



promise

promise.

the
promise.
the prism series : three.

promise.

LOVE BELVIN

The Promise

Prism

Book 3

Love Belvin



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Cover design by **Visual Luxe**

Kamiyah T.M. Belvin,

You belonged.

You're a thread in the legacy.

You're missed.

LBU Angela,

You were a gem and will forever be missed.

Roomie,

You're an energy I'll hold in my heart forever.

The promise.

the prism series : three.

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I'm wiser now.

Think twice, act once now (my block).

Leavin' the Glock in a locked box now (my kids).

Warn once, shoot twice now.

Touch my lady, you meet the ground, clown (my wife).

Fuck me twice, roll the dice...

I fool you now.

She ask for one, I give her two now.

Five babies, four cribs now.

Shit's smooth now, she claimed the crown now.

Hijacked my name, pull up to the bank...

Withdrawing from my shits now.

On a beach, wow.

No cameras, no rubbers, just my naked hoe loud (oooh-weee).

Looking through my rear mirror before crossing lanes now.

Fuck the money, fuck power, just my family now (my life)!

~Young Lord

Chapter One

Part III

February | Three Years Later

ashira

The music was soft, slow, and tormentingly sad, and I refused to look at the casket just yet while in transit. I did catch eyes with the guy sitting at the drum set. He quickly tossed a knowing glance to the organ player. It was a rapid exchange, but one I knew, and was able to confirm it when the organ player's eyes turned hooded, and he licked his lips.

Forcing my attention ahead, I told myself to just get through this ceremony, and then I'd be on my way back to Costa Rica. I'd just be a support today and then return to my real world. I was third in line, being shown to our seats. Following my father, I sat next to him on the first pew. Noelle had the aisle seat, causing us to sandwich our father. Once seated on the hard, wooden bench, I caught view of her.

Ughhh!

I cringed at the mini yellow dress she wore. While practically having the body of an adult woman, Noelle was

still just a child and was dressed inappropriately, especially for an occasion such as this. The dress I'd ordered for her had arrived two days ago; this I knew for sure. Also, in her shoddy text responses to me, she assured me she'd received it as well as the shoes I purchased for her from *Saks Fifth Avenue*. Simple black, three-and-a-half-inch *Sam Edelman* pumps were more than perfect for today. But instead, the ratchet child paired the off-the-shoulder canary yellow mini dress with the skirt portion ruffled, black tights, and yellow pleather, strappy sandals. My baby sister looked a horrible sight.

More than that, my father had nothing to say when we met with her in front of the church just short minutes ago. He did a double-take with a reactive grunt I knew to express his shock, but the man never whispered a word of concern to his daughter, which bugged me. It always annoyed me. But I couldn't focus on that right now. Nothing could be done, making me question my decision not to fly in last night and have her stay with me. That special accommodation for Noelle would be one I'd have to get used to moving forward. No, I had not the capacity right now. But whether I was ready or not, life had dealt another unexpected blow. I had to extend myself to my sister in a more dedicated way. My heart bled, understanding life would never be the same for her.

Lattice!

My lashes fluttered then eyes rolled away nearly as fast as they arrived upon her corpse, lying in a casket. This was so fucked up. Cancer. It ravished her within a year. The damn thing attacked her lungs and metastasized so quickly, our collective heads spun. Well, perhaps not Daddy's. My attention went to him, gazing stoically at the earthly remains of his former lover. I wondered about his thoughts. Had he any regrets with Noelle's mother? Did he have true love for her? Were there any internal apologies for his neglect of commitment to her...their child? Was Noelle a love child or one of ugly circumstances?

I cleared my throat, squaring my shoulders. Well, for me, Noelle was a wonderful addition to the world, mine especially. She was strong and determined and far more aggressive than I

was at her age. In my rumination, I knew it was because, up until my mother left, I was highly tended to by both my parents. I never wanted for anything, never experienced a desire unmet by one or both Noel and Celestine. If Noelle had an effective advocate all these years, it would have been me—at least, I hoped she felt that way.

My father's protruding belly moved imperceptibly, eyes gazing ahead were blank, and sausage fingers were splayed on his wide-spread thighs. What was going on in that brain of his? More importantly, what had Noelle been feeling, seeing her mother's last earthly remains stiff, cold, and expired in that *coff*—

An unnerving yet distinctive shiver coursed my spine, beginning at the base of my neck. When my belly flipped in a betraying way, I found myself glancing over my left shoulder. A few heads had been turned in the same direction, too, as a tall, urbane figure entered through the side of the sanctuary where my family had minutes ago. It seemed as though the entire room seized at his seductively dark, commanding countenance. The insouciance to his magnetic presence could have been comical if I didn't know it to be authentic.

The dark charcoal wool suit caped his fit frame with perfection. Those dark wild coils on his head appeared hydrated and trimmed well against his forehead and neck. His head swung left and right, adjusting to his place in the grand room while detaching the button of his jacket. His jaw, lined with a goatee—thick, dark, and cut with precision—flexed as his eyes narrowed in search. My heart beat wildly with an unreasonable response to his mere presence. They—those dark, intentional, passion-filled eyes—found me first, as they always had. I could then tell when he registered the juxtaposition of my family.

He wasn't alone. Ava, gazing over the room as well, silently waved him over to follow her. They meandered to an available pew about seven rows behind us. With a stiff spine, now from annoyance, I faced ahead again. *He* was here. Of course, he would be. The man had irrevocably entwined himself in my life for the unseeable future.

“Jas!” Noelle wasn’t discreet with her volume as she craned her spine to peer toward the back of the church. “Here!” I didn’t need to turn my body to see she pointed to the nearest pew behind us.

Of course, she’d saved him a seat. Ojasvi Sinclair could do no wrong in Noelle’s impressionable eyes. The question at this point was how many seats had Noelle reserved. It took mere seconds to smell his enthralling cologne, which wasn’t how I knew Jas had arrived. It was the scent interweaved with his cologne. His natural body oils, something forever clawed into the meninges of my mind and rusted in the walls of my hollow chest.

I leaped when his big, hot hand landed on my shoulder. “Ashira,” Jas whispered my name in greeting with intimate authority. The single act shocking me into silence. It was foolish of me not to expect him to speak. No matter the circumstance, Ojasvi Lamont Sinclair would clear a path to me...without provocation, much less my request. My father stood to greet him with a firm shake next, which Jas accepted, pulling his gaze from me.

“Sorry for your loss, Witherspoon,” Jas’ thick cords produced fluently to my father.

“Oh!” my father chirped. “No worries at all. *Uhhh...*” He cleared his voice, likely understanding the misstep in his response. “Noelle’s glad to have you here!”

I remained seated, facing the elevated pulpit ahead, hearing their exchange with a beating pulse reverberating in my head.

“Say less. I wouldn’t miss it, baby girl,” Jas swore in a rasp in an effort to keep his voice low.

I could sense when Noelle embraced him in a hug. “Thank you, Jas.”

“I’m so sorry,” Jas whispered. “I’m here for you forever. You heard?”

Noelle didn’t reply verbally at first, but I imagined once she’d finally broken their deep hug was when she shrieked,

“Thank you! Sit right there. I saved you a seat. You need another one?”

That’s when I did turn to face him, my request of his audacity seized by his handsome features. Those dark, entrancing eyes protected by thick lashes softened as they latched onto me. I wouldn’t fall into the trap, though. I couldn’t. Instead, I remembered how my best friends were here in support of Noelle, but none had a seat reserved in the first two rows. And if my best friends weren’t given priority seating, I knew Jas’ “assistant” was not about to be granted it. And especially because mine was at the back of the church.

With hooded eyes expressing a passion far more penetrating than lust, Jas shook his head softly. Gazing at me, he murmured, “Nah. I’m good right here.”

Inadvertently rolling my eyes, I turned forward just as the suited man at the microphone on the pulpit was announcing service was starting.



It was sad.

The funeral service was extremely long and impossibly morose. To see my sister brave a stony veneer, breaking down just twice—once when the casket was closed to begin the service and then when it closed for the final time after the eulogy—was a test of my emotional intelligence. Yes, Noelle would be affected and incredibly tearful. It was to be expected. But between trying to keep an eye on her wretched disposition, keeping mine in check, and enduring the gloomy melodies of the organ and wailings from family like Lattice’s sister, Brenda, it was all too much.

After the funeral home had resumed the care of Lattice’s body for the burial, I had to decide my next move. I made eye contact with Borys, my choreography assistant, as we performed the recessional line out of the church. At six feet, two inches and with the clearest gray eyes I’d ever seen, he was on it. Borys, a native of Poland, cut the line with natural

dexterity and was on the other side of the recessional train filing behind Lattice's resting body in a flash. I was on his heels when my time came. We traveled away from the line as I anticipated my escape. I couldn't go to the burial. There was no time. My time in Jersey—in the country—was only a matter of hours. I had a gazillion things to do before getting back on the plane.

“That was heavy,” Borys turned to me and whispered with a thick accent and big eyes.

“Was this your first American funeral?”

“No!” he quickly and defensively answered.

“But I bet it was your first Black one.” I tried measuring my grin in anticipation of him lying.

But Borys blew out a held breath while swiping through his bleach blond locks. “Yeah. Perhaps.”

I snickered, trying to avoid a full-on laughing fit. He tickled me so. Either way, I had to keep it together; we were just off the vestibule with people all around, in our faces. The place had filled since the start of service.

I tried looking for a side door or something. “Okay. Now, let me figure out how we're going to get out of here.”

“You ain't going to the burial?”

My pulse pounded at the sound of his thick, trickling chords. Licking my lips, I turned to find Jas scowling down, hovering over me, invading my personal space similar to Borys. But Jas was different; over the years, my personal space was off-limits to all but two people, him being one of them. It was just Jas' way.

Swallowing, I answered, “I explained to Noelle how my trip was only for about eight hours. Three went to the ceremony. I have several errands to run before my flight leaves.”

“You're flying out of Teterboro?”

I wanted to roll my eyes. “You know that.” It was his plane and pilot.

“Last time, it was New York.”

“But they report to you. They all do.” I turned to look for the other tall ass man in the church. “Bob has told you.”

“Ashira, Bob don’t update me with every minute of your life. You’re grown and owed privacy.”

I switched weight on my hips, spearing him with the wickedest *don’t fuck with me* gaze I could muster. That was bullshit and Jas knew it. Even if he didn’t know my itinerary hour by hour, Jas knew when I moved about the world; he funded much of it. And not just with Bob, my personal security guard. Jas supplied much of my flights and ground transportation, too, in quest of this ‘protection’ he swore I needed.

In all honesty, it took nearly a year, but now I appreciated it. It was expensive as hell to keep a bulky man capable of snapping a human neck in the span of ten seconds with me when I traveled all over the globe. I insisted on covering Bob’s stay while Jas took care of everything else. I could be reasonable. At least I’d been trying. But once in a while, my inner-rebellious spirit wanted to resent his close proximity to me. Jas had been a looming cloud in my life for four years now. It was par for the course; I’d been slowly understanding. Nonetheless, my maturation was slower than my resentment toward him.

I tucked my chin while peering directly into his eyes. “Jas, I have a tight itinerary today, and therefore, I have to leave. No. I will not be attending the burial or repast. I’ve explained this to my sister already. Is this okay with you, grand marshal, sir?” I swung my head to the side.

Immediately, I registered the storm of mixed emotions on his handsome face. Jas didn’t like when I resisted or rejected him in any way. Not that I had the opportunity to do it often. He’d allowed me my corner of the world without his looming for the most part. Over the past three years, the dance he and I performed was intricate and beautiful to everyone outside. But for the two of us, we were a representation of failed possibilities.

Instead of participating in my antagonizing energy, Jas shook his head, then tossed his glance toward Borys, then Bob. He then flung his chin. “There’s a door to the parking lot down the hall to the left.”

The men led the way, and when I started after them, a thought struck, and I spun on my heel. Jas was on his way to the vestibule when I caught up to him, gently pulling at the crux of his arm. He turned to find my long reach of him.

A million things ran through my warring mind when his eyes roved from where we met at his arm to my face. “It’s good seeing you,” I offered pathetically soft.

There was an immeasurable minefield of emotions beneath the sea between us created mostly by me and my need to not to be swept away by his enigma almost four years ago. It had been three years of emotional management and distancing that had become increasingly exhausting. All those things holding true, Jas was an energy unlike any I’d ever encountered. Whether I liked it or not, I’d be staring into these eyes of bottomless passion for the unforeseen future.

Per usual, words failed us both, but our gazes held strong with endless communication until I remembered who he was and what he represented to my tortured heart.

I released his arm, realizing his reply had been too delayed. Lifting my chin and then pulling it back, I cleared my throat and repeated from my chest, “I just wanted to say it’s... good seeing you today.”

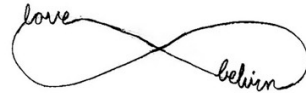
It was *my* sister’s loss we were supporting, after all.

His searing gaze impenitently stripped me bare. Jas was peering through the black designer garb cloaking my body, the freshly pressed-out tresses draping my shoulders, the meticulous natural beat of my face, and the resistance-veneer of my poker face. The man was calculating and invoked a better mask than I ever could. But I couldn’t leave him without pleasantries. It would be immature and wholly unfair to our steady partnership.

I waited until he croaked, “That’s what’s up.”

That was it. Those three words were all Ojasvi Lamont had for me in the moment.

Accepting it, I turned and left him there with faceless women ogling his undeniable virility.



The car pulled up to the gorgeous *Lake Sha’Ron* estate, and I could see soft touches of the welcoming winterized entrance adorned with artificial lavender and silver bulbs in potted plants with big green leaves aligning the walkway and front doors. Consuela had been doing a great job at keeping up with the place. The lavish homes in this subdivision were not mansion-size or even as vast as my childhood home. However, the property sizes were substantial, and the suburban designs were wonderfully palatial.

The other thing I noticed was the white *Audi A7* parked just at the end of the horseshoe driveway. There was only one person I knew with that color and model. She’d gotten it brand spanking new two years ago. When the car stopped, curiosity got the best of me, and I decided to deviate from my plans.

“Could you take the bags to the door for me?” I asked the driver prior to opening my door and before he could make his way out.

I trekked down the driveway, tightening my coat around my frame. It was hardly forty degrees out. The exhaust fumes from the waiting vehicle created clouds of smoke on my approach. I knocked on the window, observing Jos-Renee’s head toward the steering wheel. The poor woman leaped in her seat so hard the car shifted a bit. Immediately, I regretted my attempt at getting her attention.

Her face was wet, and eyes reddened with sadness when she rolled down the window, but Jos-Renee’s voice was kind. “Girl, you scared the shit out of me!” She tried chuckling.

“I’m so sorry. I noticed your car and thought it was strange you were sitting idle. Are you okay?”

She rolled her eyes, wiping her glossy cheek. “*Guuuuuurl*, I’m on my last fucking nerve with this man!”

“Who?” My face wrinkled.

“Juggy! Who else?”

“Oh!” My brows shot up. “I’m sorry. I know you’re married now and didn’t... Well, I know how relationships—” I shook my head, rolling my own damn eyes. “I’m sorry.” I offered again.

“No. No need to be sorry!” she exclaimed passionately. “That’s the damn problem. I’m married. I’m trying to move on, but the man is sick, and I don’t want to leave him hanging when he’s down like this.”

Panic struck in my chest. “Did something else happen? Is Juggy okay?”

“The way he just cussed me out lets me know he’s still the same S.O.B. he’s always been. I came over today to drop off more cases of *Ensure* and the socks my grandmother suggested he wears to maintain his body temperature. I even bought him those heating socks. I’m trying, Shi-Shi. I don’t want to abandon him. The man’s disappearing before our eyes,” she croaked in tears again.

“Every month, it seems like something new is popping up,” she continued. “He doesn’t want to go to the doctor, using urgent care facilities and the emergency room as his primary care. And today, this nigga wants to argue with *me* because I didn’t take off my coat! I have to get back to work. I’m over here on my forty-minute lunch because I’m tired of Rakim complaining about me bending over backward for my ex-boyfriend. I’m married now! But I’m over here trying to take care of him, and because my time is limited, he tells me to get the fuck out.” Both our eyes blossomed wide. “It’s just too much, Shi-Shi!”

Rakim was Jos-Renee’s new husband. They’d been married for a little over two years now. The announcement surprised Juggy and those of us connected to him. But I soon learned Jos-Renee had been friends with Rakim for years. She

said she refused anything more because of her complicated relationship with Juggy. But ironically, months after I gave birth, she eventually realized she was risking her happiness and decided to up and marry him that same year.

Juggy, on the other hand, had been sick for close to a year now. His symptoms varied, changing month by month. It started with fatigue and then moved on to weight loss. Then he went through a phase of shortness of breath. He was thought to have HIV but had been testing negative for that for months now. Then one of the doctors at an urgent care facility suggested he be tested for tuberculosis. That concerned me because if he had TB, we'd all had been exposed to it. But those tests came back negative, too. The doctors had been just as clueless as we all had, but all agreed whatever was going on with Juggy was systematic. There was a new symptom affecting a different area of his body every other month, it seemed. It had been hard on us all and for varying reasons. For me, Juggy's gregarious personality was an energy I couldn't go back to not knowing.

"I'm sorry, Jos-Renee. I know Juggy's stressed, but he has no right to take it out on you." I shook my head regrettably. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I keep telling Jas and them: convince him to get to a primary care doctor. He needs someone to run a battery of tests and follow up with him...connect some dots, maybe. It's called continuity care."

Nodding, I offered, "I'm on it. I'll be sure to talk to him before I leave."

"I didn't even know you were in town." Jos-Renee tried to smile. "It's good seeing you. My brother-in-law is crazy about you. He stays on your *TikTok* and *IG* pages, girl!" She sniffled while giggling. "He was like, 'Jos, hook me up. She single, and I'm single.' I was like, boy, you got three kids to look after. You ain't got time to keep up with Shi-Shi!" Jos-Renee laughed. "Then the fool had the nerve to say, 'She got a kid, too. I can babysit all the kids during the day and tend to Shi-Shi at night.'" The muscles in her face drastically dropped as fast as the heart in my chest. "I told him, nigga, don't you

bring that child in this. Trust me, you don't know nothing about Harlem niggas, and you don't want to. If you don't believe me, convince Shi-Shi of your plans." She rolled her eyes away, convicted by her warning.

Jos-Renee and I had many conversations over the past few years over Black romance books and more. Before she and Juggy broke up, she'd be over here at Jas' a lot when I'd bring the baby over to use the pool or drop her off. Jos and I would sit, talk, and drink often. She was really sweet and smart as all get out. I enjoyed her energy. When getting to know her, I learned she'd known Juggy, Jas, and Man for over fifteen years. She made it clear to me that the Jas I knew was not the Sin I'd recognize before his prison stint. She said Jas had always been the reticent leader of the group, but he was also no-nonsense and unpredictable. Once while tipsy in the pool, Jos-Renee mentioned Jas had his collection of bones. She made it clear to take it in the literal sense. It reminded me of the storm I'd seen deep in his eyes over the years. It was exactly what I'd seen on *Red's Island* nearly four years ago when he'd almost killed a man because of me.

"Girl, tell your brother-in-law I'll keep him in mind when I'm ready, but he's got to leave my baby out of it if it's going to work. I need a live man, not a dead one."

Jos-Renee cracked the hell up. "Listen! 'Cause, baybey! I'm trying to keep my husband out of the jaws of these Harlem fools!"

A wry smile lifted from my lips and I shook my head understanding how limited both our private lives were after intersecting with pseudo-former thugs from Harlem. Jos-Renee, on paper, was free to move on. She was a married woman now. Yet, she was still here, seeing about an ill Juggy. And so was I: here because half of my life was in this home. Jas' home.

"It was good catching up with you," I told her, needing to escape the brisk air. "You have my number. Don't hesitate to call me if I can be of help to you. I hate that this is putting a strain on your marriage."

“Yeah.” She shook her head desolately, gazing blindly ahead. “But I’mma figure it out, girl. Juggy and I always do.”

I blew her a kiss before trekking backward for the house.

“Bye, Shi-Shi! I hope to see you when the next tour you’re a part of comes to the Tri-state area!” Jos-Renee shouted my way.

“Just let me know, and I’ll get you tickets. First come, first serve,” I warned, knowing my best friends and cousins had already been begging me for concert passes.

Then I turned and headed to the set of French doors where my bags were. So many thoughts, concerns, and even anticipation racing in my mind. I rang the doorbell once and waited less than a minute before the door opened.

My lungs filled with love and excitement when Consuela’s hourglass frame swung her arm in the air and sang, “Shi-Shi!” Her eyes were as bright as her pink matte lipstick against her brown scrubs and rubber clogs. “You’re here!” Her accent was as rich as ever.

