since we decided to get back together. The funny shit is, though, when we let everyone know we were back together, the first thing they all said was that ‘it was about damn time.’ It didn’t surprise me and Sage at all, though. We knew everyone was rooting for us, so when they saw us back together again, they all felt like everything was good in the universe again. The break for us was very beneficial, even though I did crawl back to her on some down on my knees shit. I even fucking cried, but I ain’t have no shame in that shit. That woman is my motherfucking heart, so shedding tears, that shit was real serious for me. I’d rather be a nigga that cried to my woman about the love I had for her, than be the nigga that claimed he loved her but did her dirty as fuck every chance I got, and just came running back with crocodile tears for her to take me back.

When it came to me and Sage working on the barbershop and hair salon, we had a whole talk for a whole week or two, and I was breaking it down to her on how we don’t even need no fucking investor no more. That we could pull the shit off ourselves. If we kept working and gaining more exposure, then there wouldn’t be a problem for us to keep racking up on money and just buy out a building ourselves and get to building it up. I saw no point anymore of getting someone that we would have to split our money with. The only motherfucker I wanted to worry about owing is the IRS. So that twenty to twenty-five percent that an investor would take

from our business, I said fuck that. Wanting an investor was before more doors opened for me and even her, and with seeing more paths to rise to the top, to take the one with an investor would be dumb as hell.

The apartment that I had, I done let it go. I moved in with Sage a week after we were back together. I wanted to be around her and the boys as much as I could. With juggling being a mobile barber, along with building my brand and platform, shit's been busy, but every minute of doing so is worth it. Sage and I opened up a business account and been putting money in it. We got some ways to go, because what we're aiming to do, commas are going to be needed.

As for the whole shit with Ricardo, nothing ever came up. At this point, the motherfucker really just don't exist; but, of course, I know he does and everyone else does too. Tracing him, though, can't no motherfucking body do, so the protection on Sage and everyone around her is still ongoing. Sammy left the life he lived a long time ago, but he stepped back in just a little bit to call out orders for Sage, because that's his niece and he needs no fuck ups. He couldn't stick around calling orders physically, though. He was granted custody of all Tamila's kids, Jeremias, Camille, Loyal, and Khari, and he left to somewhere unknown. Sammy is a nigga that got money, he just stayed around in Charlotte for the ones he loves. He didn't want to leave, but Sage and Mandisa told him that he had to, that they would be good, and ever since then, I went back to being on go when it came to Ricardo. Whatever will come my way with him, if he is about it, I'll lay down my life for Sage and my sons.

Today is Sia's and Jabari's oldest daughter Mickey's 11th birthday, and everyone that's close to them that could make it today is here at Sky Zone Trampoline Park for the party. It's located in Pineville, NC, and that's only twenty minutes away from Charlotte. The ones out of our crew that couldn't make it today are Mandisa, Omari, Nelson, and my sister, Grace. They all gave their gifts in advance to Mickey. The only two that showed up are me and Sage, along with our sons. They're over there having the times of their lives, jumping on these trampolines and doing all that other shit that's up in here.

I'm just sitting back and chilling at this round table in this little ass chair. Sia and Sage are saying something to the kids, and they start making their way back over to me. They're both laughing about something. Sage and I catch eyes, and she's smiling at me, that beautiful ass damn smile of hers. My baby is thicker than ever. Since I been piping her down again, that ass done grown bigger, and them hips, man. My future wife is the baddest damn woman to ever walk this earth. They both make it back over to the table, and Sage takes a seat next to me in the chair beside me. She scoots the chair closer and throws one of her legs over mine. I go to caressing her thigh. She leans closer to me, and I give her a peck on the lips.

"Saint and Silas are jumping on them damn trampolines, having a fucking ball. They doing all them back flips and somersaults. The both of them done caught the eyes of some little girls, and they ain't leaving them alone at all, been following them around for a good thirty minutes," Sage says as she lays her head on my shoulder. I press my hand up to her head, running my hands through her scalp.