“Yes!” I walked into her for a reciprocated hug. “I am! It’s so good to see you!”

She smelled amazingly feminine with flowery and lavender notes. And behind her, a waft of a clean home flowed into my nostrils. Pine, citrusy-orange, and “wealthy alpha thug” pushed through my mouth, tickling my senses.

I pulled back and beamed at her. “The place looks amazing, and you look and smell even better.”

“Awww! Gracias, Señorita Shi-Shi.” She placed her hand over her chest. “Come in. You must be cold.” She went for my bags. “Let me help you.”

I waved off my driver before picking up a few of the bags by the handles, too. Consuela managed to close the door behind me. “Welcome home!”

That greeting gave me pause, causing me to swing around to face her. “*Home?* Well...” I considered it for a moment. “I guess wherever my child calls home, I should, too. Right?”

“No!” She shooed me with her hand before taking my coat. “Because, Señorita Shi-Shi, you are loved, and your home is wherever you are loved.”

Consuela had become a big sister/mother to me over the years. She’d been a constant here at Jas’ home. She ran it like the back of her hand. The woman had seen me at my lowest lows as a mother and a parenting partner to an overbearing Jas. She’d experienced me as his lover, too, finding us while stealing away moments to have him behind me in the pantry or above me over her pristine countertops. Consuela has seen more of my candor than most. Because of how she handled my less-than-stellar moments, I’d come to trust and respect her. It didn’t hurt that she adored my life’s best work.

“Thanks, Consuela,” I murmured, offering a slight gracious bow while trying to conceal my gushing.

“Again, I’m so sorry about your loss.” She performed the signing of the cross. “I have something for Señorita Noelle.”

My lips twisted to the side, and I nodded, remembering what brought me to New Jersey. “Yeah,” I sighed. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned in life, it’s that it comes in ebbs and flows, and those ebbs can be betraying at times.”

With her fingers threaded at her pelvis, Consuela nodded with empathy. “Yes.”

“Speaking of which,” My eyes circled the grand foyer, and ears perked for a distinct sound. “Where is she?”

“Oh!” Her face lifted. “Amy has her upstairs freshening up. Chi-Chi had an accident.”

I sucked in a breath. “Oh, no!” Consuela nodded with heavy shoulders. “But she’s been doing so well with going potty.” I’d made sure of it before I flew out for Alana’s tour two months ago, once again leaving my baby behind. “I even had her using the toilet when she flew in to see me last month in Florida.”

With a twisted regretful moue, Consuela offered, “She’s been doing well. I think it’s because of being so excited you were visiting today.”

That sheared my already battered heart. Whoever said a woman could have it all was full of shit. I'd done well for myself since learning of my pregnancy. I'd shot commercials for top brands like *Asè Garb*, starred in the professional football league's commercial as a cheerleader for the *Connecticut Kings*, and danced and choreographed for Dale, Alana, and Pixie. I had even done two top syndicated morning television news shows, teaching the hosts how to do the infamous Dale choreography I'd created that had gone viral on *TikTok*. And not to mention the eight music videos I'd choreographed and/or starred in.

My dance studio had been turning down applicants because we'd been overwhelmed with members, and my club in Montclair had generated more returns than the average club in its first year. Money had been generous; time had not. And time was, more often than not, a more valuable asset for a mother to give her child. It had been a regret I'd been living with since delivering a six-pound, two-ounce baby girl nearly three years ago. A guilt keeping me awake some nights, whether I was away working or holding her in my arms at night while in my bed at home.

"So was I," I replied.

"And the dance contest in Costa Rica, huhn?" Consuela made a clicking sound with her tongue. "I know you'll do great."

"We've been practicing for over a week now. It's been gruesome. Two more weeks to go. We're getting there."

"How's the weather down there?"

"In the high eighties with occasional rain." I shrugged. "It's gorgeous. We need to acclimate to the region for our lung capacity and stamina. I think that's how we came in second place last year in Brazil. The rainforest was a feat for most of the dancers. Traveling from so many regions over the past few months would've made for torture in that climate. I want my dance team to work smarter and not harder."

That reminded me of my things. I tossed my attention to the bags. "I brought you garments from Amsterdam. I even

bought moisturizing creams from Sweden two weeks ago. I bought a couple of bottles for Frankie, too.”

“*Ahhhh!*” She whistled as I handed off the bags. “Gracias!”

“I know your husband likes licorice. I got him a few packs from the Netherlands. Oh, my goodness, Consuela! You have to see their little shops over there. So adorable!”

“I bet! We got the teas you had shipped from India. Frankie loved them!”

“Oh!” Suddenly, I recalled. “West Bengal. Yeah. I hardly had time to shop there, but couldn’t pass up that opportunity.”

“Well, it was worth the try. She’s got them in the tea shop already!” Consuela laughed.

“Mommy!” a tiny, heart-thumping voice cried. I heard pitter-patter charging down the grand staircase. I turned to find her little right hand gripping the wide glossy railing. Amy held her left as she watched her next step. “Mommy! Mommy!” she shrieked.

“Oh, my goodness, Cupcake!” My eyes welled with pride... and guilt. “You’re such a wonder!”

Once at the landing, she cut from Amy and ran to me. I captured my heart and world in my arms, lifting her into the air and spinning around. Joy was in the squeeze of her little muscles around me as she giggled. I felt lightheaded with elation.

When I placed her down to get another look at her, she asked, “No more work?”

Consuela and Amy sighed with amazement aside from us.

I delivered her the night of our baby shower nearly three years ago. Sex in the last weeks of pregnancy for some women isn’t the best idea unless trying to deliver. She was only a couple of weeks early, and I was still very much attached to her, so much that I expressed it physically above our festive guests. The maelstrom of emotions I felt that day after learning basic information from Jas had been living in my heart ever

since. Some days the bitterness was intense, but on most, I learned to function with it because of the culmination of our passion. Anger and resentment was instantly overshadowed with love and an adoration I never knew when I gazed down at those chocolate eyes surrounded by the softest skin.

Chivon Ojasvi Sinclair was a wonder to have birthed. She was perfect. A brown-skinned girl with dark kinky hair and the biggest countenance known to our family. My daughter was a ball of joy and the twinkle in all of our eyes. Most affectionately, we called her Chi-Chi, a pronunciation deviation from my own name, though audibly, the *Shi* in Shi-Shi and *Chi* in Chivon were one in the same. And she had quite the community. Her father and I were rivals, contending at number one in her heart. But Chi-Chi was adored by Consuela, Frankie, Juggy, Charmagne, my father, Noelle, my mother, and Cecil. Of course, all of my friends and family loved my daughter, but these folks gave Chi-Chi a front-row seat in their lives one way or another. The magic she wielded was adorable and unlikely at the same time.

I nodded. “Yes. Mommy’s still working, Cupcake.”

“I gonna go?” Her silky brows met.

My forehead stretched. “Do you want to come to work with Mommy?”

The muscles in my baby’s face tightened as she thought on it. This wasn’t my favorite conversation, but one I took gravely serious.

“Daddy come?”

She was asking could she *and* Jas come with me. The girl owned that man, and even in her young two-year-old mind, she somehow knew it, though she didn’t understand how powerful it made her.

“*Ummmm...*” I scratched my chin, then dropped to my hunches to get closer to her height. “I think Daddy has to work, too, Cupcake. But remember: whenever you want to come to work with Mommy, you can. Cousin Cecil will bring you. Okay?”

As rapidly as soon-to-be three-year-olds do, Chi-Chi switched gears. Her expression opened to express excitement. “Make biscuits, Mommy?”

“Oh,” I dipped my chin. “is that what you want to do with Mommy today? Bake biscuits?”

The request warmed me. When I was a little girl, each time we visited my mother’s family in *Della*, South Carolina, Aunt Rose would take me either straight into the field to pick vegetables or fruits, or she’d call me into the kitchen to bake a cake or pastries from scratch for the house. She was so consistent with it, I didn’t realize until having my own child that Aunt Rose was using those experiences to bond with me. Completing those tasks not only taught me about food preparation and cooking, but it also forced me to have time in her presence and learn her energy. I’d been cooking with Chi-Chi since she could walk.

My baby nodded. “Juggy said biscuits!”

Consuela and Amy laughed.

My head reared back. “Oh, so it’s Uncle Juggy who wants the biscuits. Huhn?”

Innocuously, Chi-Chi nodded, laughing, too. God, I missed her. I missed my baby every day. And she seemed to have grown since I saw her last month. She still looked like her dad, too. It was uncannily how her features changed every so often. When she was born, she favored my father. By six months, she was all Jas. Just after turning one, we saw Charmagne. Finally, she favored my toddler pictures to a T until I saw her in Coconut Grove last month. Currently, she was all Jas in the face with the deep brown piercing eyes, classically carved nose, and full lips.

“Okay,” I pulled in a deep breath as I stood to my feet. “First, let’s see the first position.”

After processing my request, Chi-Chi’s eyes blinked, and she quickly adjusted herself to stand straight, bringing her heels together and cupping her hands at her pelvis.

“Second!” I sang dramatically.

That took her a few seconds to arrange, too. Her little feet widened in distance, and she stretched her arms out wide, chin forcefully in the air.

“Still struggling with this, I see.” I straightened her little arms, shooting them out like arrows aside her. Then I lowered her chin, closely observing her position. “Third position!”

Chi-Chi leaped into the air, bringing her heels back together and pushed her fingers down toward the floor. Of course, I had to adjust her little body so she could feel the proper stance. I rounded her arms and tilted her pelvis, feeling her *Pull-Ups* training pants. She was only to wear them when she had an accident, which had been few and far between lately.

“I had accident,” she quickly explained, knowing my feelings about her progress.

“I heard, Miss Thing,” I groaned, then patted her on the tush.

Chi-Chi giggled, breaking pose.

“*Uhn-uhn!*” I chided. “Fourth position!”

My baby’s eyes widened and she leaped into the air again bringing one foot in front of the other, her little palm gripped her waist with the other shooting into the air. With as much straining as she did, Chivon’s poses were off. Much of it was due to her age and some to poor instruction. When I shared with her father my intent to get her started in ballet school, he hired a woman to come in every two weeks to get her warmed up. While it was a nice gesture, the art form couldn’t be taken half-heartedly. Now that she’d be turning three years old in a few weeks, I could soon enroll her in a real dance school.

“Now, fifth position,” I instructed.

Chi-Chi struggled. Her little lips curled up, and index finger poked her cheek as she thought. That’s when I modeled it for her. Within seconds, she attempted to mirror what she saw, bringing one foot in front of the other and arching her arms aside her ears. I leaned down to position her feet outwards. My baby girl struggled for balance as I did. Her

muscles were still training, so I allowed her to grab me a few times to keep from falling. Eventually, I stood and observed her with pride, even snapped a picture with my phone before Chi-Chi's position collapsed.

"Alright!" I shouted. Then Amy and Consuela joined me in a round of applause. "You did it, my girl!"

Chivon giggled, bowing over, making silly faces. She was truly the most beautiful girl in the world.

"C'mon, Mommy." She reached for my hand. "Biscuits."

Teetering breathlessly, I conceded. "Okay. Let's go wash our hands first."

"Wait," Amy called out as we started out of the foyer. "Didn't you want to show Mommy your painting?"

Chivon's eyes grew large in realization. Her head tilted back to peer up at me. "Mommy, go to Daddy office."

"Daddy's office?" I repeated. "Okay. That's this way."

Consuela and Amy giggled behind us.

"I'll be in the playroom if anyone needs me," Amy shared.

Consuela added, "And I'm going to set out the ingredients I know of."

I winked at her as we headed in the opposite direction. Chi-Chi led the way; her little action of towing me behind met with determination. I obsessively studied her. In the short span, I deliberated on washing and braiding her hair before leaving. I didn't have time to, but that didn't seem fair. She turned into Jas' office. The doors were open, a beautiful stream of light beaming in from the double set of patio doors. One view of the lake shone through, and the other of the winterized lawn seemed to exaggerate the size of the office.

"Look, Mommy, look!" Chi-Chi shouted, pulling me, while pointing to a corner in the room.

She had a little easel and paint spread across a white sheet. On the white canvas was a disarray of bold colors, some ill-formed shapes, but a lot of intent. In the bottom right-hand

corner, the name Chi-Chi was written in black, clearly by an adult.

I crouched down next to her at the easel and gasped. “Did you do that, Cupcake?”

“Me!” She nodded with pride-filled enthusiasm while pointing to her belly.

I pulled out my phone while beaming, Chi-Chi backed away, leaning against the wall with one hand. “This is amazing! I’m gonna have Amy take a picture of all your paintings. I can look at them when I want to be with you.”

“Mommy, c’mon! Biscuits!” She jumped in the air, over her art piece already.

I laughed. “Hang on. Let me get a couple more shots. I want to capture the whole thing.”

When I was done, I stood to my feet. That was all Chi-Chi needed to begin her exit from her father’s office. Following her, I caught a glimpse of the art piece above his desk. It was huge and...new. I couldn’t recall the last time I’d been in here, but I didn’t remember seeing this.

“Cupcake!” I called out, staring stock-still at the image.

“Mommy!” she answered.

“Wait.” I didn’t want her roaming unsupervised, at her second home or not. She was hardly three.

Her pattering feet grew closer, signaling her obedience. I studied the piece on the wall, identifying the signature in the left-hand corner at the bottom. *Francesco Basso*. Franco Basso was what the streets referred to him as when he began infiltrating social elite groups with Diddy, Jay-Z, Swizz, and the likes years ago. Similar to the *Mauve* brandy line, once the right stakeholders in Black culture introduced you, you were in. It didn’t matter what your existence or reputation was before then; your value had, at least, doubled once you were weaved into the Black culture.

“Jas got *Basso* to recreate that?” I whispered into the air.

It was a photograph taken by Jas of me witnessing Chi-Chi taking her first steps. She was almost nine months old and Jas had been sensing the new development coming on for weeks while I'd been away working with *Asè Garb* in Paris. Jas made a sudden decision to show up with our baby. I didn't demand an answer as to why, so desperate to see her. They spent a few days out there, hanging out with me in between photoshoots and recording a new commercial. Jas and Chi-Chi's presence had been the highlight of my visit, the best and worst memories made in The City of Light.

The morning they were due to leave, I was beyond tired when preparing to ride with them to the airport, wanting to get in as much time with my baby as possible and to break some painful news to Jas. Out of nowhere, Jas ordered the driver to take us to *Parc des Buttes Chaumont*. The park grounds were endless, I knew. I was immediately angered, already in my anxiety bag from the upcoming separation and our impending conversation. Annoyed, I obeyed when Jas asked me to go for a walk. Not too far into it, he asked me to put Chi-Chi down. Not understanding, I still obeyed. My baby fell immediately. In fact, she fell three times on the grass. But on her fourth try, she succeeded, walking an impressive distance all the way to a tree.

Trailing behind her nervously, I cried. *Sobbed* as my girl laughed her way to the twenty-foot tree.

When I had made it to her, I squatted at her side, then found Jas, Amy, and his security on their way over. He sported a measured grin, but the sparkle in his eye as he held a camera couldn't be missed. It had become his new toy as a father, his camera. Gripping it with both hands, he held it back on his shoulders.

"You didn't want Mommy to miss it." He beamed at baby Chi-Chi.

That's when I realized the purpose of Jas' trip to Paris.

"Was this her first time?"

Jas nodded, full lips closed and cheeks spread joyously.

He'd wanted our baby's first walk to be witnessed by me, too. I'd already missed so much in pursuit of "having it all." The pride on his face melted my heart. It was another considerate act Jas had committed to help me along in motherhood, and I was grateful. I'd never see the unmitigated happiness he expressed at that moment again. After we left the park, the airport was the next stop, where I shared with him news neither one of us was ready for.

"And you had Basso recreate it," I more or less commented to myself.

Last I heard, Basso didn't prefer re-creations. He liked live models like Kim Kardashian, Brielle, Miley Cyrus, Dale, J.Lo, Idris Elba, and Ragee. He'd done loads of celebrities, and his wait list was impossible. That explained why it was new. It had likely taken that long to have Basso start and complete it. Now the beautiful image was the central focus of his home office.

"I made the wall," I fake cheered in a whisper.

"Mommy!" Chi-Chi whined, snapping me out of my head. "Biscuits!"

"Oh," I sighed, eyes closing in frustration at my ridiculous stupor. "Right, baby." I dipped down to pick her up, placing my baby on my hip. "Biscuits, here we come! But first, we wash our hands."

Chi-Chi waved her little hands in the air, attempting to sing the hand-washing song. "Clean hands. Clean hands. Bye-bye, germs. Go away..."

Chapter Two

Part III

February | Three Years Later

ashira

“**S**hi-Shi,” I heard, then felt a gentle nudge at my arm. “Shi-Shi, Borys is outside waiting.” Consuela’s thick accent fully awakened me. “Your flight leaves in an hour.”

An hour?

I sat up, feeling my baby’s warm little body curled next to me. Blinking, I nodded to Consuela in disbelief. I was only supposed to close my eyes for a few minutes. I knew I shouldn’t have tried, but I wasn’t ready to leave her. We’d been having too much fun together.

“Okay,” I whispered, then tried to fix my eyes on my sleeping angel.

Chi-Chi and I baked buttermilk biscuits then cleaned up after ourselves. She helped with as much as she could. We invited Juggy up and together, we sat at the kitchen table near the glass doors leading out to the patio. Chi-Chi, from her high chair, was able to dress her biscuits in either strawberry or

orange jam. Juggy and I helped her with the honey, not wanting her to make a mess of it. As we drank tea from the *Baccarat* tea set my mother sent up for Chi-Chi, she drank from a plastic tea cup, not knowing the difference. My baby loved tea and biscuits. While I cooked with her when home, I didn't teach her this combination. I suspected it was my mother or aunt, Rose, who had her in the kitchen when she'd visit.

Then I washed and blow-dried her hair. I braided it up while Chi-Chi colored in her book with crayons. I knew I didn't have the time, but wasn't ready to part from her then. Once done, I told myself I'd put her down for a nap and wait until she fell asleep to creep out. So, we lay on the full-sized bed in her room for when I stayed over, and I rubbed Chivon's back to get her to fall asleep. Boy, was that a bad idea. I'd been under-rested, thanks to my travel back home for this funeral.

Now, as I peered down on my baby's reposed body, observing the fine hairs of her sideburns and her jumping lids, sadness began to fall upon me. My time with her was over. Again. She'd awaken to the fumes I'd leave behind. *Again.*

Having it all didn't feel so good.



I watched as Borys took his seat across from me on the jet. Bob, my security, sat in the oversized seat behind me. Pensive, I gazed out of the window, watching the grounds people shuffle beneath.

“Damn, I'm tired,” Borys yawned. “But I'm glad we made it on time. I'm surprised you missed stopping by the studio. The girls weren't happy.”

I nodded. Not only did I miss the dance studio, but I didn't make it to my club either. There were papers needing to be signed by me. I was sure I'd be hearing about that soon, too. It was no biggie; I'd just have to do it electronically.

“You good over there, Shi-Shi?” Marie, one of the dancers from Jersey wanting to take the turnaround trip with us, asked.

I nodded, lying. It wasn't that *something* was bothering me. I just felt off. It was weird, but I'd never left for work feeling this bereft. I'd just left too much energy—leaving it here—and it didn't feel right. My baby girl would be without me for nearly another month, Juggy's health had not been improving a bit, and Jas seemed more distant than ever.

“Thank God your baby's father has money,” Borys yawned again, snuggling into his seat with closed eyes.

“Why?” Marie asked.

“Because my long ass legs could never stretch out like this on a commercial flight. Not for fucking five hours.” He licked his lips then his eyes burst open, a wicked sparkle flashing. “What would be better is him on here with me.” Borys winked.

“Shit.” Marie shook her head. “You're nuts, bro.”

Borys grinned beautifully, knowing he was out of line. “You think he knows about me?”

I twisted my neck to look at him sideways. “You think?”

His torso shot from the chair. “You're serious?”

I swiveled in my chair to see Bob behind me. “Does your employer know my choreography assistant likes wood as much as he does snatch?”

With a relaxed expression, Bob scoffed while rubbing his chin as he held a *Guns & Ammo* magazine in the other hand. Then he shook his head, going back to his read.

Chuckling, I shook my head. “Chi-Chi's father would have hired two bodyguards if he didn't know you were gay. One for me and the other to trail you.” Marie and Borys laughed. “The man is just that controlling.”

Or at least, he used to be...

“Well, if me being for the rainbow is getting me this comfortable ass flight, I'm gay out the ass happy.” Borys

stretched his legs out again.

“How are the girls?” I asked Marie, a mom of two from Haledon.

She twisted her lips before sharing. “The same. Unimpressed by the shit I brought back this time. My eleven-year-old is sneaking my lipstick to school. My mother whooped her ass over it, as she should have.” I tensed in my seat in reaction, eyes burst wide. “And my four-year-old, GeeGee, paid me all of twenty seconds of attention when hugging me back.” Her shoulders lifted in the air. “That’s all I got. Then I was out.” I blinked, not knowing if that was a good thing or not. “How was big momma lil’ Chi-Chi?” Marie cooed.

I nodded in confirmation. “A big momma.”

Without me...

“Costa Rica,” Borys groaned with closed eyes. “we’re bringing it back in, baby!”

This was true. *International Dance Competition*, also known as *IDC*, was in two weeks. Dozens of dance troupes from all over the world flew into the announced location to claim the first-place title. It was an event my team had participated in last year, coming in second place. This would be our second attempt, and we were not leaving without the platinum first-place plaque. Costa Rica was the host location and where we were for days building and practicing our routines until I had to fly home for the funeral today. It was a big deal. Tenured tour and stage directors like Frank Gatson, Shane Sparks, Les Twins, and Joseph Go, just to name a few, were in attendance. Careers were made at *IDC*. The competition was steep, but the coveted prize was one on my bucket list.

“Yeah, baby!” Marie pumped her fist in the air while gazing into her tablet.

My phone chirped, and excitement bloomed in my chest at the hopeful sender. But it wasn’t *that* correspondent.

Austin: *I’m guessing today isn’t a go.*

Remembering one of my “errands,” I sighed and typed back.

Me: Sorry. I got tied up with Chi-Chi.

Then my phone rang. Before answering, I located my *AirPods* and pushed them into my ears.

“Hey.”

“Hello to you, too, gorgeous,” his smooth voice attempted. “Are you leaving Jersey now?”

I realized too many men had insight into my itinerary. With half a smile, I sighed, “Yup. Ashira’s duties are over. Now back to Shi-Shi’s world.”

The phone vibrated, and I glanced down at the text message that had come through.

Austin: *It’s all good. I’ll be shooting in Canada for a week or so, wrapping up. Maybe I’ll fly down to Costa Rica to see the show.*

“I like Shi-Shi’s world. Wouldn’t mind dipping into Ashira’s either,” my caller suggested.

More than I didn’t know what to say to Austin, I was absolutely stunned by that declaration.



When I walked through the door of the garage, Frankie shouted, “She’s at the top of the steps, waiting on you.”

I scoffed. Little Miss Momma must have been alerted to me pulling up. Instead of heading into the kitchen, I made my

way to the front foyer of my home, laying the jacket of my suit over my left lower arm. Sure enough, her tiny stature was at the top of the stairs. She wore her little dress pajamas and had one leg crossed over the other and a hand on her hip while holding on to a spoke in the railings.

“Daddy, time to read Bible!”

My head bounced back at that demand.

Excuse me?

This girl was too much. That’s when I noticed her new hairstyle. The fresh parts between her braids.

“*Hi, Chivon?*”

She waited a beat before replying. “Hi, Daddy.” Her eyes circled as she thought about her next words. “How *vas* you day?”

That’s more like it...

No words had ever soothed me as the ones coming from this tiny being. She was more than I’d ever deserved. In less than three years, she’d taught me so much about myself. I was now a vulnerable man. Frail and fragile, and at risk to whatever the world could throw at me on a whim by way of hurting her. She was like an old soul, full of love and purpose. She’d be three years old in a matter of weeks. *Damn...* My baby was growing so fast, but still, I had no idea how I’d survived before her light.

“It was long, Blueberry.” I scratched my head, straining. “Really long.”

“Sorry.” I heard the pout in her voice, and my head shot up.

“For what?” I smiled wide, hard, and genuinely. “I’m home. With you. You know what that means.”

Pushing her index fingernail against her teeth, her little body curled as she giggled. She was my lodestar, my reason to exercise faith each day.

“You home.”

She may not have understood, but she knew how to respond. When I was with her, all things were made right or hopeful again.

I winked at her. “You brush your teeth yet?” She shook her head. “Go brush your teeth and Daddy’ll be up to read to you.”

She was off before I finished my sentence and shouted, “Okay!”

Shaking my head while chuckling quietly, I paced to the kitchen. Frankie was there clipping coupons. I believed she was the only person who still did this. She’d leave them behind for Consuela.

“You look like shit,” she murmured as she licked her thumb and swiped through the pages.

“Thank God I don’t feel like it.” I was just tired.

“Shi-Shi was here.”

I steeled, pulling the pitcher of lemonade from the fridge. “Hello, Frankie. Good to see you. How was your day?”

“Well,” she hummed, nose wrinkling to bring her oversized glasses closer to her eyes. “I had my daily apple this morning, and in the course of putting in eight hours at the tea shop, I had my daily poop.”

My head fell to the side. “Nice, Frankie.”

She shrugged. Then I heard Jug limping into the kitchen behind me.

I placed the pitcher on the countertop and strolled over to the cabinet for a glass when he announced, “You missed Shi-Shi, yo.”

Again, I paused. Then I swung my head over to him. “Yo, whaddup, dawg? How was ya day? I see you limping. What’s up with that?”

He pulled up to a stool and dropped himself onto it. “Damn, man. My leg. My shit been swollen since yesterday.”

“You go to the doctor?”

“Nah. I was gonna ask Jos-Renee to run me to that urgent care spot, but her selfish ass wanna trip. So, I just parlayed all day.”

“You should be hittin’ up a doctor, man. This seems deeper than an X-ray and band-aid issue. Something ain’t right.”

He waved me off. “I’m good, Cap. Sorry I wasn’t able to hit up the funeral with you today. Shortie good?”

Shaking my head, I swallowed back half of the glass of lemonade I’d poured. “Noelle’s a soldier. You know that.”

“Yeah.” He scoffed, reaching for one of the glass cake dishes filled with biscuits. “She a winner. A lil’ G. But *ummmm...*” He swiped his nose before plucking a biscuit. “Shi-Shi pulled up. Was here for a minute, too.”

Frankie glanced up, looking at me. I took a quiet deep breath, knowing it was time to address it.

“I know. That’s why I got in so late. I wanted to give them some time alone.”

“Where you been, ock?” Juggy asked around, chewing.

“I went to the burial. Then I hung out at the repast for a minute. We bounced after about thirty minutes.”

“We?” Frankie asked.

“Ava,” I explained. “We grabbed lunch, then checked on a few sites, including the new *Prism Built* property.”

“Damn!” Jug whistled. “You applyin’ pressure, I see.”

I nodded in agreement. I’d successfully won the litigation with Dan Lewinski’s *Just Homes*. Their argument to the courts was Danny Lew had made the transfer of ownership under duress due to his addiction. My lawyers proved there was no documented evidence of his addiction. He’d not entered rehabilitation, been fired from a job because of drugs, nor had any arrests on record regarding the usage of any type. What had been documented was Danny Lew’s distribution of Percocet, Oxycontin, Xanax, Vicodin, Ritalin, and Adderall. He wasn’t a big dealer, but was certainly a documented one.

The judge ruled in my favor, rightfully awarding me full ownership of *Just Homes* and all of its subsidiaries.

“Yeah. I’ve got to settle the engine. Damn sure paid enough for it.”

“*Mmmhmmm...*” Frankie agreed.

To get through the attorney and investigative fees along with paying my own personal expenses, such as building a new facility for my company called *Prism Built*, personal security, and a damn private jet, amongst other things, I had to dig into my bank. That was Frankie. She had a bag for me on reserve, but it was hers. We’d been working on me repaying the bank for a few months now.

“You need to relax, bruh.”

I scoffed, standing across the island from him, head to the side. “Relax.” I tried it out for size.

“See!” Jug chuckled. “You ‘on’t even know what that mean. When was the last time you got away just for you and nobody else?”

Frankie looked up from the paper. “I know the answer to that, but won’t say.”

“Yeah,” Jug agreed. “Me, too. You need to go somewhere where you can let ya balls hang. Get ya shit sucked on a *beach* ___”

“Or on a ski conveyor lift.” Frankie performed the chef’s kiss.

My eyes went wild.

“Okay, big F!” Juggy choked on laughter.

“Y’all doing too much. My life ain’t right for one of those.” I shook my head.

Juggy shrugged. “You only need a chick. That ain’t a issue, my nigga. Word.”

I rubbed my heavy eyes, not really beat for this conversation. I was tired as hell. “I ain’t got nobody to parlay like that with. ‘Member that?”

“Yeah,” Frankie piped up. “And about that.”

My eyes narrowed and head popped back at her miniature frame filled with so much audacity.

“You need a bitch, yo. Spittin’ some real shit: you need a damn woman to hold you down. Like, we know you good on ya business and daddy game. Shit, we even know you still strong on ya spiritual walk, so you ‘on’t even need help tamin’ ya shit. You just need some good ol’ R&R.”

“Companionship,” Frankie agreed. “You’re a good man, Sin. You deserve to have a woman worship you. Someone you feel free to pursue these big dreams you have with, minus the drama of obliquity.”

“Damn.” Jug’s forehead stretched. “What that mean?”

Frankie glared up at me. “Shi-Shi.”

She’d confirmed my perception unnecessarily.

“Oh, damn,” Juggy grumbled.

I nodded silently, done with the conversation. “Y’all got it. Been thinking this for a couple of months now. Guess I should put that on the list of other important shit I gotta do like...” I pushed my thumb over my shoulder. “...go put the lady of the house down for the night.”

Jug sighed as I backed away and turned to leave the kitchen.



“The Lord...”

Chivon repeated, “The Lord.”

“Is good to all...”

“Is...” She kicked her little leg over me possessively on the bed, then rubbed her eye.

“Is good to all,” I helped her out.

“Good to all.”

“And His mercy...”

“His mercy.”

“Is over all that...”

“Over that.”

“He has made.”

“He has made,” she yawned. “What that mean?”

“What does it mean?” I sighed, readjusting myself on the bed here in her bedroom reserved for her mother.

It was the only space big enough for the both of us to read the Word and pray at night before I tucked her into her own bed to sleep.

“It means everyone and thing born into the earth belongs to God.” I licked my lips, tight eyes narrowing. “And whatever belongs to God, He takes care of. He does it by this ‘candy’ He gives called mercy. That means He protects us from the bad things we do.” My eyes dropped down to her, knowing damn well my baby couldn’t grasp any of this. She wasn’t even three.

But I did believe I was conditioning her spirit to receive the precepts of God’s love each time we talked about Him.

Chivon’s head popped up. “Daddy...”

My heart melted at that one common yet most endearing title. “Yeah, Blueberry.”

“I sleepy,” she whined.

Yup...

She’d had enough of my cackle. We’d prayed and read the Word and now, baby girl was ready to go down.

I closed the children’s daily affirmations book and laid it on the nightstand. Then I scooped her to my chest before standing from the bed. I walked over to her low ass sleigh bed with railings, kissing her cheeks and chin along the way. Then I placed her on the mattress and pulled the little blanket over her curled body.

“Night-night, Chivon.”

“Night-night,” she mumbled before yawning.

I headed out to the hall, leaving the door open. As soon as I made it to my bedroom, I went straight to the sitting room, where my laptop was opened and checked my emails. After not seeing any priority senders, I left for the bathroom to take a leak and wash my face. It would be a long night for me, combing through reports and designs for new products *Por el Amor del Amor* was preparing to launch. I needed this venture to be successful. The timing couldn't be better. I'd just begun seeing my investments in the company about a year ago. This launch was predicted to triple those returns.

I was at my laptop for half a minute before my cell rang.

“Celestine,” I answered.

“Hello, there!” she sang. “Please tell me my little lamb had an extra scoop of ice cream for dessert and is still burning it off instead of turning in at her appointed bedtime.”

Chuckling quietly, I pinched the bridge of my nose as I shook my head. “Nah. She's out cold.”

“Oh, no!” her cry was melodious. “I cut the after-talks short and ran home from my class to try and catch her tonight.”

My brows shot up, and I inhaled as I sat up, trying to fight a yawn. “Sorry.”

“*Ut!*” she shrieked. “Are you in the bed, too, sweetheart?”

Chuckling, I answered, “Nah. Nowhere near it.”

“Oh. That means you're working from home. Dear, you really work too hard. When was the last time you took a break?”

Lifting my forehead, confused and shocked by that question, I asked, “A break? What you mean?”

“I mean, get out of Jersey. Leave the responsibility of the visits and supervision to capable people. You need to feel the earth beneath your bare feet. Find a woman to release *you*—

hell, find two! You're young and presumably still with horsepower stamina." I blinked, speechless. "Hello!"

I sat back, stunned. "That sounds wild."

"Why?"

"You're Chivon's grandmother."

A breathy titter sprinkled into the line. "That's not what you mean, sweetheart!" She groaned, "I'm Ashira Chivon's mother is what you really mean."

"I mean..." *Yeah...*

"Honey, do you recall what I told you almost four years ago in *Della*? I told you she was not the woman for you. I knew she wasn't prepared for that much of a man. I knew this because she's my child. Her brain and/or lack of life experiences haven't allowed her to hone the ability to accept what she cannot understand."

"*Celes—*"

"And now, look at your lifestyle. You're a single father, a man commanding likely more than her father at his prime earning period—a handsome, functional hunk of a man. You're holding my grandchild on your back and your manhood in your hand. Tell me, Jas, are you happy?" That feminine chortle flowered in my ear again. "Are you satisfied, you robust man, you?"

"I am blessed." I tried to land the conversation there. "I appreciate your kind words to me—"

"The women here in Brazil are beautiful. They'll remind you of your power. Listen: eat the meat and do what you want with the bone. But don't rot away, waiting on Ashira."

"Again. Thanks." I scratched my head, mad uncomfortable with this conversation. "I'mma have Chivon call you in the morning. You know she gets up crazy early."

Celestine laughed. "She does indeed. You can do me one better."

I tried typing a response to an email. "What's that?"

“I’ll be in *Della* next week. Bring my lamb to see me!” she chirped with excitement. “The family would love to have her. You know we adore Chivon.”

They did. Ashira’s entire family had been crazy accepting of my baby, Noel included. They sent her gifts, called, spent time with her, and followed all of her developments. It was the only reason I decided to be cordial with Noel. It was a hard decision, but I tried to do what was best for my daughter. So far, we hadn’t been friends, but could be in the same room without him saying something slick and me knocking his big ass the fuck out.

I’d also been surprised by how well Celestine had taken to Chivon. She’d flown to stay here in my home with her twice since she was born. I’d also taken Chivon to *Della* to see Ashira’s family—without Ashira. They called for Chivon, and Rose didn’t travel much, so I accommodated the requests. Plus, they treated me well when I visited *Della*. They didn’t care that I wasn’t family. To them, because Chivon existed, I was a part of the tribe. And the hospitality was amazing. That made me sit back on the sofa and consider.

“Send me the dates. I’ll see what I can make happen.”

“Really?”

“Really.” I nodded, still thinking it over. “Chivon likes the animals on the farm. She likes to cook, too.” They did a lot of that in their family. “I’ll hit my assistant up first thing in the morning—well, when you send me the dates.”

“I’ll text them now.”

“Cool.” And thank God this conversation was done. “I’ll hit you tomorrow.”

“Good night, dear heart.”

After hanging up, I tossed the phone over to the other side of the sofa. Feeling overwhelmed and tense as hell, I closed my eyes at the sight of the number of unread emails.

“*Urghhhhh!*” I fell back into the sofa, covering my eyes.

What a fucking day...

Noelle's mom was gone. Dead. The little girl was so brave, fighting the pain of the loss and the disappointment of not having her sister there for the whole homegoing event. Noel dipped right after the burial. Even though I had someplace to be, I found it hard to leave her after her father did, so Ava and I stayed until we couldn't. Then, after going about my day and completing my itinerary, I avoided coming home to give Chivon alone time with her mother.

No, Ashira and I weren't at war, but I didn't want Chivon distracted from a rare visit from her mother. My daughter was attached to me, and understandably so, seeing I was the primary parent. Had been for close to three years. Ashira was very much a mother, but one juggling the demands of a career that required worldwide travel. I'd never wanted my presence in her life to inhibit her dreams. That included her parenting style with my child. I'd take care of mine. And I had been.

The first year of fatherhood had been rocky for me. I had to learn more than how to change a diaper and warm up bottles. I had to apply patience to a helpless baby. Even after hiring a competent nanny, I rarely slept and had to always be on call for emergencies. Chivon Ojasvi had become the nucleus of my world without an alternative option. Her mother had been around for the first six months before having to hit the road to continue her career in dancing. She'd be away for two to four months at a time, leaving me to bring Chivon to visit wherever Ashira's work had taken her, even if for a couple of days.

Did I have to? No. But whether Ashira liked it or not, we were now family. I didn't want to have the wonder of Chivon alone. She was an amazing and quickly developing gift Ashira shouldn't have been kept from. So, I did what I had to do, purchasing an expensive ass jet Sadik Ellis sold to me when he realized his growing family needed more room. I fixed it up beneath the hood, made a few upgrades to the interior, and painted over his *The Ellis II* name on the outside, replacing it with *Prism Built*. It had been an expense but a necessary one considering my travel with the cigar and wine estates and Ashira's extensive travel. I invested in my family. Still had been.

But now...

I sighed.

As difficult as it was to admit, I had been lonely. Since breaking up with Ashira when we learned she was expecting Chivon, I'd felt alone like never before. Me. The nigga who ate a fed dime bid and came home on the tightest discipline shit. I was lonelier than a motherfucker. Going through the court proceedings had been draining—and lonely. Once in a while, I'd find myself in court fantasizing about going home that night to Ashira and Chivon, sharing my day because she'd understand my plight. She knew the business. Other days, and still, I found myself daydreaming about being on a yacht in the middle of the Caribbean, blasting Michael Jackson while watching the most sinful and fuckable body move artfully. Wickedly.

However, those days left as quickly as they'd come. Now, during appropriate weather, I'd take Chivon on my *60 Cantius*. We'd cruise the waters for hours. Twice, sailed down to Cape May County and copped a hotel room for a couple of days before coming home. My baby loved the water. She enjoyed being up on the bow with Amy, watching for dolphins while I navigated our ride from the cockpit. It was so rewarding but did nothing to satisfy my craving for companionship. Fatherhood had been fun and challenging. Being single had been hell.

That was when a thought struck, and I reached for my phone across the sofa.

Me: Who was the chick you thought I should meet?

Three minutes later, E hit me back.

Ezra: *I have never presented such a prospect. Wrong Carmichael.*

That made me laugh, but he was right. I decided to hit the right Carmichael.

Me: Who was that chick you said I should meet?

I had been on my fourth email response when my phone chirped.

Lex-Dawg: *Who Josie?*

My eyes blew the hell up.

Me: She black?

Lex-Dawg: *Yeah. She's been with our church for like 3 years now. 28 with a 4 year old daughter. So cute!*

Me: What do she do for a living?

Lex-Dawg: *A teacher. She's from DC. Left baby daddy back at home. The nigga married a Korean girl. ☐*

Me: Interesting.

Lex-Dawg: *She's sweet and really sure about who she is and what she wants. I think she's cute too with style. You want her number?*

Me: Nah. I don't know what she looks like.

Lex-Dawg: *You want me to send you a pic?*

Me: Nah. This Sunday I'm busy but I'll pull up next Sunday..

Lex-Dawg: *Damn. Okay.*

Nowadays, pictures are the most deceiving tools of misrepresentation for women. Because of fucking filters you could think a chick looked like Brielle and when you finally got up, she actually looked like Ice T. Nah. I was good on the games. The old fashion route would have to be my method.

Chapter Three

Part III

February | Three Years Later



Thumbing through the pages of the profile he'd sent over to me before this video-conference, I stared into the screen at his hand and head gestures, the smirk that wouldn't die on his face. Dark-skinned brother, clearly cultured and articulate. The evidence of his wealth could be seen in the background of his camera view, which was a private plane.

“And you're interested in New Jersey agriculture?”

“Yeah, man,” his British accent was distinct. “It's something I've been contemplating for a few years. As a businessman yourself, you know before you invest, you must research.”

“And that research landed you to the *Château Blevin* estate? Forgive me, but I ain't following. According to your portfolio here, none of your businesses are in the American market. Why start with purchasing cultivated land and land that ain't even on the market?”

“Well,” he swiped his nose with a thumb while readjusting himself in his chair. “Let me give you some background on my enterprises. I am the son of a Nigerian immigrant. Hardworking, diligent, and humble man who started from the real muds of the homeland. My father was a gold-miner in South Africa where he migrated to in order to find a better living. He worked hard in the South Deep off the Harmony Gold territories, risking his life. He did it long enough to amass a small fortune and move his family to London, where I was born.