"You already know, my little men are smoother than ever. They're going to track the ladies no matter what they're doing. Mama Bear better go ahead and get used to it while they're young, because teenage years, ain't going to be no joke. I'm telling you this now, we getting them fucking condoms," I say to Sage, and she taps me in the chest and laughs. She thinks I'm being funny, but I'm dead ass serious. She just sees Saint and Silas as her little boys still, so, she don't want to be thinking about them and sex, but I'm a man and I know how it is growing up and hitting teenage years. So, the birds and the bees talk, we going to do once they hit either ten or twelve years old, because when boys hit the age of thirteen, they be walking around with their chests out, ready to do grown things instead of child things, and sex is included in that.

"I don't want to hear none of that. You acting like grown folks ain't out here still virgins, they ain't going to need no condoms. Not everyone loses their virginities young," Sage says back to me, lifting her head, and I hit her with a 'really' face.

“Okay, okay...they do be losing it that age, and it’s rare when you come across grown virgins, but still, no. We ain’t about to be thinking about that, they eight years old.”

She’ll have a changed mind by the time they get to the ages I already said. I’d rather them come to us being open and letting us know of their sexual activities one day than going behind our backs and doing it. There’s a lot more to sex than just getting someone pregnant. STDs and every damn thing else that can fuck them up goes with that.

“Aight then, baby,” I say to her, kissing her once again.

I look to Sia, and she’s sitting across the round table in a chair. She’s looking down on her phone and begins texting.

“Jabari said he was about to pull up like fifteen minutes ago. It’s still somewhat early into the birthday party, but where the fuck is he at with Mickey’s cake?” Sia says, and soon as she even speaks on Jabari, he comes through the building’s door with a white box that must be holding the cake inside, and in his other hand he’s holding on to a Food Lion bag with everything that’s needed for the cake. He gets over to us and places the box and bag down.

“About time, baby. Like, you know we have to find a way to make the candles look cute on this specific unicorn cake, by the way it’s made. You get everything needed, like, you seriously ain’t forget shit? This birthday been going perfect, and it needs to stay that way for my baby,” Sia says, standing up out her chair. She goes to take out a pack of candles from the bag, and then she starts unboxing the cake. Opening it up, her whole entire face scrunches the fuck up. She looks up at Jabari, and he’s wearing a look of disbelief on his face.

“I know you fucking lying. No, Jabari... what in the fuck is this?” She slams the top of the cake box down, frustrated.

“Baby, I ain’t thin—”

She puts her hand in his face, stopping him from talking any further. “You ain’t think to check the fucking cake at least once the whole entire drive from Charlotte? What the fuck are we supposed to do with an ugly ass got damn Ninja Turtle

cake? Oh my god, if I didn't love you, I'll be punching you dead in yo' shit right now. I can smell the weed on you as well, high as hell. You're a fucking idiot sometimes." Sia grabs up her purse and keys.

"Where you about to go, baby? I ain't that fucking high, so chill on that. We just get the kids' cakes all the time from that bakery and then for other shit. It ain't never been wrong any other time when I didn't look into the box. I can go back and cuss them motherfuckers out and get my baby girl's cake. It's an honest fucking mistake. You and them fucked up hormones be doing too damn much, I swear." Sia slaps him in the back of his head, and the way his eyes buck out in shock, has me chuckling to myself. My nigga deserved that slap. Sia's pregnant, and one thing you don't do is piss off a pregnant woman.

"I said I wanted Mickey's birthday to be fucking perfect. Call the bakery right now and see if the cake is still even there. If we have someone else's cake, then they might have given Mickey's out by accident too."

Jabari goes into his pocket and pulls out his phone. He's moving his finger around on the phone screen and then moves his phone to his ear. "Don't be fucking helloing me, y'all motherfuckers done got my daughter's cake wrong... It was a unicorn-like cake for Mickey Hairston. Nigga, what?... The cake was already picked up, but I'm sitting here in front of a damn cake that looks like green shit with turtles' faces on it! So, the damn cake that I picked up ain't meant for my daughter. Mannn...I'm looking right at the ugly ass cake. So, you motherfuckers telling me the cake ain't there? Tomorrow, I'm getting my motherfucking money back from y'all." Jabari hangs up and throws his phone on the table. He leans back in the chair and lets out a frustrated ass deep breath. I look over to Sia, and she just shakes her head in such disappointment.

"Let me go and try to somehow fix this shit. There ain't going to be nobody on call to make a cake such as that. My baby, unfortunately, has to settle for some ugly ass store-bought cake. She deserves way more than that, but there ain't

nothing else I can do on such a short notice,” Sia says, and she begins walking away.

Jabari stands up and is about to walk behind her, but Sage says, “Let her go, Jabari. I think you the last person she wants to be riding with.” Sage stands up from the chair and grabs up her purse, then she leans down to me give me kisses. “I love you, baby, and make sure you keep an eye on the boys. Last time they were with you, they got in a fight with some other little boys.”

I chuckle, thinking back to when Saint and Silas got to fighting on the basketball court in the neighborhood about four days ago. “Baby, they were defending themselves. Some punk ass little boys tried to bully them. The little niggas even swung on them first because they were mad Saint and Silas were beating them in the basketball game. They ain’t go for that and neither did I, so they stood their ground.”

“I hear ya, baby, but as I said before, keep yo’ eyes on them,” she says, leaning down giving me another kiss.

“You be safe out there, baby. You already know you got to keep yo’ eyes out for everything.”

“Yeah, I know...as it’s been for fucking months,” she says back to me, as if nothing that’s been going with her is really that serious anymore.

We share one more kiss together and then she leaves from me, running behind Sia. She catches up with her and they walk out of the building.

I look to Jabari and he’s massaging his right temple with his fingers. “I love my damn wife, man, but she been getting on my damn nerves for the past two weeks. The moment I step up into the house, it’s always some fucking shit with her. I have enough stress from working and then with the other restaurant being built. Dealing with all that shit, I just want to come home, to my peace. She ain’t being my damn peace right now, though, and then with her pregnant, those mood swings. They’re worse than the pregnancy with Jai,” Jabari says, and he picks up his phone and goes to tapping on it with his thumbs.

Jabari and Sia stay having their ups and downs, and what couple don't go through that? When it comes to Jabari speaking on Sia, as her being his wife, I don't say shit. I just let him vent, because I believe as a man, no other man should speak on anything with your wife. Sage and I don't even speak to those around us like that no more when it comes to our foundation, because our business is our business. Beforehand, a lot of people were saying this or that on us, and it was all good, but we just don't be wanting extra input when it's only ours needed. If we good, then we good. If we not, then to others we still good. It's no hate or anything towards the ones we love and care for, but it's our relationship, and then eventually it'll be our marriage. Once we get over one fucking thing, and that's still motherfucking Ricardo. Lowkey, I've been picking up on Sage just being chill with all of it, as if the unknown to her ain't no threat. I'll be happy when she's back here and in my sight.

Jabari is still typing on his phone, but it then slips out of his hand and falls to the floor. He bends down to pick it up. "Man, she did not leave this here? She lucky ain't nobody steal this expensive shit," Jabari says, lifting back up, and he's holding a black long wallet with a big golden C on it, and a name Chole.

"Oh damn, she left her wallet. Well, Sage is with her, so I bet she'll pay for whatever she needs to get," I say to him and turn my head, looking over to Saint and Silas. They're jumping around and having fun, and I see the two girls Sage was talking about. Silas looks like he's trying to teach the girl to do a front flip. Looking back over to Jabari, he has his phone to his ear, most likely calling Sia. I take out my phone from my pants pocket and see so many notifications. I've rarely checked my phone today, because I didn't want to focus on anything with business, when it's Mickey's birthday. I keep on scrolling then slow down. There's one notification that's sticking out the most to me, and it's a Facebook messenger message from that bitch, Chanel, who's just known as a damn stalker. The last time I saw her was at Club 51 Degrees, when my sister told her she'll beat her ass. Even with not seeing her, she kept on up with trying to hit me up, but this is a message.