“While in Peckham, he took on businesses in different regions, investing in many markets. He left for Wales for a few years, where he took up farming, finding a particular passion in cow and sheep husbandry. Wool, lamb, beef and other industries are a spoke under that umbrella. He then traveled over to Loire Valley and worked his way into a rare arrangement where a vineyard was about to close its doors due to consecutive dreadful seasons. He invested, brought a few of his men over, and turned the business around. That is unheard of for a Black man in that region.

Enough of my father,” he paused to square his shoulders. Something feeling off about his confident energy. Assurance wasn’t a trait I’d fault another Black man for. Posturing was. And with his considerable experience in investments and harvesting, the work should not require this much presentation. “I worked his businesses until I was able to figure out my own way. My first venture alone was in almond farming in Italy. The Italian market isn’t as profitable as the American, but it garnered me enough to add the pesticides and tech startups. I’ve been able to establish my own business in investments and cultivation. And to answer that last question, everything is negotiable if the price is right. That was one of the first principles in business my father taught me.” He winked.

Fucking winked...at me.

“I’m still waiting to hear why the American market. Why now?”

The smile in his dark eyes dimmed, but the one on his face never dulled.

“If I can be honest?”

My brows shot up as my phone chirped on my desk in my home office. Before Ava could make it over to address it, I’d silenced it. “Please.”

“That was my father’s teaching. Do not engage in the American markets. The whole country is made up of immigrants. They treat each other poorly...have no strong collective culture. There’s greed and division there. Enterprise exists all over the world; America can be easily missed.”

I nodded. “Says the immigrant himself—several times over,” I lowkey argued.

He gave a nod of humility, sporting the same untrusting grin. “I now see the light. I am my own man, looking to find my own way. I’ve heard your name in circles and thought this was a good place to start. I figured if the venture is successful,” His torso swayed expressively. “then maybe I can bring an American love home to my mother and please at least one of my parents.” And then came another damn wink.

Admittedly, I was not a well-traveled man. Most of mine happened with the mother of my child. So gestures and expressions weren’t things I understood in other cultures. But the winking shit was fucking weird to my *Harlem Pride* ass.

“I’ll keep it a bean with you.”

“Please do.”

“My property in Central Jersey isn’t up for sale. The fifty-two acres we own may not all be utilized, but the amount of land was purchased for a reason. Plus, I’m not sure what you can cultivate with what’s unused. I don’t see a potential for a venture at all.”

He laughed. “I don’t agree. Remember, my name is Haris Elba. Haris means to cultivate. Black people in America are getting into transparent-grown produce. That means they prefer to know all about the soil their fruits and vegetables are being grown in. No lies or hidden pesticides or genetically

modified organisms. The vegan lifestyle is one of the fastest-growing diets there. There's so much we can do with even ten acres. I can flip that into fifty in no time."

"Daddy..." Her little voice, in contrast to his, had my neck whipping to find Chivon at my office door. "I got boo-boo."

Ava was up and to her right away.

"Elba, thanks for the offer. I have your information to stew on."

"Appreciated it, sir." His smile deepened. "She's adorable."

"Who is?"

"Your daughter." He nodded.

I thought about that for a minute, causing an awkward silence. "How do you know that?"

He pointed to the screen. "She's above your head. Adorable. She looks so much like her mum."

The image behind me came to mind. "Enjoy the rest of your day."

"As should you, Sinclair."

I tapped my mouse and disconnected the call.

Ava strolled over with Chivon on her hip. She reached for me as I approached them.

"Daddy baby fell?" She nodded. "Tell me where so I can beat it up."

Chivon pointed behind me with a pout; I knew she wasn't really hurt. Ava returned to her desk, giggling. I turned with her in my arm to face my desk. Confirming what I already knew. I studied Ashira's angle in the picture I had *Basso* recreate. Ashira's face wasn't shown. Just her long legs curled in a squat and arms stretched out protectively to catch Chivon if she fell on the grass. Her hair, blown by the wild wind, was gusted in every direction, covering her big ass frames.

How the fuck could he say Chivon looked like her masked mother unless he knew said faceless mother?

“You think you need a band-aid, baby?” I walked her out of the office, bouncing her gently on my arm.

She nodded with dry tears. “And cupcake.”

“Awwwww...” I groaned. “Daddy’s baby needs a cupcake, too.”



ashira

I paused the music. “*Agaaaaain!*”

Ricky dropped his head in frustration, and Evelyn rolled her eyes. Both were out of breath, still at it an hour after I dismissed the rest of our troupe. They were close but didn’t lead each move with the intent needed to pull off a particular portion of the choreography successfully.

“It’s late, Shi-Shi,” Borys murmured, facing ahead so as not to draw attention to his admonishing me.

I shifted to face him. “*IDC* is only a little more than a week away. Is there something I should know about?” I cocked my head to the side. “Did you wake up on the wrong planet again?”

Borys rolled his gray eyes sexily. The guy was a European god with all his features working together to make panties moist or boxers tight. Hooded eyes, narrowed nose, natural sensual pout of his small lips all mixed with six-foot, two-inches of hard muscles, agile limbs, and a passion for sensuality.

With wide nostrils, he left the speaker we'd been sitting on with the snatch of his body. "You're being a bitch, Shi-Shi," he murmured, not quite wanting Ricky and Evelyn to hear and partially not giving a fuck if they did.

But they heard when I reminded him. "That's *whole* bitch, whose got the whole to *IDC*, baby!"

He muttered something in his native tongue before reminding me, "Please call Pixie's camp back." Then Borys stormed out of the studio.

I shook my head, deciding to effectively ignore his bitchy attitude. "From the top!"

Ricky and Evelyn got into position, and I began the track again. It was better, but not perfect. Even with swollen feet and an aching shoulder, I hopped down from the speaker and demonstrated timed movements twice. They repeated the sequence six times more since Borys left before getting it right, and I called the conclusion.

Sweating from head to toe and breathing hard with a heaving chest, Ricky snatched his pile of belongings from the floor and practically stormed out of the room as Borys had done earlier. And that's who he was likely headed to against my policies. Evelyn leaned over, bringing her chest to her knees as she failed to gain control of her breath and cried. Then she stumbled backward, eyelids fluttering. I jumped from the speaker onto swollen feet, taking long strides her way.

"Hey, hey!" I reached for her. "Hey!" Taking her by the shoulders, I pulled her upper torso, gently laying her on the floor. Then I pulled her feet in the air, above her heart. "You're going to pass out!" I scolded her.

Sobbing, Evelyn choked out, "I'm trying! My body is aching...and all I'm doing is trying!" Her incoherent words could be felt. I'd been riding the hell out of her...and with reason.

"You die of a goddamn heart attack or exhaustion, and then what? Who's shipping your body back to Atlanta?" With

a shaky arm, she pointed to me. As much as I wanted to laugh, I was too concerned to. “I need you to man the fuck up!”

With an uncontrolled diaphragm, Evelyn cried, “How?”

I rolled my eyes, massaging her sweaty legs. “You’re the best dancer I have on my team. By far, the best! You’re a learning dancer without ego. You’re far from lazy and a leader here. Your style is versatile, your delivery is confident, and you know when to be competitive. I asked you to join my troupe, not the other way around. Did you do it to crumble?”

With tears streaming from closed eyes, Evelyn shook her head. I noticed her mouth was shut when she did it. That told me her breathing was getting under control. I placed her legs down.

“Good. Now, go soak, get over your feelings, and enjoy your day off.”

I returned to the speaker to grab my things. Without looking back, I left the studio. Bob was on my heels the minute the door closed behind me. He didn’t speak much, but his presence had always been felt. No longer annoyed by it, I simply adjusted to having a tag-along.

We stayed in a villa resort about twenty miles from the coastal airport. Essentially, we were in the middle of nowhere but with gorgeous tropical views. Because of the length of time we were here, I had to find an affordable place in the climate for my team to practice. It was peaceful and gorgeous, yet stowed away to keep it affordable and us focused.

But, at night, I got lonely. It had been this way since before we arrived in Costa Rica. I couldn’t put my finger on why, but I’d been feeling increasingly blue. And almost as though nature could sense my inevitable mood around this time of the day, the sky cracked open above the heaven-reaching trees, and the rain began to pour. This wasn’t uncommon here. It rained often and hard. Bob quickly opened an umbrella and took long lunges to cover me. I pushed my arm out, rejecting his care. I needed the deluge. Tears raced from my eyes before the rain reached my face. I cried while tramping to the empty villa awaiting me. My heart trembled and lungs squeezed. I

clutched my work bag to my chest, hoping not much damage would be done to its contents. Empty. I felt completely void inside.

Finding my keys, I let myself inside my villa and managed to the table near the door for the light. Knowing Bob was behind, waiting on me to enter safely, I was sure to close the door quickly. I stepped out of my wet shoes and peeled off my cropped sweats, leaving just my leotard. After digging out my phone, relieved it was still operational, I left my bag near the table, too. One by one, I began to light candles all around, not caring to use the electricity. The shadows became my friend. Each one represented potential lurking energy, which had been preferred over the simple knowledge of me being in the luxurious space alone.

I poured myself three thumbs of *Mauve*, quickly downing a bit of the spicy brown liquid. Gaping out of the window, captivated by the downpour, I stood in the middle of the living room. The tears stopped and numbness began to encroach. That was a welcomed balm, too. Beginning to turn down for the night, I placed my phone near the charging *iPad*. I checked it for alerts from Chi-Chi to find none. That caused a deep, desolate sigh before I stepped into the bathroom to light those candles, too. Next, I began running water and pouring oils and *Epsom* salt into the clawfoot tub.

While the bath ran, I went back to the living room and poured another drink. I placed it on the table next to the tub when I heard my phone sound in the bedroom. Curiously, I toed out to the nightstand and received a text from my best friend.

Corinne: Sugar plum! I'm not going to be able to make it next weekend. The Miami location will be without a manager starting this weekend. Cherri's out on maternity leave...the dumb bitch. I'm flying out tomorrow to cover for her and hire someone to replace her this year potentially. So sorry, but drinks on me win or lose when you get back.

Corinne: btw when are you coming back? What's after IDC?

I sighed again.

My friends won't be here...

Peach wouldn't be coming because she's speaking at a conference that was planned over a year ago. Becky told me the day of Lattice's funeral, her surgery got scheduled for the week of *IDC*. Shizu was hosting family from back home. It was a bad time for everyone. I didn't invite my father because I wanted him to be at Noelle's basketball tournament. My sister needed our father more than I did. There was no way I'd invite my mother; she wouldn't come. Last year's *IDC* was in her neck of the woods, and I asked her to attend. She waited until the morning of to text she couldn't make it. A part of me wondered if it was a ploy to damper my mood before I competed. Perhaps it even worked. Either way, I wouldn't invite her again.

Before I could think of my response to Corinne, the phone rang in my hand.

Something unlocked in my chest, and my belly fluttered. I felt lighter in my disposition at the sight of his name.

Shocked, I breathed, answering, "Austin..."

"Did I catch you at a bad time?" I heard his scoff. "Seems to be my luck with you lately."

I turned around in my empty, dimmed bedroom, seeing no one else lurking in the shadows.

My mouth twisted as I considered it. "Your timing couldn't be better."



I curled my legs over one another in the spicy water, feeling incredibly relaxed. The throbbing of my feet stopped ten minutes ago, and my thighs no longer ached. And I laughed...laughed my ass off.

"Ginger?"

"Yup," Austin confirmed. "Sergeant Ginger."

“With her tiny, mean ass. I can’t imagine it.”

“Well, I can confirm she is. I saw her before flying out here to Vancouver. The girl had the nerve to wear a belly shirt and have her hands on her hips.”

I sputtered in laughter again. “Hips? What hips?”

“You know Ginger’s always thought she was a miniature Meg Thee Stallion. You can’t tell that girl nothing.”

“Sure couldn’t. Her job in all the years I was around was to keep you in line. She was your family’s watch dog. How did she have time to get knocked up?”

“Right?” Austin snickered himself.

Austin’s cousin, Ginger, was a little more than five years younger than he was but had been very close to him. Almost everywhere Austin went, so had Ginger. She wasn’t mean to me exactly, but she wasn’t as inviting and warm as many of his relatives had been. Although her energy for me hadn’t changed in all the years Austin and I were together, I never took it personally.

She was reserved with mostly everyone outside of their family—even some inside. She wasn’t violent or heavily attitudinal, but she annoyed me when I was in celebratory moods and wanted to dance and take pictures for social media. If Austin, my friends, or someone cool from his camp weren’t around during an event I attended with him, Ginger’s four-foot-eleven frame would stand stoically with folded arms and a cold regard. She spoke only when needed to communicate important matters.

Sometimes, I thought she was depressed. Then there were times I honestly believed her to be socially retarded. Either way, Ginger made sure Austin communicated with his family and manager. His assistant, Loni, couldn’t stand Ginger, but it was useless; Ginger wasn’t going anywhere. Austin got along with her, and their family valued her role in his life.

“I can’t believe Ginger’s pregnant.” I shook my head against the folded towel I rested on. “It shows how fast the world has *moved*—”

“In *four* years,” Austin added.

“Right.”

“Remember that time she caught us fucking?”

The memory didn’t take long to render itself. “We were drunk,” I dismissed the thought.

“Fucked up, but it was one of the best times,” he chuckled in my ear.

Drunk sex. I missed that. I missed sex. Incredible sex. After sex. Pre-sex. But intoxicating sex was a special feature. With Austin, the handful of times we engaged under the influence, it was fun. The one time with Jas was...mind-blowing. An experience filled with fiery passion and just as many orgasms as the number of times Austin and I had during drunk sex. But none of those times with Austin did I cum.

My thighs rubbed together in the water.

“I guess.”

There was a pause before he asked, “Can I tell you a secret?”

My face folded, and I didn’t know why. After all that time, I was game to talk with Austin. “I guess.”

“I fucked up with you.”

I wheezed dramatically. “You think that’s a secret?”

Austin laughed. “No. That’s not exactly what I mean.”

“I hope the hell not!” I playfully scolded.

Thinking of his betrayal with Brielle no longer stung. That era of my life felt two lifetimes ago.

“What I mean is...I should have fought harder to tell you I was wrong and so, so, so sorry for what I did. I fucked up, and it was easier to passively seek you out when you were hurting.”

Was I hurting?

I really had to think about that. The first few days after learning Austin had been fucking *thee* Brielle for an

unspecified amount of time stung like a motherfucker. We'd been together for three years; the last thing I worried about was Austin cheating. That had never been a thing for us. But honestly, I couldn't recall much of the burn after those few days.

"If it provides any consolation, I was good, Au. I was dealing with it as best I could, and having you around, apologizing, would have only exasperated the breakup period."

"Because you were with ol' boy?" His voice dipping an octave raised my hackles.

Jas...

"I played the cards dealt to me the best I could."

"You're dancing, Shi-Shi. I'm trying to talk finally, and you're not participating."

I readjusted myself in the tub then asked, "How can I participate?"

"I don't know. I just feel like..." He paused for a spell. "Shit, I fucked up, Shi-Shi. I saw you wanted it to be over and I finally gave you the space you obviously needed. Then I heard from this nigga, telling me not even to contact you. Azmir co-*signed*—I mean, Shi-Shi, I heard how Azmir can get down...how he earned his reputation behind the scenes back in the day. But when I saw that nigga, and he..."

When Austin's words delayed, I asked, "What?"

"When I first saw that nigga, I thought it was a joke."

I flinched, disturbing the bubbles. "Why?"

"He didn't seem like your type."

This topic annoyed the hell out of me. When Jas and I started dating, a number of people mentioned me not being his type or him not being mine. Even his cousins made it a point to inform me of their opinion. Why did people assume to know me enough to understand my type?

Hell, I'd still been single for close to four years, given how I'd broken up with Austin then jumped into a whirlwind affair with Jas weeks later. Lately, I had been learning so much about myself; what made me smile, what frustrated me, what music affected my mood, when I didn't need to be around people, and how to be alone, sit, and think. There was so much more I'd been working on; my identity as a woman, what defined my womanhood, what my spirituality actually was, who God was, how did I feel Him, how I experienced Him, and why was I here?

Some questions had been defined over the past year; some were still floating in the empty universe. Being away from my family and best friends isolated me from all of my comforts that could be described, at times, as distractions. Traveling the world broadened my mind, sometimes confused me, and often emptied me of all I thought I knew about Ashira. So if I'd been in this obscure place for the past few years, questioning and discovering myself, how did people believe they could define what they didn't know had been evolving?

I cleared my throat. "What's my type?"

"Shit," he breathed hard and seemingly uncomfortably into the phone. "I don't know. Someone who can make you laugh your silly ass off. A man who can deal with your mood swings when you're at work. Somebody you can take to your father's Kappa balls or someone to help finesse Celestine when she's going crazy on you for no reason."

I thought about that.

"Your mother thinks I'm a motherless train wreck." A soft scoff left my throat. "She called me after our breakup and thought to remind me of it."

Austin sucked his teeth. "That's messed up."

"But that is really how she felt about me all those years."

"She was bugging."

"I know." I nodded. "She was protecting you."

"She's a mom, Shi-Shi."

“And so am I...now,” left my mouth in a whisper.

Not that I was embarrassed. Chi-Chi was an amazing add-on, no matter how crazy things had been between her father and me.

“She’s cute. I see the pictures you post of her all the time.” That brought her little face to mind, and I smiled broadly, chin dipping into the water. “I don’t ever see her father. That’s fucked up.”

“Why?”

“Because you gave him a baby. He ain’t have to chase you and was damn lucky even to let you open up to him. He got you pregnant, and then what?”

“What?” I echoed his question senselessly but was hella curious about his theory.

“You tell me. Is he still around? When I reached out to you for the first time a month ago, you said you were single. That still true?”

I nodded. “It is.”

“Shit,” Austin whispered. “I don’t know if I should be happy or mad as fuck for leaving you out there like that. If I would’ve handled my business as your man, our lives would be so different.”

“This is true.” I poked my lips and nodded again.

Or is it?

If Austin and I didn’t break up as we did, there likely would have been no Jas. I would’ve never cheated on Austin. And if I didn’t push Jas as I did back then, he would’ve never been attracted to me romantically. However, if there had been no Jas in my life, I likely would have still been running on that same hamster wheel in life. I would have still been daydreaming about opening my own club, still stuck in an office from eight am to six pm, making my father’s dreams come true.

Or would you?

Jas now owned what was once known as *Witherspoon Homes*. He bought it in a major merger then acquisition. The astute man was now in control of forty-three percent of the residential construction in the state of New Jersey. His actions, including defeating Dan Lewinski in a nasty, drawn-out legal battle, had been unprecedented. The other, larger firms had met their proverbial “David.”

Some of the hard thinking I’d been doing recently included where I would have ended up if *Witherspoon Homes* was taken while I was still at the helm. Where would I have landed? Would I have then finally pushed myself to make my dreams happen?

“I have another secret for you,” Austin’s timber broke my thoughts.

“I’m listening.”

“Naomi’s pregnant.”

I blinked. “Your girlfriend, Naomi?”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“But she’s been my replacement on the red carpets. You two have been photographed together for over two years. Right?”

Naomi was a new R&B artist who had been under Pixie’s camp. She ran the circuit by doing features with major artists like Young Lord, Chris Brown, Doja Cat, and even Ameerah, the violinist. It had been three years since her debut and she’d worked with major artists and had even had short roles in movies with Ragee and Julia Roberts. She’d even begun dating Austin Seers. The two had been photographed kissing and holding hands. It was unheard of, her introduction into the industry.

The strange thing was she had not put out an album yet. There were a string of nasty tweets last year about owing her fans a full album after they’d been supporting her career. Austin even subbed the haters on an *IG* post, which went viral last year. They never publicly announced their relationship, nor did they try to hide it.

“We’ve been cool for close to three years, but that’s it. She’s been a great friend and understanding of my situation.”

“What situation?”

“Of one day getting the balls to tell you I want you again.”

What?

My face wrinkled, and heart galloped. *Holy shit!*

“I don’t mean to freak you out. You weren’t a topic of conversation for us much, but I told her from the jump that I’d never had a love like you, and I fucked it up. So, until I could man up and apologize to you, I wasn’t trying to get into another relationship.”

“It sure looked like you did to me, *and* she’s pregnant.”

“You got pregnant by a man who wasn’t yours,” Austin argued.

My jaw fell. “Jas and I were together, Au. As short-lived as it was, things were serious between us.”