The whole time of her trying to ever contact me, she'll just call and call, but never send a message to me. I press on it, and it directs me to messenger, so I read it.

Chanel: Please! Please! You have to talk to me; Chance, it's about Sage, it's about a whole lot of other shit! They've planned to take Sage today. Me seeing you at the club for the first time in years wasn't a coincidence. I was supposed to set you up the last night I saw you, but I went against them. I figured they would have killed me, but instead, they've beat my ass and raped me ever since. His men have been monitoring me every time I was calling you. In the clubs I saw you in, I had a wire on me. They were listening in so I wouldn't talk and tell you anything. You need to call me. It's Ricardo, you know him! He found me, he found me and our son. I never talked with you after I quit working at the prison. I quit because I was pregnant with your baby. We weren't really shit, so I said fuck it, I'll just raise my baby on my own. I had left back to New Jersey where I'm from. Whenever you read this, you have to call me, please! I killed the man they had watching over me today. I took his phone and wallet. He had no cash or anything on him. They're looking for me. I can't go to the police here because some of them are in his pockets. If you don't hear from me anymore, then they found me, and they've killed me. Save my baby, save our son, Chance. I beg of you. He's keeping my baby alive for a reason. If I'm dead, you need to save Kwame, before that reason is no longer something that'll stop him from killing him.

Sent:9:21 a.m.

Wait...wait...wait, what the fuck did I just read? What the fuck? Yo, nah, nah, this ain't nothing real. This can't be no real message.

It's already two something in the afternoon, and that fucking message was sent this morning. I press my finger to the phone icon on the messenger app, and pressing my phone to my ear, there's no ring. I take the phone from my ear, and

the call failed to go through. I try again, still nothing. I stand up out of the chair and my hands are shaking. My breathing is speeding up, and it's like fire is blazing up inside of me. Jabari stands up out of his seat and he's looking at me puzzledly.

“Yo, Chance, what the fuck is up with you?” he asks me.

I glance to the boys and then back to him. “Jabari, watch the boys for me. I got to go, I got—”

I take off, sprint to the doors and burst out of them. I go into my pockets, taking my key ring and grabbing up my key fob, pushing down on it, unlocking my car. Hopping in the car, I turn it on, hit it out of park, and waste no time speeding off. I hit the phone call button on my steering wheel, and talking to the Bluetooth, I tell it to call Sage.

Sia is driving a little too damn reckless right now, and I get the being mad over the cake, but she needs to slow her ass down. I'll be mad too if on the very day of my child's birthday something goes wrong, though. Mickey bragged about having a unicorn cake for her birthday for the longest, so now that she won't have it, of course, Sia will be hurt as a mother. Us mothers will go to the end of the earth to put a smile on our babies' faces, so, others probably think this cake ain't a big deal, but when it comes to making your child happy, it is very much a big ass deal.

"I really can't believe this. We're heading to a damn Food Lion, to go and get a damn cake from there. I can just see my baby's face now. I know she's going to have a whole damn hissy fit, and she might not even blow out the damn candles. After today, I got to go and get that cake to make up for her blowing out on this basic ass one today," Sia says as she gets in another lane, zooming by a slow ass fucking car, then getting back in the right lane. The car jerks a little as she's keeping up a fast ass speed, driving with one hand and having her other hand laying on her stomach.

The night that Sia threw up at Waffle House, I was right about her possibly being pregnant. She took two tests after that night and both came back positive. She was happy as ever, and I was happy for her. Sia is going in and out of traffic lanes, and she should have let me fucking drive.