No, he didn’t tell me his legal name until I was good and pregnant, sending me into labor. But I’d fallen in love with Jas in two to three months. It had taken over a year for me to feel the passion I’d felt for Chivon’s father with Austin.

Austin scoffed, “Come on, Shi-Shi. You two didn’t make it a year.”

“This isn’t a debate I’m about to have with you.” I swallowed, half annoyed, half embarrassed. “Why do you care?”

“Because I want you back, Shi-Shi. I don’t give a fuck if it ruins my relationship with ADJ; I want you to know I’m ready.”

First of all... “Who is ADJ?”

“I’m sorry. Azmir. I know those two are friends and all, but you were mine first. Fuck that.”

I shook my head dazed. This was the type of bullshit I had to deal with. At first, taking this call, I was okay with light

flirting—giving Austin the opportunity to inspire some level of romance or lust in me. But no. The fantasy had been effectively broken, and I'd been reminded of my reality: just any man wouldn't do for me at this place in my life. Spinning the block wasn't even an attractive possibility.

“Au...”

“No,” he stated with adamance. “It's taken me too many years to say this. I wasn't planning on dropping it on you today. I wanted to kind of...grow into it, but come on, Shi-Shi! What's holding us back? It ain't your daughter. Can't be her father.”

“No.” I rolled my eyes. “It's your impending child. Austin, are you even listening to yourself? You're about to have a baby and asking me to get back together. That's messy as hell.”

“Na and I are just friends. Good friends, but nothing more, Shi-Shi.”

“Your life's about to change.” I warned. “When the baby comes, you're going to learn so much more about yourself. It will change the world as you know it.”

“No baby can change me wanting you. There should be no babies between us that we didn't make together.”

“Yet we're here.”

“I fucked up.”

“And here I am, a mother to a precious two-year-old.”

“She'll be three in a few weeks.”

I nodded as though he could see me again. “Yup. And I couldn't imagine my life without her, Austin. Don't remember what waking up each day to no thoughts of her well-being and future feels like anymore. You'll feel the same about your baby with Naomi.”

“Funny, the only person I've ever felt that way about is you.”

My line beeped, startling me. I leaped from the water and reached for my phone on a wooden stoop. It was Jas. My heart fell from my chest.

“Au, I have an incoming call. It’s an emergency.”

“*Ah*—are you shading me? How do you know it’s an emergency if you haven’t answered it yet?”

I rolled my eyes. “Because it’s from a party who never calls this late. I’ll hit you in a few days.”

“I’ll be there for *IDC!*”

Rolling my eyes again, I sighed, “Later, Au.” Then I clicked over, switching lines. “Hey...”

“Whadup?” Jas’ thick, coarse throat produced. “You hear her, Chivon? It’s Mommy!” He sounded soft yet excited, but I could tell it was forced.

I could hear Chi-Chi’s sniffles in the background. It was after her bedtime there on the East Coast. I’d said goodnight to her while in the studio hours ago.

“Is everything okay?” I panicked.

“Yeah,” Jas’ voice was singsong, soothing. I could envision him holding her small body into his chest on his Wyoming king-sized bed, fitting of the king protecting his princess. “Munchkin had a bad dream. She woke up a little shook and cried for her mommy.”

My eyes burst wide. “Oh.” I wasn’t aware of her having that desire when with her father. I sat up so fast to leave the tub, water splashed everywhere. “Let me *FaceTime!*” I grabbed a towel and quickly wrapped my body before sitting on the padded chair in the bathroom as the phone dialed Jas’ number.

When he answered, the image of the oversized upholstered headboard appeared. Just as I’d imagined, Jas’ big frame sat against the mountainous pillows, holding Chi-Chi’s little body in a fetal position. She was dressed in the matching two-piece pajama pant set Becky gifted her for Christmas with the Black

baby dolls printed all over. I could see the tears rimming her beautiful eyes as she studied me.

“Mommy...”

I nodded. “I’m right here, baby. Did you have a bad dream?” Chi-Chi nodded. I gasped, concerned. “About what?” When she shrugged she didn’t know, I smiled. “Well, whatever it was, you can see you’re okay now. Right? You, Daddy, and Mommy’re right here.”

I watched as she lifted her head against her father’s contoured breastplate. His gaze on her was powerful, I knew. My father’s presence alone, when I was Chi-Chi’s age, could defeat any adversary my young mind could conjure. Jas adored the girl. The fact was both admirable and envious-worthy.

Then Jas’ tenor broke out in a song while gazing deep into her eyes. “There’s one, who is me, and two, who is you. There’s three who is...” He stopped, and his brows lifted. “Who is it, Chivon?” he asked her expectantly.

Chi-Chi yawned, then attempted to sing while rubbing her eyes, “Mommy.”

Continuing to sing, Jas followed up with, “And then we’re a crew.”

“No fear. Not here,” Chi-Chi sang. “Not today. Goodnight.”

They continued together, “No bears. No wolves. Just God’s light.”

Something blossomed in my chest. My baby girl sang the made-up jingle with familiarity and conviction. My spine shivered and it had nothing to do with the water still dripping from my body. It was the sweet sentimentality of their bond. I wanted that for my daughter. I’d had it with my father for so many years and wore it like a security blanket. She was such a lucky girl. Deserving, too.

Then the phone shifted. I didn’t know why until Jas’ raspy vocals could be heard, “I think we’re ready to try this again.” Seconds later, the camera focused again on my sleeping angel

in her father's arm as he carried her to her room. Chi-Chi was out by the time she touched the mattress. I watched as he held the phone as steady as he could with one hand while using the other to pull the blanket over her. Then he padded out of her room. Once in the hallway, I could see his face again. "Thanks for answering," his voice was low. "She was scared."

Thanks for answering?

Ignoring what felt like a jab, I nodded. "Must've been a bad nightmare. But she went down fast and let you put her back in her bed."

"Yeah. I got us out of the habit of her sleeping in my bed just before Christmas. If I had to grow up, she's got to, too."

Chi-Chi still slept in my bed when with me. So, I understood how that emotional attachment went both ways when training your child to be more independent. "I hear you."

"Less than two weeks away, huhn?"

"*IDC?* Yeah." I rolled my eyes. "Call me old, but this year's kicking my ass. Maybe it's because I'm just coming off the Ragee '*The Rhyme of Love*' tour then going straight into this or..." I sighed, shaking my head.

"Or what?"

"My ass is getting old," I murmured. Jas' mirth spurred my own. "I'm not even kidding you, man. It's been brutal. Even *emotionally*—" I caught myself.

Jas and I didn't engage in conversations like this. It was a boundary I set three years ago, something I thought necessary to preserve my independence. Jas was a force of nature. Being his partner in parenting, at one point, felt suffocating. I needed my freedom from that. And if I wanted to maintain it, taking on conversations about my emotional well-being couldn't happen.

And there it was. The deep gaze Jas paid to me, attempting to search my soul through the camera. It was an act I'd been resenting since learning of his full name the day I went into labor with our first child. His penetrative regard was leveling, alarming, and often intimidating.

“Everything good, Ashira?”

I bit my lips together, thinking of my response. Tonight, I was too exhausted to react to his authoritative tone. I decided to lie instead. “All is well on this end.” I nodded, snapping out of my stupid vulnerable state. “Have you heard from Noelle? I tried calling her almost every day since I’ve been back out here.”

“Yeah. She hit me up earlier.”

“What she say?”

He shrugged with his head, pouting his lips. Why did I take keen notice of them? Perhaps it was because I couldn’t recall the last time I’d had this much face time with Jas. Our conversations were brief, in transit, and typically limited to Chi-Chi.

“Something about a fundraiser at her school.”

“What about it?”

Jas shrugged again. “Just needed a few dollars. I handled it.”

Why would she go to Jas and not me? I mean, I could get why not my father. I’d still been working on them. But I’d called Noelle at least five times since the funeral a few days ago to no avail. That’s when I knew. My sister had been ignoring me. Something in my chest twisted.

“Well,” Jas’ eyes closed as he rotated his neck, stretching out the muscles. “I’mma let you go. I know you were busy.”

My eyes burst wide and I shook my head. “Oh, no! I wasn’t busy at all. I was taking a bath...” It was Jas’ eyes bursting open now. Why did I back the camera up so he could see my bare shoulders? It was dumb! Such a stupid, childlike move. It was another marker of my need to prove I was an accessible partner—at least, as present as I could be from a distance. Instantly, I caught it. Jas’ eyes turned hooded, then they glazed over, staring into the phone. My clitoris swelled promptly. This was too much. I cleared my throat. “Okay. Thanks for calling me.”

Jas caught himself and was able to sideswipe the moment. “S’all good. You go ‘head, finish ya bath.” When I smiled, acquiescing, Jas’ brows shot up. “Oh! Your moms called. She wants to see Chivon.”

I shook my head, feeling ill over the mention of my mother. “She’ll have to wait until I’m done here—at least.” I was working. There was nothing I could do with my mother’s craving from out here. Then I thought, “Unless she wants to come to Jersey again to see her.”

That was pure sarcasm, but my feelings about my mother’s resentment of me had intensified since I’d become a mother myself. I’d grown less patient with her antics.

“I ain’t gon’ hold you.” Jas rubbed his eyes. “We’re working on something.”

I shrugged, unable to care less. “Okay.”

“Night.”

“Good night. Thanks again.”

Suddenly, my mood dropped again. I twisted the left knob of the tub’s faucet to run more hot water. Then I took another swig of my brandy. The tips of my nails drummed the lip of the porcelain tub. I was tweaking. My mind raced, heart ached, and body throbbed in need. Nothing about me was sure. Where was my next gig? Yeah, I had options on the table, but nothing inspiring. What type of sister had I been to Noelle? Yes, I’d still been supporting her since my career took off, but being a mother and entrepreneur of my own businesses had caused a major shift in my priorities. Was I a good mom?

I toed over to the vanity and reached inside one of its drawers. Pulling out the waterproof apparatus, I returned to the tub. Right away, I appreciated the warming water. The minute I adjusted myself inside the tub, I spread my thighs. When the motor sounded after I pushed up the lever, my mind went blank, and I brought the vibrator between my folds. I enjoyed the stimulating massage until my body melted in an orgasm.

Then I recovered and did it twice more.

Chapter Four

Part III

February | Three Years Later



I observed Chivon a few feet away at a kids' play table, having tea with her cousin, Ryleigh. The two girls had real chinaware with their baby dolls taking up the other two seats at the table. Ryleigh pretended to laugh while holding her mug in one hand. Chivon followed suit then dabbed her mouth with her napkin.

She then, suddenly, turned to her baby and yelled, "No burping at the table, baby!"

My head fell back and I laughed quietly with closed eyes. Celestine reached across the table, slamming her soft hand on my arm. I could hear her cousins, Betty and Charles, cracking the hell up, too. Ryleigh was their granddaughter.

"She's something else!" Celestine tittered. "Where does she get it from?"

All I could do was shake my head.

“You laugh at me, Daddy?” Chivon demanded from across the room.

That had me cracking up even more. I nodded. “Yeah, Blueberry. Why are you being mean to baby?”

Chivon performed one of her fake laughs. “No burping at the table, Daddy.”

That had her family howling again. And my baby ate it up, beaming as she took another sip of her tea.

“Young lady!” Celestine playfully called out. “Where did you get that from?”

Chivon gave a phony laugh again. She may have known where she’d gotten that rule from but couldn’t articulate it. My baby would soon be three years old but had still been developing. I understood her, though.

“You teach her that?” Charles asked, still amused.

I shook my head adamantly.

“Oh, please!” Celestine blew out a puff of air. “That girl has her father wrapped around her tiny finger. The sun rises and sets on that little head for Jas Sinclair.”

Charles stood to leave. “That reminds me of Shi-Shi and her daddy!” He chuckled while walking inside the house.

We were on the great back porch at the big house on the *Della* property. It was enclosed, made with temperature-controlling materials. Today, on the last one of our visit, we sat out here with a natural stone, wood-burning fireplace. Chivon’s five-year-old cousin, Ryleigh, joined her grandparents down here in *Della* for the weekend and was able to spend time with her before our flight out tonight. Of course, Celestine pulled out one of many China tea sets she’d purchased for Chivon.

“Let’s hope that’s all the resemblance they have to those two.” Celestine rolled her eyes then drew her attention back to the girls.

I caught Betty shaking her head before one of my phones rang on the table in front of me.

“Peach, whaddup?” I answered, having seen her name pop up.

“Hey, Jas! I just hit up Ava about the birthday party. She told me I should call you directly for details on the nativity setup.”

“Oh.” My forehead shot up. “True that. Yeah. I wanted to make sure I have enough room for the setup. You know we’re having a tent out there.”

“Yes. Like Chi-Chi’s first birthday party, right? That was huge. I’m thinking the skit can be done in there. That way, folks can stay right where they are and enjoy the show.”

A couple of months ago, when Ashira’s best friend, Peach, dropped off Chivon’s Christmas gifts at the house, we found ourselves kicking it. Apparently, a friend of hers, a member of *Redeeming Souls Church*, was the head of a drama production team. This same team put on a dope nativity play at the church. I so happened to be in the building that night and was blown away by the power of their portrayal of the Savior’s birth. When Peach told me she knew the director, I wildly mentioned wanting Chivon to experience it. Then Peach mentioned a children’s rendition. Of course, I had to seek out the production performing at my baby’s third birthday party going down in a couple of weeks. We needed to iron out the details.

“Yeah. That’s what’s up. I’m out of town right *now*—”

“Oh! I’m sorry.”

“Nah. It’s all good. Can I hit you tomorrow? I know it’s a crazy day, being Sunday and all.” Peach was in leadership at her father’s church. Sundays were her prime days.

“I’ll be at *Redeeming Souls* tomorrow...”

“Oh, word?” I left my chair to pick up Chivon’s napkin as she attempted to “feed” her baby doll tea. “I’ll be there with Chivon in the morning, too. Which service?”

“The second one. The good pastor is christening my girlfriend’s son,” she joked.

“Oh. A’ight. I’ll look for you then.”

“Okay. See you tomorrow, brudder!”

I laughed hard—tickled, in fact. As the godmother of my daughter, Peach and I had become cool. She was really dedicated to Chivon and would often have to arrange time with her through me when Ashira was on the road. I learned how cool, deep, and smart the girl was. But in between those features, I’d also get dosages of her silliness. That was what tickled me. It was a facet of Ashira’s personality I missed on the low.

“A’ight.”

Just as I hung up, I could sense a vibe. I turned and saw Celestine and Betty looking my way with zero apologies.

“So, maybe there’s some hope for you after all,” Celestine remarked.

“How do you mean?”

She sat up in her chair, adjusting the pearls on her neck. “You’re not foolishly holding out for a certain helpless heartless as I thought. You *are* pursuing other lucky ladies.” She winked. “Good for you.” She tossed her index finger toward Chivon, who couldn’t see her. “She’s going to need to see a solid feminine figure around your alpha nature.”

“That was Peach,” I explained. “As in Chivon’s godmother, Peach.”

“Oh.” Her mouth formed the letter *O*.

Betty rolled her eyes. “Don’t off the man to just anyone.”

“A man like Jas cannot be with just anyone,” Celestine corrected her. “As I said, he needs a special wooer.”

“Chi-Chi! Leigh-Leigh!” Rose shouted behind me as she walked out of the house, holding a wooden board loaded with food. “Y’all, come on. We going to the north-side farm to feed the goats. Harmon Lee’s gotta feed them they vitamins, too. Y’all gotta stay back for that there, though.”

The girls jumped from their little wooden seats, shouting, “The farm!”

“Goats!”

The tea set leaped on the table from their quick departure. Those brown baby dolls were completely forgotten about. The girls ran over to Rose just as she placed the charcuterie plank in front of me. Diana, Ashira’s cousin, was right behind Rose, placing a bottle of wine, an empty glass, and utensils on the table. The wine was for Celestine. The family knew I didn’t drink.

Damn...

A pile of macaroni and cheese, Brussels sprouts, mesquite-rubbed pulled pork, porterhouse steak, and cornbread topped the wooden tray. And as usual, in the bottom right-hand corner, a name was carved inside, branding the board. Ashira didn’t exaggerate when she said a part of her family’s culture was serving food on charcuterie boards instead of plates. According to Rose, the tradition had been in their family for centuries. Carving the names into each one was a way of them remembering their ancestors.

“This is...” I measured my words. The *Nivleb* tribe of *Della*, South Carolina, treated me well. I’d always been not just welcomed but anticipated with open arms. The men were reserved but mad respectful, and the women were protective lionesses—over me. When I began coming down to visit with Ashira after Chivon was born, I’d tell them all the time not to make a big fuss over me in terms of their hospitality. I’d said it so many times that Ashira had to pull me aside and explain how offensive it was to them. So, I stopped. “...looks amazing, ladies. Thanks so much.”

“Daddy,” Chivon was at my side. “you eat that food?” Her eyes were big, expressing the amount of food on such a large tray.

She was so damn pretty, my baby. Any slight variation to her expression can bring out features resembling her beautiful mother, mine, or even Celestine. Each time I recognized a shared feature, I was reminded of all that went into creating

this gorgeous ass creature. Sometimes, it was so mesmerizing I sat and wondered about exactly when Chivon was conceived. I was wilding out, raw-dogging it with her mother, desperate to experience all of her back then. It could have been so many times—but I recalled each one. I was so damn open. So fucking green. How could I not create something this perfect?

I nodded at my baby. “You need to go potty before you leave?”

Chivon quickly shook her head, which was predictable.

“Oh, no, you don’t, young marvel,” Celestine hissed. “Until you stop having accidents, you must go.” Chivon hung her head in shame. “Unt, unt!” She snapped her tongue, chastising. Then Celestine clapped her hands together, straightening her spine. “First position!”

It took Chivon a few seconds to understand the command, but when she did, her heels pushed together, as did her legs, and her little arms curled into bows.

“Second position!” Celestine commanded.

Chivon jumped, and her feet, legs, and arms spread apart as her chin lifted in the air.

Her grandmother requested, “Now third position.” My baby’s little legs came back together, one foot crossed over the other, and her arms changed positions, too. “Bring that arm fully out, Chivon!”

Blinking hard with her chin still high, she straightened her arm, attempting to improve it, but I didn’t see it. She was still so small, her body not developed for any “great” posture. But I let Ashira and her moms have it on this. It was their dance thing, their way of training Chivon.

“Fourth position,” Celestine moved on.

Chivon hesitated for a moment. She even looked my way for help. I hated that I couldn’t help my baby. I hired a ballet instructor recently. She’d come to the house to give Chivon lessons. Ashira hasn’t been impressed by it at all. And now, looking at it myself, I thought the effort baby girl was

applying was impressive. She switched the position of her arms.

Celestine rolled her eyes and adjusted the weight of her elbows on the table. “And fifth position, my little lamb.”

Chivon moved into this one a little quicker than the last. She pushed her arms straight into the air. Still blinking with obvious insecurity, my baby girl looked her grandmother’s way. Celestine sucked her teeth and rolled her eyes again. Then she stood from the table and walked over to Chivon, and repositioned her arm and feet.

“Don’t move!” she chastised her while arranging my baby’s little limbs. When done, Celestine stood straight. “Now, this—hold it! This is a proper fifth position, my lamb.” Shaking her head, Celestine walked away. “Lots of work to do, missy.”

She wasn’t harsh, but Celestine was damn sure hard on her.

“Daddy,” Chivon mewled, still holding in position. “I gotta potty.” Chivon looked to be ready to cry.

Before I could respond, Rose clapped her hands. “C’mon, Chi-Chi, let’s go!”

Ryleigh jumped into action, and immediately, Chivon glanced her grandmother’s way. She held her for a second or two before deciding to break. My baby was out, shooting inside the house, zipping past her great-great-aunt, Rose.

Betty snickered, rolling her eyes. “Let that baby alone, Lestine.”

“I can’t. She’s my legacy. The end of my rope. She will be great.” Celestine looked my way. “Even if it means me convincing her father he needs not to wait for her mother to return to have a leading lady in his life.”

“I’m single,” Diana, Betty’s daughter, plopped herself in a chair across the table from me and announced with a wink.

“Excuse me, young lady?” The nasty stare Celestine gave the girl perfectly personified, *‘bitch, I wish you would.’*

“Lestine!” Betty begged her pardon. “You just said you wanna fix the man up with a woman. She just playin.”

“The man is nothing to be played with coming from family. What type of white trash shit are you ki-ki’ing about, Diana?”

Diana shrugged, stuffing a piece of cornbread into her mouth. “It ain’t like they ever really been together,” her delivery country as hell. “They just gotta baby. People with kids fool around all the time.”

“Let me tell you something, young lady,” Celestine gritted with tight lips. This shit was getting mad uncomfortable. “The only ‘fool around’ happening here is you speaking like one. I will not have the father of my granddaughter disrespected on this land. Do you hear me?”

Diana, who couldn’t be more than twenty-eight or twenty-nine based on her birthday party that was held down here two years ago, rolled her eyes and left the table. “Yes, ma’am.”

“You ain’t hafta short my child like that,” Betty barked, but in a cute, non-threatening way.

“Your child didn’t have to disrespect my child as she did either, Betty.”

“*Ut!*” Betty’s head snapped back. The warm brown-skinned woman looked to be in her late fifties, possibly early sixties, as she knitted. “You do it all the time, Celestine!”

Celestine slapped the table. “Because she’s mine. Just like the little lamb is mine. I may not be perfect, but the Universe saw fit to extend my DNA. They’re mine, Betty. Mine!” She sat back in her chair, trying to catch her breath.

I was blown away by her honesty. Until today, I’d never heard Celestine speak a kind word about Ashira. It had been clear to me since Chivon was born, that she was deeply loved by her grandmother. Yes, Celestine was strict and held high expectations of her granddaughter, but she was also loving, teaching, and affectionate toward my baby. Sometimes, it reminded me of how Celestine was with Ashira when I’d first encountered the Witherspoons.

Needing to shift the energy in the room, I picked up my fork and napkin, taking a deep breath. “‘S’all good. ‘S’all good.”

Celestine pushed her chair back from the table. Without eye contact, she murmured, “Enjoy your lunch. I’m going to gather Chivon’s things for your flight tonight.” She didn’t wait for a response before taking off inside the house.

Betty, still in the corner, holding her needles in each hand, shook her head. I was convinced the lady was mad as shit. And to make shit even more awkward, when our eyes did meet, I gave her a corny ass nod as a means of trying to express my sympathy. Celestine was a whole ass lioness of a personality. She cleared rooms when expressing her wrath. I’d seen it enough, even the first time she’d met Chivon. Amy had to endure Celestine’s matriarchal-toned doubts, glares, and suggestions in care.

“That woman something else,” Betty whispered, still salty as hell.

She was right, too.



ashira

“That’s the thing with you millennial Americans.”

I glanced up from my phone and felt my tight eyes loosen as a smile spread on my face while peering over the burning candles centering the dinner table. “What’s that?”

“Your life is in those miniature computers.” He flashed his signature smile.

My beam broadened. “If you’re wondering what’s divided my singular attention from you, just say that.”

He laughed quietly, eyes falling away sheepishly. The man was...attractive. His total package was astoundingly gorgeous, but his face was a five and a half; body—from what I’d only seen in person fully clothed and in pictures with swim trunks—was a seven and three-quarters; and his occupation and financial portfolio, I knew of were at least a nine. All of that calculated to be one hell of an attractive man.

“Okay.” He sat up in his seat, brushing down the three diamond-crusted medallions hanging from his chest. “What’s keeping my beauty’s attention from me?”

“My daughter.” I put the phone to sleep by pressing the hold button, then lay it on the table face up next to my wine glass. “She just arrived home from out of town and I was being notified of her being put to bed.” I sat back and angled my head.

“You’re being a mum,” he stated with what seemed like understanding.

“One of the most important roles in my life.”

“One of them?”

I nodded while sipping wine from a glass, allowing the soft calypso tunes to interlude. “One of them,” I affirmed.

“What are your others?” His British accent was cute and growing on me.

“That’s a very significant and, yet, privy question, Mr. Elba.”

“And this...” He reached over the table to pour himself more wine. “...is a date. Is it not the very appropriate occasion to get to gain knowledge of privileged information?”

I gave a single nod. “That depends.”

“On?”

“Your intentions.” My chin shifted again. “With me,” I noted for emphasis.

Haris Elba flew into Costa Rica today to have dinner with me since he wouldn't be able to attend the *IDC* competition next weekend. I met him six months ago at a party I attended in Cardiff, Wales. My troupe had just finished a show on that leg of Ragee's '*The Rhyme of Love*' tour at the *Principality Coliseum* and wanted to let our hair down before leaving town for the next stop in London. That was my second time performing in Cardiff. The first was with Alana, and with me being a new mom away from my infant, touring for the first time, I didn't get out much. My body had still been in postpartum condition and I didn't have my usual confidence or my mind its wit. So, I did very little touring the fascinating places we worked.

The club in Cardiff was different the second time I was in town. The music was broader but mostly familiar, and we danced and drank merrily that night. When it was time to leave, my crew and I were accosted by a group of unsmiling men near the door. Haris approached, asking to speak to me. When I explained it was time for me to go, he said he'd gone out of his way to find me at the club that night. I thought it was a little weird, but not much. My career and person had risen to meteoric heights over the years. I was on more platforms than I could count. I'd had deals with companies such as *TikTok*, *ViacomCBS* for the work I'd done with *BET*, *Asè Garb*, *Ragee*, and the *Football League*, all thanks to Elle Hunter and her *Dynamic Branding* team.

I was now a public figure to a small degree, hence Jas' insistence on having security travel with me. So, when this dude with a distinct accent approached me, I wasn't alarmed. I told him he showed up too late and if fate would have it, we'd meet again. Haris told me over the music he didn't believe in the expectation of fate; he created it. Being tipsy, I was borderline arrogant. My response was he hadn't done a great job at creating much that night because I was leaving the club right then and there; my curfew had been up. Haris laughed, but I was damn serious. Bob had been sick that night. That circumstance alone should have canceled my outing, but I cut him a deal, which was giving me a curfew. There was no way I wouldn't honor it that night. I didn't need Jas on my ass.

With a sweet yet sweaty intoxicated smile, I told him, “*Seems to me your man-made fate ain’t the flex you were looking for.*” When I stepped off to leave, a card was pushed my way, obstructing my walk away. I stared at Haris’ hanger-on’er, deciding if I should cuss his ass the fuck out. Instead, Borys snatched the card and directed me to the door. Working off the alcohol that night with a shower and sleep took precedence over giving that exchange a second thought. It wasn’t until the next stop in England when I’d see or think of him again. This time, Haris was backstage waiting after our final act.

“*My fate is powerful, Shi-Shi. And it’s attached to you,*” were his first words to me.

Needless to say, that was the night he’d gotten my attention, and I learned how well-connected he was in Europe and his wealth. We’d seen each other a handful of times since then, mostly rushed and often with someone from my team in tow. He wanted me, I knew. But I’d never been short of faceless men wanting me. Also, I was in a precarious situation with Jas. I’d also been impossibly busy between motherhood and work. It would take a man of keen determination and specific financial backing to compete for time in my face. He’d been a great distraction from me feeling dry in the romance department. I’d actually grown to appreciate his efforts, though I had no damn idea what I’d do with them. My life was wildly complicated now.

“My mum wants a daughter-in-law. I have no time for casual discoveries about random women, Shi-Shi.” His accent brought me back to the here and now.

I wanted to giggle at the way he pronounced my name. Again, it was cute.

“What do *you* want?” I gazed him square in the eyes.

“I want to make Mum happy...but with my own twist.” He smirked.

“And what’s that?”

“An American girl.”

My forehead lifted, and eyes blossomed in amusement. “American?” I tried it out for size, measuring his accomplished smirk. Haris thought he was impressing me. “Sounds kind of fetish-y.” I wrinkled my nose.

He chuckled. “What makes wanting an American girl a fetish?”

“You’re a Nigerian from London. You skipped over two cultures to want an American girl. Humor me.” I brought my elbows to the table. “Why?”

“Because American girls dream of being swept off their feet, in love and happily ever after with the prince of your fairytale.”

“And that’s not the same for Nigerian and English women?”

“Not as it is for American, which makes you so special. I’m offering you culture and family.”

“Black Americans have culture and family.” I supplied a gentle smile.

“Yes, love, but it’s a bit convoluted, wouldn’t you say?”

I shrugged. “Not mine. I’m well-versed with my maternal lineage, leading back to the motherland, and even have a strong pride for my people. My family is huge.”

“But I can give you a more direct culture. My mum can take you to see the Esie figurines and to pray in Zaria at one of the churches on Prayer Mountain. You’re a praying woman. Am I not correct?”

My eyes fell at the answer. I had, indeed, evolved into a more spiritual being in the past two years, something very few people knew. And I mean very few. It was a new facet of my evolution. I hadn’t even told all of my best friends, which made sharing it with a random guy seem kind of shallow.

Haris scoffed. “My mum can show you a culture you’ve never seen. Isn’t it something you’d want for your daughter? A man who can give her what she’s never had and make her a woman envied by many?”

I inhaled, pacing my words and emotions as I reached for my wine glass. “My daughter has the benefit of culture and wealth. She’ll be taught what was taught to me by her grandmother.”

When I took a sip of my wine, Haris asked, “And what’s that?”

“That if marrying a man from her own race and culture—specifically her father’s—isn’t her first preference, there’s some soul searching that needs to be done.”

A passing frown shaded his face until his grin returned. “Then, love,” he scoffed. “that would make me...”

“Lacking pride for your culture?” I nodded, smirking my damn self. “*Mmmhmm...*” I picked up my fork to continue eating what was left of my fish. “But you’re cute, though. So, keep selling me on what you can bring to my life that I don’t already have.”

“I mean...” He stretched his arms. “This. Me. At your convenience. The moment I realized I wouldn’t be able to make your event this coming weekend, I flew here to Costa Rica to spend time with you. To say I’m sorry.”

I patted the corner of my mouth with the napkin, chewing the last of my fish. “I appreciate that. I really do.”

“And how many men can you say you know who can do this?”

My gaze danced against his, my head falling to the side. “Let’s make something clear.” He stretched his arms, inviting me to proceed. “We’re still getting to know each other. I’m open to learning things about you and sharing things about me as well.”

“Is that not what we’ve been doing?”

“Apparently, not fast enough for your presumptions. I’m not poor, Haris. I’ve never been. Yes, many American girls I know dream of the ‘right’ man, and I’m not much different.” I shrugged. “I’ve always wanted the right *partner*.”

Haris laughed, and not in a jovial way, but a condescending one. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those ‘I don’t need a man’ type of women, love. I’d never taken you for that. You seem far too bright.” The combination of the lifting of his cheeks and the pinching of the space between his brows was telling of his sarcasm and disappointment.

I shook my head before taking a sip of my wine. “I don’t need a man to make a good living *for* me,” I tried explaining, sitting back in my chair. “I need one to partner *with* me. I don’t need to be financially taken care of. I need to be partnered with. I want to be needed, utilized, and appreciated just as much as I want to give those same attributes.”

His head angled, eyes glimmered expressively. “Whatever do you know about that, dear? You’re a single woman?”

My dishonest beam broadened again. “I haven’t always been. Even more than that, I’m in a partnership of sorts now. We may not be together romantically, but I rely on him to maintain my most prized possession on this planet. That transcends any romantic arrangement there is. *We’re—*” I shook my head, not wanting to speak on the temperature or design of my relationship with Chi-Chi’s father. “I’m simply trying to make the point if you think you’re wooing me with the promise of marriage, you shouldn’t waste your time. I’m not that type of girl.”

“Why is that?”

“Because if marriage is what I wanted, I could have had that many moons ago.”

“Then what do you want, my love?” The gleam in his eyes tantalized me.

I didn’t answer that question, not believing I owed Haris any explanation about my views on marriage. The prospect was not on the table...no matter how much he thought the possibility flattered me. Instead, I swirled my food with my fork on the plate as I redirected the conversation.

“What are your spiritual views, Haris.”

Momentarily, the enchanted grin faded from his smooth, hickory face. “As in religion?”

My neck twisted as I understood he wasn’t accurately processing the question. “If you observe it, that, too.”

He exhaled roughly through his nostrils while sitting up in his chair, eyes darting out into the restaurant’s distance. “Well, my parents—back home in Nigeria—were raised in the Islamic faith. When they settled in London, my mother converted to Catholicism, and my father followed. I don’t think he really believes, but he follows the rituals.”

“Or he follows your mother.” I winked. “But you haven’t said what your beliefs are, Haris.”

He took another deep breath, brows lifting. “I...*uhhh*...” He cleared his throat. “I don’t subscribe to celestial matters. I’ve always believed there was a god in me, which has led me to this level of success I’ve reached. There’s a shitload more money out there to obtain, but I’ve got enough to be set for life. I didn’t need religion for that. Spirits are for guidance; I’ve done a good job guiding myself.” Haris shrugged.

That was when I’d gotten my answer.

“Then you may not be familiar with the Bible. I’ve been studying it for a little while now, feeling the need for balance and answers.”

“Has it been helpful?”

I didn’t know why, but Haris’ question felt mocking.

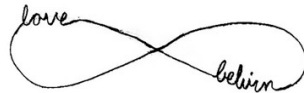
Forging ahead, decidedly ignoring that inkling, I shared, “Proverbs chapter one, verse five says, ‘a wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels.’ To me, that means there is so much to unearth about the journey we’re traveling. There are even depths of myself I’m exploring.”

“Does this have anything to do with your views on marriage?”

“Yes and no. It has everything to do with how I measure the parameters of my world. It’s how I’ve been able to govern

who and what enters and exits.” Finally, there was a flip in Haris’ eyes. The charm had been gone long enough for me to see his vulnerability and see authenticity in the man. My lower face spread horizontally, and eyes narrowed in quiet pleasure. “I believe I’m done with dinner.”

He leaped in his seat. “Of, course.” Eyes combing the room for the waiter.



His breaths were harsh, and his palms annoyingly misty. But that didn’t deter me from exploring his mouth without hesitation in the back seat of his sedan. Haris was okay-looking. His face was mild, body tall and slender. The man’s magic ingredient, for me, was his confidence. He exuded it. He wanted in my bed—*let’s make that very clear*—under the guise of marriage, and I didn’t mind. The attention felt amazing, which was strange for me. I’d never been short of a man vying for my attention. Even now, I set up guards in my DM and had Borys pose as my significant other when we were on the road often.

However, no one went out of their way to get my attention as Haris had. And quite frankly, I was fucking lonely. Being the sole breadwinner in my home as a single mom had been easy. Being away from my family was hard as fuck. For over two years, I’d avoided this feeling of loneliness. Neediness. That was until it had reached its peak recently.

And now, while, yeah, Haris’ arms felt foreign, his breathing heavily in my face, and his tongue too far outside of the parameters of my lips, I was fishing for chemistry to pounce on. I needed male companionship just for the night. I’d sort out the complications regarding it in the morning.

Just for tonight...

I reached for the waist of his pants, surprisingly detaching his belt with deft performance. His breathing increased unimaginably as I progressed into his loose boxers. Haris’ greedy hand reached the underside of my bare thigh, inching

beneath the hem of my *Fendi* sheath dress. He'd eventually be headed for my panties, but I wasn't ready for that...*just yet*. I still needed a spark of chemistry. I'd take it from there. With that, I'd show Haris the night of his life.

Just give me this...

My heart pounded as I made it to his bed of pubic hairs. Immediately, I felt like a trespasser. He *was* foreign! But Haris was an uncharted territory I needed the escape of. This...*it* was all I needed to finally move to a new plateau as a woman and get this monkey off my back. And I was ready. Just for this night.

Shit...

My feverish body went cold instantly. The tips of my fingers met the bottom of my palm. Haris may have been lengthy in height, but his minor member was petite while fully erect. My shoulders fell against the leather seat. Slowly, my arm retracted, lifeless hand pulling from the strange man's pants. Next, my tongue slowed then withdrew.

Haris pulled back in search of an answer. I wiped my mouth, now disgusted by his audacity to be so sloppy. For a while, I kept my eyes low, feeling completely deflated. It happened again. The time I thought I was ready to move on—*away* from the definition of my femininity I'd known for four years—the opportunity evaporated in dramatic fashion before my eyes.

“Shi-Shi,” that accent was questioning. “my love, what's wrong?”

I finally peered Haris in the eyes. My throat screamed as I offered lowly, “I'm sorry. It's been a long day.”

In the dark of the car as his driver waited near the door to my villa, Haris' jaw fell in incredulity.



love
believe

jas

My eyes rolled up to the clock on the nightstand.

1:52 am

Fuck. I had church in a few hours and was still awake as I lay on my side, one leg curled and the other straight. My one hand cupped the side of my face, and the other was balled against the mattress. Dick was halfway hard, mind still running with...shit. This was a mental and physical state I'd been enduring for months now—actually a couple of years, but it had been becoming far more fucking intense recently.

God, what is this—

WHACK!

A swift kick landed on the blade of my shoulder. That was followed by a loud ass fart from a tiny body. The blow—both of them—reminded me of my company.

Chivon.

Shit...

The smell of her little gas and mild sting in my back snapped me out of my bitchy mood. I'd forgotten she was here with me, which was hard; she took up most of my king-sized bed, leaving me about a third of it to stay out of her way. The girl was a wild sleeper and a difficult one after trips out of town.

We'd flown in from *Della* a few hours ago and I managed to feed and give Chivon a bath before putting her down for bed. I was dog-tired and knew she was exhausted, too. The problem was when returning home from being away, my baby didn't like sleeping in her own damn bed. I used to try and fight with her, going back and forth all night long from my room to hers when she'd fall asleep in my bed. Tonight, I

didn't have the energy. I didn't trip when she climbed on my bed and slipped under the comforter. She then kicked it off, crawled over to me, and laid a wet one on the side of my cheek before saying 'night-night' and snuggling back into the bed.

I didn't fight her, already knowing the play. No one told me how after having a child, my life no longer belonged to me. I lived for this girl's contentment and never tripped over it. *But now...* It would be nice to add new energy to the place—another adult, of course. I had a ways to go before I could think about having another child. I accepted that when my first was born. Just like I wouldn't fight this damn “gray” mood, fucking with me again.

Straining, I lifted from the mattress and shifted to leave the bed. I'd never been a man to be in my feelings. Doing that shit was a waste of time and energy. Me, I was a resolution-seeker. Sitting and sulking had never suited me. So what did I do?

I made my way over to the sitting room, closing the glass door behind me. The purple prayer mat was there waiting for me. Taking to my knees, I positioned myself to look to the hills from which cometh my help.

Chapter Five

Part III

February | Three Years Later



“**S** eben!” Chivon jumped down a step. “Eight!” Another step while clutching my hand. “Ten!” She hit the landing, ready to celebrate.

My eyes quickly skirted around the ground floor. “You missed nine.” Then I lifted my gaze again, peeping out a place for us to hang out of the way of the moving crowd so I could text Lex to figure out where she was.

Chivon hopped on one foot, then the next in her princess dress, tights, and shoes while I held her little hand, clutching our coats beneath the same arm. Service had just ended, and the place was swarming with bodies leaving their seats. [Redeeming Souls for Abundant Living in Christ Family Worship Church, also known as RSfALC](#), was a mad house. I still didn’t feel compelled to be in the church house Sunday after Sunday. For a few years, I’d pop in during weekday services, where I felt the intimate vibe better suited me. My walk was spiritual, and, for me, attending services in the building was mostly for community purposes. I didn’t need to

fellowship with a concert-size group of people. I just needed to be fed the Word of God.

Funny thing happened when Chivon was born and could sit up on her own and not wild out: I felt compelled to bring her. She hadn't been attending children's church every Sunday like the Carmichael girls just yet. I wasn't ready, but had been preparing for it. That was why Ezra suggested I sit in the balcony with the smaller crowd. I soon learned there were mostly celebrities there with their children and guests. I didn't trip on it, though. I wanted to give my daughter a spiritual... springboard I wasn't given as a child. The community aspect of spirituality, I could dig for her. She would be the better for it and would have the leg up I didn't coming up. And Chivon loved coming to church. My baby girl got hyped during praise and worship.

"Let's go, Daddy!" She pushed up from her toes then fanned out her dress.

"I'm trying to look for Auntie *Lex*—"

"Sin!" I heard my name being shouted.

Similar to Chivon's mother, it wasn't hard locating Lex in a crowd. She was tall as hell with big and wild natural hair, something we used to clown her about back in the day. I couldn't front: keeping her hair natural worked for Lex as an adult. But that was something I would never tell her. I'd blow her head up doing it, and that wasn't something I would allow her big ass head.

"What it do?" I greeted when she made it to us.

"Thanks for coming today!" After a swift, playful punch in the arm, Lex located Chivon. "And there's my big girl!"

With her index finger in her mouth, Chivon's face lit up like a Christmas tree as she beamed up to a crouched over Lex.

"Cat's got ya tongue?" I wiggled her little arm from our clasped hands. "You ain't gon' speak?"

"Hi!" Chivon finally broke through her initial shy state.

"Hey, baby! Did you enjoy church today?"