“Sia! If you don’t slow the fuck down, you’re either going to get pulled over, or we might end up in a got damn car accident. I know you mad, I hate it for Mickey too that she don’t have that cake, but just take a deep breath and slow this motherfucking car down.”

She eases up on the gas and starts driving the actual speed limit. “Yeah, I ain’t got time for another fucking speeding ticket.”

The time that’s went on by, there’s been some changes, some for good and others for bad. The bad is that I’m still having protection on me, and anybody else that’s involved with me is still at fucking risk. My uncle is gone to I have no clue where. He only contacts me whenever he does, and he finally got custody over all of Tamila’s kids, and that was a day to do nothing but praise dances. Tamila never ended up doing anything to me. The last I heard on her was that she went off to some rehab after losing all four of her kids to Uncle Sammy. As for what happened to Rahil, since he had no choice but to leech off of her, I heard he was back around his mother again, trying to get him to take her in, but more so, just wanting to steal up all of her shit to sell and get drugs. Nobody fucks with him, not even his old friends.

Everyone that I love and am close too, is doing good. I mean, they don’t really let what’s going on with the protection shit get to them. Why it doesn’t get to them, I have no idea. I figured they would have dropped my ass by now, but it’s something that just ain’t sitting right with me. I’m very thankful no one has been hurt, but if someone is out to get you, wouldn’t the first thing be for them to take out the people they know you care about the most? Chance and I have been planning and doing a lot of wonderful things together, but I’ve been hiding how I feel about the protection and shit sometimes. I be so over it that I just don’t care at times of knowing who’s protecting me today or the next. It becomes very repetitive, and I just want to know when will it fucking end, and I think Chance is picking up on it, but just isn’t saying anything to me.

I pick up my purse from the floorboard and take out my phone. It's literally on one percent since I forgot last night to put it on the charger. I was too occupied by Chance after a long and successful day of styling and cutting hair. Running around the whole day with Sia to get the birthday party ready, I had no time to even think of charging up my phone. Glancing at the screen, I see so many missed calls from Chance, like what the fuck? Fifteen missed damn calls. My stomach literally drops. Oh my god, Saint and Silas, what has happened that quick? Sia and I haven't even been gone that damn long from Sky Zone.

I click on the missed calls, and it dials to Chance automatically. Putting the phone up to my ear, I start hearing ringing. On the first ring, it stops, and Chance picks up.

“Sage, where are you at? Baby, I need you to tu—” Removing my phone from my ear, my phone has died.

Something's going on, I can tell by the mix of terror and anger in his voice. I drop my phone back in my purse. “Sia, turn the car around, we need to get back to Sky Zone. That was Chance and he called me fifteen times. All I got from the call was that he was asking where I was at before my phone died.” Sia looks over to me then back to the road, both of her hands are now on the steering wheel.

“What happened? I mean, you don't think nothing has happened, right?” Sia asks me worriedly, and I can't respond back to her. I can't get her all worked up with her being pregnant. If something is going down, does that mean Ricardo finally has come back out of his hole?

Turning in my seat I look out the back window of her car, and I don't even see Beezy's car following behind us. I'm so use to him or the others following me around that checking to see if they have become unnecessary, but right now he's nowhere on the road.

I turn back around and place my hands on top of my legs. “We just need to get back there, Sia,” I say, trying to hide my own worriedness from my voice.

Sia is about to drive up to a green light, so she turns her signal light on. As she's coming into a right turn, I whip my head over to her, and then I see a black truck speeding our way, not slowing down at all. She has the right of way, but it keeps going and going.

"Siiiiaaaaa! Siaaaaa!" I yell, and she turns to me, but then looks outside her window.