Chivon nodded, watching people greet Lex every seven seconds. I still tripped off her being a damn first lady to a big organization like this.

Crazy.

“What does that mean?” I asked my daughter, pushing her to use words.

“Yeah.” Chivon couldn’t break that hard smile.

“Good! And because you had such a good time, Auntie brought something for you.” Lex pulled a lollipop from the pocket of her blazer. “It’s coconut-flavored, so it won’t stain your mouth.” She winked and handed it over to Chivon.

“Tank you!” my baby managed, still not fully clear with her pronunciations.

But her every expression was understood by most.

“You’re very welcome, cutie pie,” Lex cooed before standing straight, leaving Chivon to tear open the candy. “And my sugary treat for you is here, too.” Before I could ask what the hell she meant, Lex pivoted, bringing into view a red-boned shortie. Long lashes, pretty grin, and high cheekbones piqued my interest right away. “*Sin—Jas,*” she corrected herself, and rightfully. “This is Josie, the friend of mine I was telling you about.”

Oh. Damn.

Shortie’s arm rushed to me eagerly. “Hi, Jas. I’ve heard a little something about you.”

Getting myself together, I reached for her hand in the air and shook it. “It’s Ojasvi,” I corrected. “I hope all good things...but that depends on who talked. If it was First Lady, I’m not sure how much of it is true.”

Lex laughed, and Josie’s smile stretched. “Who else *knows* you?” Her eyes skirted over to my Chivon.

That was odd.

What did it mean?

“Forward, are we?” Lex’s hand went beneath her wild hair to the back of her neck.

Ignoring whatever that was, I tossed my gaze to Chivon, chowing down on the sugar pop. “Chivon here do,” I added. “I heard you got a little shortie, too.”

“I do.” Josie kneeled down and waved. “Hi, Chivon. You’re a very pretty girl. You look just like your daddy.”

When Chivon’s only response was a smile as she sucked on her lollipop, I wiggled her arm again. “What do you say?”

Chivon’s confused eyes rolled up at me.

“What should she say?” Josie playfully challenged me.

I blinked, confused my damn self. “Thank you.”

Josie’s lashes met. “For being told she’s pretty?”

“Nah. For looking like me.”

Both Josie and Lex cracked the hell up. But I didn’t join in. That’s when I got to see how pretty Josie’s smile was. Her beauty was loud and edgy as hell. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been impressed by a woman.

“Oh, hello!” Lex’s attention diverted just behind me. “Great to see you in the tabernacle today.”

I turned to find Peach approaching with a warm smile. “Praise the Lord, First Lady Carmichael.”

Peach...

She was tall in high heels and a burgundy dress revealing her feminine build. Blonde, long hair running down her back. Makeup mild, but hinted on her pretty face. The woman resembled her crew: fashionable and dripping with hints of top designers. The *Chanel* earrings in her lobes sparkled, as did the diamonds in her *Cartier* necklace, matching her wrist. The other arm was strapped in a glistening *Rollie*. She may have been the more spiritual and religious one of her crew, but Peach stayed laced like her girls.

“Godmommy!” Chivon screamed hard as hell, excited to see her.

My baby abandoned my hand and ran toward Peach, who scooped her up quickly, nuzzling her nose into Chivon's neck. I guessed because she wore lipstick and didn't want to stain her face.

Then Peach and Lex embraced. "I hope you enjoyed the Word," Lex fished politely.

"Always." Peach's smile was big but reserved. I knew she fangirled over Ezra but would never slip in front of him or his wife. She wasn't like that. Peach had class. "I can't think of many capable of infusing an unadulterated remah word into a logos message so eloquently, so controlled, and confidently. I take notes each time."

"Praise God," Lex whispered, nodding her head humbly.

It was still crazy to see this new, polished, and church-cultured Lex Grier from Harlem World. I still hadn't gotten used to it.

"What it do, Peach?" I greeted when she moved to hug me.

"I was lucky to find you two." Peach nuzzled Chivon's cheek this time.

I was a little stuck. "So, you cheated on your congregation today?"

Peach's face wrinkled. "I told you I'd be here today. Remember the nativity production for Chi-Chi's you know what?"

My eyes rolled closed.

Damn.

"My bad. Yeah. That." I couldn't help but to look over at Josie again. It was easy to. "Ummm..." I didn't know what to say at first, so damn out of the dating game.

"Cat's got your tongue this time," Lex snickered.

Shaking my head, fighting my own humor, I tossed my chin toward shortie. "You mind if we exchange information?"

Lex's eyes blew the hell up. I ignored her, not wasting a single moment giving a fuck.

Josie seemed surprised by that. Eyes blinking and forehead stretched, she pushed out, “Of course, not!” Then she reached for her purse, I assumed for her phone.

“Daddy,” Chivon pouted my way with glossed, sugary lips. “I go potty.”

“Oh.” My eyes swung around, blindly looking for a restroom.

I was really off my mental game and needed to get my shit together. I never tripped off women and wouldn’t start now. But something about this felt...a’ight.

“Godmommy can take you.” Peach offered, communicating something with her eyes again. “Give us girls a minute to right ourselves.” She turned to leave, looking over her shoulder. “Meet you back right here?”

“Yeah,” Josie gushed, though the question was never posed to her. “Unfortunately, but yes.” Her eyes never leaving me.

I knew right away that remark wasn’t to diss Peach. *Nah.* Ol’ girl was making it high-key clear to me she was feeling the kid.

That’s what’s up...



ashira

Standing at the mirror of my bathroom vanity, I observed the faint crow’s feet on the sides of my eyes. Tonight, the bags beneath them were visible again. I was grateful they weren’t a hue darker than my natural complexion. That happened now, too. It began a year ago when my team and I were preparing

for Dale's U.S. concert tour. Aging. *And too prematurely.* I observed, studying myself in the mirror, then nodded faintly. It was happening to...*me.*

Then I questioned how it happened. The last memories I had of life at a reasonable pace were when I'd decided to step out of the shadows of my father's dream and vacation that year, month after month. I wanted to explore the world and drag my girls with me, even if it was at my own expense. That would be my first step in declaring my independent space against my father's. And I'd done that. I'd gone to several breathtaking locales with my best friends and had the best times.

So how did I get here?

Have you ever sat with your shit? Like...really taken out the time to look into the mirror at your reality? Your ugly?

When my cousin, Diana, and I used to fight, our grandmother would break us up and plop us in two chairs facing the corners of the room. She'd say, "*Now, you sit in ya ugly and thank about what ya did.*" We'd sit for close to an hour sometimes, and I learned to think. Sitting with my ugly gave me the time and mental space to explore my behaviors and plan my next course of action.

But damn...

Looking at my ugly through a mirror was far more terrifying than glowering at a wall.

Who are you?

Each day, I grew to resemble my mother more and more. My youth had been quickly fleeting. What was the plan now? How had I gotten here? The biggest professional competition of my life was in less than ten hours. Before my attention had gotten locked into this mirror, I'd been packing my makeup and toiletry bags for the show. One cursory glance and I caught my ugly—and not in the sense of lacking outward beauty.

My ugly was my discontentment. The lack of pride I carried in spite of recent successes. It didn't matter that I'd

risen to become one of the most sought-after choreographers in the industry; I'd grown hollow inside. Empty. Would dancing be my only legacy?

At the alarming ache renting my belly, I stroked my abdomen. Then the smarting caved my chest, forcing my other hand there. I dropped my face. What was this gnawing lingering of blues I'd taken on in my life? What began as just sporadic preoccupation of thoughts of dissatisfaction had been blossoming into full-on body manifestations.

My phone rang, breaking my reverie. I pulled it from the pocket of my cropped sweats.

"Hey..."

"Hey, Shi-Shi," Marsha's voice was reserved, rather smaller than I'd known of her. "Everything's cool?"

"Yeah." I blinked, rubbing my forehead as I attempted to get my shit together. Always on, I was a leader. "I think our final rehearsal ran smoother than I anticipated. If Sam can keep in step with Kimmy and lay off that knee tonight—"

"Instead of going out with production tonight, drinking and dancing the night away," she snickered.

Sighing in agreement, I replied, "Yeah. But I'm good. We've been working hard."

"Yeah. I know. It's just..." She hesitated. "You've been different this year. It's like...you're preoccupied...tense, maybe?"

My focus landed on my ugly again in the mirror. *Damn.* The shit was hard.

Shaking my head, I tried to explain. "I wanna win, Marsha. Last year we came so close. We're über talented individually, and as a team, we're unstoppable. I know it. I just need the world to."

"*Mmmhmm,*" she sighed audibly into the phone. "I do, too. I just don't want it at the risk of your happiness." Marsha's word flow began to slow, and I didn't care to rush her for some odd reason. The conversation was turning awkward. And

personal. I was fine! Stressed, anxious about the show tomorrow, yes. But the totality of my existence had been dedicated to this occasion. So, I resumed packing the toiletry bag, something I'd been doing before getting lost in the rabbit hole of my appearance in the mirror. "I hope you don't get offended when I say this, but..." More silence. "I've never not seen you happy doing choreography until this time. Don't get me wrong: you know your shit and are the best at it. It's just... your light has been off. I feel your dedication to the art form but not your fulfillment from it."

I exhaled, tossing shit into the bag. "Yeah. Maybe I'm getting old." My shoulders leaped in a shrug she couldn't see. "Maybe I've got shit to prove to those D.C. bitches." Marsha didn't find that funny. "But I've been so damn determined for us to get here and own it. No matter what happens tomorrow, I'm going to find something to help me unwind from it all." I tossed the glass bottle of prime spritzer too hard.

"Oh, yeah?" Marsha asked. "Like what?"

I shrugged again, this time with my lips. "I've been looking into those popup gardens in urban cities. There's this organization that uses donated goods to clear out abandoned, dilapidated properties and create beautiful oases for the residents to visit. Almost like a park or museum. They've done them in Philly, New York, and New Jersey. I heard about the one coming to Paterson this spring. I've been thinking about volunteering Chi-Chi and me to maybe help clear out the space—for sure plant flowers and things like..."

I held a round, plastic carton midair as my mind transported to yesteryear.

"When frustrated with life, you'd often say, 'I need a dog,' or 'I need a plant,' or 'I need to volunteer at the senior home.' And to those alleged needs, sometimes I've said, 'You don't need a dog or a plant or to volunteer.' Then there were other occasions when I said, 'Okay. Start with a plant, move on to life form, and eventually, you'll get to what your heart truly wants.'" Peach. They were Peach's spooky words at my baby shower. "Your journey as a mother will mature your spirit and expand your mind to widths and breadths that will allow you

to feed a community. Then will you bask in your purpose on this earth.”

I glanced down to find my plastic birth control case in my hand. Turning it over, I viewed the essential companion with foreign eyes suddenly.

“You still there, Shi-Shi?” Concern was laced in Marsha’s question.

Closing my eyes, I cleared my throat, trying to snap out of the addlepat state I’d found myself in again. *My ugly.* “Yeah. I’m fine, Marsha.” Shaking my head, I tried to assure, “I’ll be just fine.”

Marsha wasn’t the only one I needed to convince.



My head began to roll deeply over my shoulders, chest, and blades on its own by now. The sounds of the backstage zoo had finally drowned out. I needed the quiet to slip into myself—to align with every bone, muscle, and limb in my body. Each one of them needed to be undoubtedly synchronized. I needed this. With the torrent of emotions I’d woken up with this morning, realizing no one would be here to support me, my mood began spiraling.

I’d offered to swing the expenses for anyone who’d come down to Costa Rica, but there were still no takers. Peach had a speaking engagement in Baltimore. Cecil’s class reunion was today. Noelle had hardly been speaking to me, so I didn’t bother to ask if she wanted to come instead of playing in her basketball tournament. And my mother...

Well...

Her adoring my child was as close as I’d get to support from her. The *IDC* competition was near her in Brazil last year. Dancing had been the air my mother breathed for as long as I’d been alive. She was a choreographer herself and attended competitions all over the world. Yet she still declined the invitation to *IDC* last year...virtually in her backyard. It

hurt. I hated it did, but it had. Up until that point in my life, I thought I'd adjusted well to her lack of interest for a connection to me. Damn. Was I wrong.

The announcement of my dance troupe could be recognized in my trance-like state. I needed to come out of my reality and get into the right zone for this performance. I wouldn't blow it. No, none of my closest family and friends would be here to see me dance my heart out and pursue another goal, but the opportunity was still present nonetheless.

And I damn sure wouldn't replay the lance of pain I felt last night when discovering Chi-Chi's father's new social life. I idly wandered to [Spilling That Hot Tea](#) on Instagram. They were always high energy with detailed gossip and good for a distraction. There was a picture of a group of people at what appeared to be a dinner party. At the festively decorated table were a handful of recognizable faces like [Ragee](#), the [head coach of the Connecticut Kings](#), [Trent Bailey](#), [Lex](#), and a few others. The table reeked of mahogany wealth. They looked good...including Jas, who smirked against everyone's beam.

Apparently, Ebonee Williams, a Black, popular nighttime television host in Canada commented, asking who was the brown-skinned guy with the sponge curls and low beard. She had to differentiate him by complexion because Coach Pierce of the *Kings* donned the same hairstyle. There were a dozen sub-comments under Ebonee's agreeing with her. Then she came back with, *"I know a few of these people. I'll find him and send out our save the dates."*

What a fucking irritant to have populating my head before a show!



jas

“She fall!” Chivon gasped shakily while pointing to the stage.

As I held her on my arm so she could have the same vantage point, I nodded. The audience reacted to her fall, too. The *ooh*'s rang out in the air from the crowd when dude pushed Ashira into the air and stumbled while sending her. Ashira landed on her palms and one foot with her chest toward the air. The place was packed, and energy live. I'd heard whispers of Ashira's crew being one of the most anticipated tonight. Humidity and the tightly drawn, hyped ass crowd worked against my preferred ventilation. I wouldn't complain, and neither did Chivon, as our attention couldn't leave the stage. We'd been waiting, too. This was the last act of the night. Highly awaited, this troupe couldn't drop the ball.

Ashira skipped a beat...maybe two, but eventually, out of nowhere, rhythmically leaped into the air weightlessly using that one foot she'd landed on. She slapped dude who'd seemed stuck in the ass as she snapped back into the routine with pure ease. The crowd cheered, going crazy.

My lil' homie...

Chivon giggled, eyes glued to her mother.

“See...” I bounced her on my arm. “Your mommy never stays down.”

My baby cackled even louder, though she wasn't old enough to fully appreciate my words just yet.

love
belvin

ashira

Still out of breath, I was pensive backstage. I paced back and forth. Sweat dripped from my head, arms, and chest, and my heart galloped in nervous anticipation.

I fell...

Damn!

That goddamn knee gave out on Sam during our air-toss routine, shooting me aimlessly during the opening number. That lessened my time in the air, sending me to the floor too soon. My wrists stung and the bed of the foot I'd landed on lit a blaze with pain upon impact, but I managed to rebound from the mishap and agony of it all in no time. But I'd fallen. We had the perfect choreography and fucked it up on a fall. My troupe managed the rest of the number without another error, but I was scared out of my mind as we waited for the judges to tally their votes.

Damn.

I fell.

“Mommy!” That small yet powerful cry had my legs steel and head snapping up.

Chi-Chi?

My head swung right, then left. She gleamed radiantly, carrying a bouquet of flowers while sitting on the shoulders of her lengthy mocha-skinned father. *How did they even get back here?* The small and emotionless entourage surrounding Chivon and her father reminded me of general access to my world.

My knees buckled and eyes closed, spilling hot water at the same time.

“Mommy crying!” Chi-Chi announced.

I covered my face, hating I was fucking up my makeup. A few *awwww*'s could be heard around my sobs. Feeling her little hand on my thigh, I realized her father had removed her from his shoulders. I tried forcing my palms away but knelt instead. Chi-Chi took me at the wrists and did the job for me as I'd done for her several times over the years.

“Wha' you crying?” she asked.

When I tried to laugh, another round of tears pushed from my face. “Because your gorgeous face is here with me.”

I heard the *awwww*'s around me again.

“Daddy here,” Chivon announced as though I didn't know. “Look! Daddy, c'mere!”

I was able to successfully laugh this time as did others.

Jas obediently strode closer to me. His hand was drawn, and expression soft. “Congratulations, Witherspoon. You did it again.”

Running my eyes from his big hand, up his legs, then chest, I latched a hold of it to stand. That's when it hit me. The look in the man's eyes, the stoic muscles of his face when in my presence, the stiffness of his posture, and the iron door he'd shut behind his eyes all when in my presence. Like a crocodile's, an attachment protecting his inner being would flip when around me, and until now, in my vulnerable state, I didn't quite understand it. I wasn't too sure now, but had a spark of knowledge.

Staring him directly in the eyes, I could feel Jas' need to maintain the stony veneer. “Told baby girl here you always put in that work from your heart. You know you can't lose that way, no matter what them judges say.”

Those words of praise showered over me like a wellspring in the middle of the Atacama, causing the carotid artery in my neck to pulse loudly in my skull.

What I was able to identify in the flash of a moment was what was hidden behind the protective layer of his eyes; Jas'

undeniable passion for me. The first time I recognized it was in *DiFillippo's* when I asked to speak to him before eating with the Jacobs. I knew in my heart of hearts the man didn't want to share the same air as me that night, but there was a flip—a protective slide over his pupils, revealing his vulnerability to me. I'd seen it the first time he'd taken me on his boat, the first time he made love to me when I'd taken his jailhouse virginity, when I broke things off with him when his daughter was born, and countless times since. I'd never seen it in our encounters at *Brown Barista*, when we'd generally argue, or much as of late. The problem with recognizing it was the sprinkle of vulnerable passion had been the coldness Jas led with when interacting with me.

My attention on him faltered, blindly scanning uniformed dancers performing the same self-engrossed pacing I'd been doing. A few in my camp smiled, recognizing my unexpected guests.

“I thought by telling you that, it would kill the tears.” Jas' tenor had my eyes back onto him.

It seemed everything quieted around me, and all I saw was him. In that moment, there were so many things to say, countless emotions bouncing between the two of us. I felt raw enough to attempt them and had finally realized we needed to address our shit—

“What?” someone barked behind me.

“We're number one!” Borys shouted.

I heard it, understood it, but couldn't quite appreciate it. My eyes were locked onto a now perplexed Jas. He knew something was off with me but likely wouldn't ask. Things had been so fucked up between us for way too long.

You're here?

I wanted to shout in excitement similarly to the way my team was doing all around me. Jas showed up for me. Out of all the potential support...all the promises and declarations made by people over the months, Jas never committed his support for *IDC*. But his showing felt on par with the energy

he'd always represented in my life: consistency, even at the bane of my perceived happiness. The man had been unfailingly present. Generous in expressing mercy and grace.

“Yo, you hear that?” Jas lifted Chi-Chi in his arms, attention still to me. “You guys won.”

I did. But something far more riotous was going off in my head and heart.

“Thanks for coming,” I managed, fighting back my emotions, knowing my face was a canvas of melted crayons.

And it happened again. The flip in his eyes from hard and cold to helpless vulnerability.

“Always.” His delivery was soft or perhaps drowned out by the boisterous shouts and screams from my team, who'd scooped me into the air with celebratory flair.

“We have to get our trophy, Shi-Shi!” Borys chided.

I turned back to Jas, ready to tell him I'd be right back. But it was unnecessary. The proud gleam in his eyes expressed they'd be right there until I returned.



“Three, four, five...” Chivon hopped on each leg, one at a time, while she clasped my hands above her. “Seben, eight—”

“You missed six,” I corrected her.

“Sir,” Eric, one of my security guys, approached us, leaning into me with a low volume, “Bob just hit me. Seers is here. Four o'clock, near the curtain.”

My eyes scanned an almost ninety-degree angle. Amongst the dancers in uniforms and backstage staff, I saw three niggas. Two of them whispering and looking my way. Immediately, Austin Seers' chin lifted, and lips balled. His mans with him, whispering in his ear, pulled him back by the arm into the shadows of the curtains.

Oh, word?

She got that nigga here?

“What you wanna do?” Eric asked.

Thinking for a minute, processing the shit, I continued to stare Austin's way, and could still see one of his boys partially covered by a shadow. A few scenarios ran through my mind, none pretty. I told that nigga four years ago to stay the fuck away from Ashira. That was before she had my baby. Did the nigga think now was a safe bet? Did Ashira cosign this shit? Did she put the battery in his back? Or did his pussy ass forget I was *that* nigga?

“You hear me, Daddy?” Chivon yanked at my hands.

My attention dropped to her pretty face, set into an angry scowl. I would swear her mother could be identified in each tense muscle of her expression.

“My bad, baby. Whatchu say?”

“Six. Six, Daddy!”