"Ahhhhhhhhhaaaa!" Sia screams, and the truck smashes mightily into her car, t-boning us. I jolt powerfully in the seat, and the seat belt extends as far as it can go, getting locked up and choking me. More force from the hit has me leaning forward, and the air bag goes off and my body is thrown to the side, my head hitting against the passenger window. Immediately, I feel a throbbing pain in the right side of my head. The car feels like it's no longer moving, and I start feeling something warm and thick flowing down the side of my head, and I know that it's my blood. My whole body is in excruciating pain, the car front is smashed up, and my left leg is on complete fire. I try to move it, but with every pull of a muscle, it hurts.

"Sia? Sia?" I cry out, my voice cracking, and she's not responding back to me. I go to trying to get the seatbelt unhooked, and I struggle for a few seconds until it unsnaps, and my throat is no longer being crushed by the seat belt. Fighting through the agony, I push my body up. It feels like complete dead weight. I press my hands up to the air bag on the driver's side, trying to get to Sia.

"Sia, please! Say something to me!" I yell, my throat tightening up. Tears are falling from my eyes and it's burning my whole entire face. The windshield is completely broken out, the glass must have cut me all over. Gritting my teeth, I give all my strength trying to see Sia. The air bag moving back from my hands, I catch a look of Sia and she's completely bloody. The air bag has her leaning back, and I try to catch her chest moving up and down, but there's nothing, unless I just can't really see from her shirt and the blood.

I go to reaching my hand up to her face, but the car door on my side opens up and someone grabs me from behind, dragging me out of the car, more glass cutting me while they're doing so. The person grabs me from off the ground and holds me in their arms bridal style, running off from Sia's car. I raise my hand up. I want to scream, but my throat is burning so much that my vocal cords can't even make a low sound. Looking up to the person carrying me, they have on a black ninja ski mask, with black sunglasses on. My eyes are blinking repeatedly because blood is trickling down in them. Looking forward through my blurry vision, I see a 2019 Lincoln Navigator L Black Label 4x4, and the back door on the side I'm seeing comes flying open.

“Throw her in!” That voice, I know that fucking voice. The person gets to the car quickly while running, and throws me into the car. I land roughly into the seat. My left leg has to be broken. I'm trying to move it, but nothing is really moving. I can't fucking run even if I wanted to. So much pain keeps shooting within my body like fireworks bursting in the sky. Moving my hands to my eyes, I begin trying to wipe the blood away from them, but the more I wipe, the more I'm smearing it all over, making it worse. I feel a large and rough hand touching my face. Someone goes to wiping my eyes for me, and I can see a little better. Pushing myself up in the seat, I look over to the left of me, and there he is. The last time that I saw him was at the mansion. Ricardo is sitting up in the seat, and he has a glass filled with brown liquor and two ice cubes in it. He takes a sip from the glass, and I see he has a bloody handkerchief on his lap. He must have wiped my eyes clear.

“I told you to not try me, Sage. If your friend doesn't survive from that, her blood is on your hands,” Ricardo says to me, and I hear a chuckle from behind me. There's someone else in here other than the person driving. I've heard that bitch's voice. I force myself to not focus on how sore and beat up my body is. Turning to the back of the car, there's more seats. My eyes land on Tamila. She doesn't look like someone who's a drug addict anymore, she actually looks like she's gotten clean. I move my head over to a little boy, and he looks

so terrified. He has a teddy bear in his hand, and he looks...he looks like he could be Chance's twin.

Oh my god, this little boy, who is he? Could he? No, no... Chance would have told me if, he...

A cloth comes over my face, and the strong smell of chemicals is burning my nose. It's making me sleepy. I'm trying to fight it, but I'm losing, my eyes are becoming real heavy.

“When you wake up, you'll be somewhere that's very breathtaking, and you and I will have a long talk, Sage,” Ricardo says, and my eyes begin closing. My fast heartbeat is slowing down to a normal pace, and everything is dark, so very dark.

I wanted him to finally stop hiding, I wanted him to come at me. I should have been more careful with what I wished for. He should have come at me while I was alone. Sia?

TO BE CONTINUED