“I'm sorry. Good job. You're getting so much better, Blueberry.”

She wiggled beneath me, shimmying in her dress. Chivon's smile exploded. “It okay.”

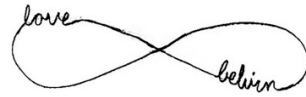
Even being angry with me, my baby knew how to deliver mercy. Damn. She was so good for me. A true gift from God. Had to be. Nothing soothed my inner craze like the simple sight of her miniature being or the sound of her soft, innocent voice. Chivon quieted brewing storms in me a lot now.

That had my gaze shifting up and seeing their coward asses still in the wings of darkness.

“Nah. He good for now,” I finally answered Eric.

I didn’t know what the hell Ashira was on.

But I’mma let her have it...



ashira

The energy leaving the stage was deafening. Shouts, stomps from air-kicks, and even cartwheels from my team were on level ten. We won *International Dance Competition...* finally! Even with the teeming celebratory vigor around me, I couldn’t quite process the victory. Taking the stage to perform, I was caught in the snares of major blues.

And heavily anticipatory...

I scanned the backstage area for Chi-Chi and Jas amongst the sea of people, including my own. Just as expected, they were there, virtually where I’d left them. Chi-Chi held onto her father’s hands as she danced, hopping on one foot then the other. I headed their way and once again was encountered by the crocodile slide in his eyes.

“Hey!” I exhaled.

“Mommy!” She ran to me.

I picked her up when her tiny frame reached me. “Hey, baby girl!”

“You won!” her cry sounded more like “*vun.*”

“I did, sugar and spice! And guess what?”

“What?” she asked with infectious excitement.

“I get to celebrate with the princess I love! Mommy won!” I cheered.

“Yaay, Mommy!” she shouted, body locking against my chest with unbridled bliss.

Laughing, I turned to her father. “That’s if you guys aren’t flying out tonight.”

Jas shook his head, forehead lifting. “Nah. We just got in a few hours ago. Left Amy back at the villa to get things settled in.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Oh!” I gasped, looking shocked at Chi-Chi. “Guess I’ll have to steal all the hours I can to eat up my sugar and spice!” I nuzzled into her neck, causing her to giggle from way down in her belly and squirm against me. Then a thought occurred. “Is that okay with you?” I asked her father. “Is there room for me?”

I knew he traveled with security and had to accommodate them as well as Amy, the nanny.

Jas’ brows leaped expressing indifference before he asked, don’t you have some celebrating to do?” He tossed his chin over my head.

My troupe.

“I’ll have to debrief, but they’ll understand, seeing Chi-Chi’s here.” I didn’t give a damn.

Jas shrugged again, this time with his head. “There’s room. That’s where we’ll be.”

There was something in his tone. Something empty... uninviting—or at least that’s what Jas wanted me to believe. I wasn’t taking the hook. This was my night. We’d won a coveted title tonight. I wouldn’t allow anything to ruin this high I was on.

My baby was here with me!

Regretfully, I placed Chi-Chi down. The sooner I could wrap up the night with my crew would be the sooner I'd get back to her. As soon as her feet touched down, she skipped over to her father. Jas picked her up right away and was rewarded by a swift kiss on his hairy cheek by her. He saluted me, bringing his index to his forehead, then turned to leave. Chi-Chi didn't even look back as he carried her off.

A slight ache rented my chest at that. She seemed okay parting from me. It hadn't always been that way. I remembered times I had to leave when Chi-Chi was asleep to avoid her crying spells.

What was this?

"Okay. Bitch, now that, *that* one's gone, what are you going to do about this one?" Borys asked lowly over my head.

What?

I turned to find him leaning over me, reminding me of how Jas did once upon a time when being affectionate.

"Who?" I was now half irritated, half curious.

Borys pointed near the curtains of the stage. I could hardly make out Jerry, Austin's bodyguard, until he stepped further out of the shadows.

Oh!

I smiled just before Austin joined him, slowly making their way over. I met them halfway.

"And another one!"

"Another what?" Austin asked, unsmiling as he approached us.

"Surprise."

"What was the first?" I noticed the rapidness of his hug... which was fine, just strange. Quickly thinking about it, I realized how silly it was of me not to expect Jas to attend today. He attended last year's event—even without Chi-Chi. He'd flown down from work on his cigar line in Cuba. So,

why hadn't he been a thought during my pity party last night and this morning? "Winning? You've always been a winner."

I gushed, "That's sweet." Then there was an awkward spell, one Austin created by looking around but not directly at me. Still, I forged ahead. "I just can't believe you're here."

"I told you I was coming."

"You did?"

Austin scratched the top of his head. "Yeah. When I couldn't see you in Jersey a couple of weeks ago. You know... when you stood me up?"

I laughed. "I got caught up in mamahood. I'm sorry. Clearly, I was on another planet because I don't remember you saying you'd come."

"Yeah. I can tell. You know your mobbin' baby daddy thinks you ain't have a real man before him." He scoffed, then murmured, swiping his hand over his mouth, "He eventually fucked up with you. I wonder how high and fucking mighty shit feels now for him. How do he feel being on the outside?" He tapped Jerry's arm, and they snickered together.

Jas...on the outside?

Was that how men thought when they did women wrong to the point of breaking up? And with Jas; was he on the outside of my real world like Austin had now been for four years? That was a lot to chew on, considering we shared a child. But then, perhaps that was our reality. When I thought of the upchuck of emotions I'd felt last night, reading Ebonee Williams' comments, it was hard to agree Jas was the only one on the outside.

"And on that note..." I laughed, eyes swinging over to Borys. He followed suit. "Tonight was a success and my troupe and I need to debrief. How long are you in town for?"

Chapter Six

Part III

February | Three Years Later

ashira

As the moisturizer melted into my face, I felt ten pounds lighter. Having stripped out of my uniform, showering, and washing off the makeup from the show, I was finally coming down from the day's anxiety. We'd won. Being an *IDC* winner will forever be attached to my legacy as a dancer.

I exhaled, examining myself once again in the mirror. Gloom didn't consume me tonight, not just because of my recent win. I was one thousand percent sure it was because of the mini-me awaiting on the property of this gorgeous villa her father snagged to come down and support me. Clothed in a bikini and terry cloth short-shorts, I toed out of the room I was assigned and could hear jazz music flowing from a short distance.

All Ava's doing...

Had to be. She arranged for every detail in Jas' life, it seemed, and in particular, his lush lodgings. I refused to give

thought to what other ways the girl was accommodating. The place apparently had six bedrooms, all on one level. I found my way to the living room with a California-room-style opening to the outdoors.

The place was opulent, something I'd come to expect from Jas. The convict from a housing project in Harlem was extremely peculiar about his digs: permanent resident and vacation homes. The contemporary kitchen I passed, with a stainless steel stove, and hood surrounded by granite countertops, validated my argument. Even the low-lit palatial living room was populated with lush over-sized, off-white sofas and a gargantuan plasma television.

Conversely, my intention was just outside of the living room. Her bare feet moved off rhythm and little shoulders shifted awkwardly in the spirit of dance, but her dark brown eyes were fixated up high to her dance partner. Leaning into a pillar, I crossed my arms and gazed at them in the courtyard, surrounded by a glistening lit pool and gorgeously manicured shrubs mixed with exotically colorful florals. It was certainly a vibe of love and striking villatic views.

She was flourishing just as the flowers were in full bloom here in the courtyard. *Damn...* It seemed like just a few weeks ago, Ines was returning from *Costco* with another box of diapers for her to last the week. Her crawling on my father's glossy and intently polished marble floors with big eyes and an adventurous heart didn't feel that far back in the distance. No more bottles and disappearing pacifiers. Gone were the walkers, and she didn't want to eat in her high chair when I visited her a few weeks ago at her father's, though I insisted on it. My daughter was no longer a baby, and she'd been shedding her toddler scales daily. *I mean...* Yeah, kindergarten was not yet upon us, but Chivon would be three years old in a matter of days.

She was a tour de force already, vocal about her needs and possessive with her things...which clearly included her father. Her little fingers gripped his big hands, and her eyes expressed blind trust and intimate familiarity. That Chi-Chi was in love with her father. I was all too conversant with the phenomenon.

Lucky for her, she was yet too young to learn how wrong she was. No matter how great of a dedicated and attending father a little girl has, fathers don't belong to daughters. Their hearts, dicks, and egos are far more loyal to other outlets.

Look at him now...

His massive body resembled a gorilla compared to Chivon's miniature frame. Striated grooves covered his back, chest, abdomen, and arms. His body was herculean, appearing to be able to crush our daughter without struggle. The dark, voluminous tight curls of his scalp, dust of hair lining his defined jaw structure, and full lips beautifully contoured were all elements of a delicious man.

In my wanton state, I should have been heavily aroused, but my good senses prevailed because I no longer had hope of intimacy with Chivon's father. That faucet had been shut off by him. Sex had always been on Jas' terms. From day one, when I unabashedly wanted to ravish the unrefined thug-a-boo convict, it only happened when he was ready. Even when I'd withdrawn from him emotionally, stunned when learning of his murderous inclinations, I still had access to his body, but because *Jas* allowed it. It wasn't because, to him, I was this irresistibly sexy woman. It was because he granted me access into his personal space.

And now look at who occupies it...

Suddenly, Jas' dark irises were upon me. He didn't break in rhythm while looking my way. It was unexpected, fast, and almost slyly, something I'd seen of him over the years. The storm hidden behind his eyes. It was the Harlem in the man. As refined as Jas' new life had been, there were some characteristics of "the block" he'd likely never escape.

Jas' attention to Chi-Chi resumed, and he murmured something to her I couldn't hear.

She turned to me with heavy eyes and gasped. "Mommy?" A smile warmed my face.

"Hey, Chi..."

Her movements stalled. “You *wan*—come dance, Mommy? Come dance!”

I pushed off the wall and toed over to the pair. Immediately when I arrived, Chivon pushed me back at the pelvis. “You over ‘dere, Mommy. Not with my Daddy!”

Obedying her while stunned and confused, I backed away and allowed her to position herself between us. Chi-Chi wanted my hand on her shoulder while she resumed gripping her fingers with her father. She immediately fell into her two-step, occasionally glancing back at me to be sure I was dancing “with” them.

Fighting his mirth, Jas’ eyes closed and I could see the rolling of them. He picked up on her possessive nature, too. If I sat in my feelings about this, I’d have to admit they were hurt. Never in all the years I was obsessed with Noel did my mother express her resentment or unease over my fixation on her husband. So, I certainly wouldn’t do that over my “baby’s daddy.” I’d let Chi-Chi have her way with him for as long as she could.

“She needs a sibling.”

“Pardon?” Jas asked.

I motioned down to my mini-me with my chin. “She needs a sibling.”

Jas didn’t reply. In fact, his face erased of any emotion in an instant. I continued the dance, still taken by my child’s audacity but eventually cooling to finding the humor in it all.

Jas’ phone sounded just as the song was ending.

“Shit,” he murmured, looking at the caller’s identification. “I gotta take this. Chivon, it’s past your bedtime. You should be ready now.”

“No, Daddy,” she fought.

“I’ll stay out with her for a few more minutes, then put her to sleep.”

“Make sure she brush her teeth,” Jas commanded, stepping away shirtless and flexing.

“You want to sleep with Mommy tonight?” A new song had begun, and I grabbed Chi-Chi’s little hands to continue to dance.

“No sleep with Mommy. I big girl now!”

My head popped back at that. Although I managed a smile, my feelings were completely slaughtered. Since when did my baby not want to snuggle with me at night?

I noticed the music decreasing drastically in volume, but still alive. I spun Chi-Chi around underneath me and realized it didn’t garner her same giggling response as it always had. Then she let go of one of my hands to rub her eye. My baby was sleepy. A hefty yawn soon followed.

“Okay. Okay. Okay.” I took her by the chin. “Mommy gets the hint. Time for bed.”

“I not sleepy.” She pouted.

“Okay. Let’s go brush your teeth, then we’ll check in on Miss Sleepy. Is that alright?”

Chi-Chi nodded. I guided her through the plush home and found her room and bathroom near her father’s. She brushed her teeth, and I walked her to her bed where we prayed, and she fell out almost as soon as she rolled over. Chivon had really been developing into a big girl. No crying, fussing, or complaining of fear in an unfamiliar room. Nope. My big girl relinquished herself to Mr. Sandman.

I, on the other hand, was wired. I’d just had a big win and had been ignoring my phone since arriving here. On my way back outside, I grabbed a towel and my phone from my bedroom. After dropping my shorts, I dipped my toe into the hot tub, quickly deciding on it. After the strain I’d put on my body in these past few weeks, it was only right. Tension loosened almost immediately once everything was submerged except for my hands and head. Right away, I found myself psyched by the congratulatory texts from my best friends. Borys must have done exactly as I requested, which was to reach out to them all with the news.

I was posting pictures and videos Marie sent me from the competition when Jas came into the courtyard with his laptop. “Let me know what the rheumatologist nigga say, and we can politick about it from there.”

“A’ight. Like that,” Juggy rasped into the phone. “Y’all good down there? When y’all headed back?”

Jas planted himself at a table and tapped at the computer. “Ummm... We fly out tomorrow night...like eight. I’mma take Chivon swimming and let her think she working out with me. Some shit to tire both our asses out for the flight.”

Juggy chuckled. “Yeah. You know my lil soldier like to think she be getting her shit in for real.” While I recognized his voice, the spirit of his delivery didn’t match the Juggy I knew. He sounded weak, which was understandable. Juggy had been sick for so long.

“You know it.”

“A’ight. Yo, tell Shi-Shi I said congratulations. I’m proud of her boss ass.”

My head shot up and gazed Jas’ way. His attention was on his laptop, unmoving. “You got it. But I’mma see about you when we touch down.”

“Yeah. A’ight. Just like that.”

“Like that.” Jas disconnected the call.

I waited a beat before asking from a short distance away “Is he okay?”

Jas inhaled before murmuring, “He maintaining.”

Street vernacular. I didn’t know how to take that. Jos-Renee’s report was more detailed. Going back to my phone, I decided not to push.

“She brush her teeth?”

Huhn?

“Chi-Chi?” He didn’t answer, only gave me a cursory glance. “Yeah. Did a good job, too. She went out right away.”

“Did she pray?”

“Of course.” I choked, “We did together.”

The nerve...

Jas didn't reply.

When I was done with social media, I placed my phone just off the ledge of the hot tub and settled deeper into the heated water. I tried relaxing and taking in the moment. It was hard to. Time alone with Jas often seemed awkward as of late. I heard him grumble a bit to himself, obviously engrossed in whatever he was doing.

“Work?” That was a silly question. Work had been Jas' mistress virtually since I met him. It was all he did.

“Some of it.” He closed the laptop, sat back in the chair on a stretch, and exhaled with a groan.

So damn intense...

“So... How's life?” Another senseless question, but my attempt at killing the emptiness of the air between us.

“Pardon me?”

I chuckled. “How's life been for you?” That was jarring. “What's been going on with you? How are you, Ojasvi?” I smiled with my eyes. “Is that a foreign question?”

“Maybe coming from you, yeah.”

“Well, I want to know.”

There was a slight pause before he exhaled again. “Chivon and work. Nothing more. Nothing less. Regular stress and shit.”

“Chi-Chi is stress?”

“Chivon is life. Securing a stable one for her is stress. And work...all of it is hella stressful. Ain't nothing, though.”

“Are you still in therapy?”

“For sure.” When my eyes bulged, Jas asked, “That's shocking to you? That shit's still useful.”

“I get it. I get it. Have you discussed this stress with her—if you’re still seeing the same one?”

“I am, and I do when applicable. You still see somebody?”

“Her. Not as regularly as I should.” I scraped my bottom teeth over my lips, feeling embarrassed. After an awkward spell, I shared, “She needs a sibling.”

“Who?”

“Chi-Chi. She’s too territorial over you.”

“Chivon needs very little, but I feel you. Now, as a father, I wish I wasn’t the only child for so long. In lots of ways, I still feel I am.”

“You talk to the therapist about that, too?”

He nodded. “I do.”

“And what does she say?”

There was another pause, this one even longer. “I’m working on it.” His answer so cavalier.

“How?”

After a beat, Jas looked my way. “I’m working on it.”

I was crazy curious now, parroting, “*How?*”

“Can I keep it a buck?” I nodded, jaw relaxed. “I’m back outside...switching gears again in life. To be real, I’m looking for somebody...for me.”

I thought for a minute, stunned by my own words while trying to play it cool because that was *Jas*’ demeanor, “You’re back to your ‘list?’”

His chuckle revealed a bit of embarrassment. “Yeah. I guess.”

The ease of his truth. The delivery of his honesty was so casual. With another man, it would be a clear sign of his pettiness, his contempt. But for Jas, it was his heart. His honesty. It was the man’s promise he made to himself behind prison walls.

“What does that mean for me?”

“What do you mean?”

“You made it clear when I was pregnant with Chi-Chi, I can’t be with anyone else. You haven’t touched me or expressed a desire to in eight months.” *Hell yeah*, I’d been counting. I had my needs, too. “What does that mean, Jas?”

A longer period of silence. “I’ve been thinking of that for a minute. Seems you’ve been doing you.”

“How so?”

“Ya ex back at the show. Costa Rica ain’t a convenient, everyday trip. I know. Been paying a grip for you to be down here for your business. Even flew down today to support you.” He fingered his coils. “Unless he got a gig down this way.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not like that. I didn’t know he was coming.” Thoughts of me blowing Austin off tonight so I could be here with Chi-Chi came back to mind. He looked genuinely defeated by my decline to hang out. It just wasn’t a good time. I didn’t even celebrate with my troupe after we debriefed.

“Proverbs chapter four, verse twenty-three. You remember your Word, Ashira?” Without pride, I shook my head, desperate for his next word. “Above all things, guard your heart and everything that flows from it.”

“Does that mean you don’t *love*—have love for me? Is there no room in your heart for me, Jas?”

“To keep it a bean? Girl...I’mma love you til my last breath. That don’t mean it’s good for me, though.”

“Then what is?” I demanded as he stood, collecting his laptop.

“My God’s promises. He said he’d keep His promise. Maybe all these years, I thought you were that. I been wrong a few times before. I can be wrong again. But His promises never fail. I gotta be smart about it. I gotta get what’s mine, sweetheart.”

Jas walked off.

Angrily, I spewed, “So, I can be with someone else? Give my body to another man? I have my needs, too, Jas. Yeah, I’m sure I’ve gone longer than a year since losing my virginity, but I’m now a woman with real desires to be met. Did you consider that in your grand scheme? Or is it just about you and Chi-Chi now? With your lofty expectations of life...a woman, she’ll be an only child much longer than you and I were.”

Then there was that crocodile eye flip. Deadpan, he advised, “Say less, Witherspoon.”

“No! I think I’ll say more!” Internally, I cringed at the Millburn in my tone. But I didn’t give a damn. I wouldn’t allow him to keep my life...my personal livelihood, on hold while he went after his “spiritual” pilgrimage. My throat burned as I demanded, “If this is about the baby, then say that shit, Jas.”

With his back to me, he warned, “Let’s not go the fuck there.”



March | Three Years Later

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "jas". The letters are stylized and cursive, with a small blue mark above the 'j'.

“Uncle Sin, look at me!” Little Trevor shouted, hyped as hell as he rode one of the six ponies in my backyard with the assistance of one of the ranchers.

“You doin’ it, kid!” I tossed my chin, sporting a big ass smile.

I couldn’t believe Man had two more kids in the past three years. I ain’t judge, but reminded him of the time he told me when his then-youngest turned sixteen, he was done. What

was wild was how the last two were by two different chicks. Either way, I loved them and was happy they were all here celebrating Chivon's big day.

It was cold as hell in March, which sucked for outdoor birthday parties. But two years ago, when planning Chivon's first party, Ashira put me up on heated tents. She wanted to do the party at her pops' place. When I questioned it, she mentioned her family having these tents. Her plan was for a miniature fair with a few rides and concession stands. I didn't have the space Witherspoon did on his estate, so I let her throw the party she wanted that year. But that's when I went out and copped three of the tents for when I wanted to host her party here.

Ashira's father and I had learned to co-exist in a world belonging to Chivon, but not for one minute would I allow him to provide for my daughter outside of a typical grandfather/grandchild paradigm. As a man, I knew the fastest way for you to lose respect from a boss nigga like Noel Witherspoon was to have him take care of you in a similar fashion to how he did his children. Fuck that. I was my own man. Affairs concerning my seed would be funded and supported by her mother and me, and I was the primary on that, although Ashira didn't have to lift a finger or count out a single dollar. I was capable of taking care of it all for this little girl.

So, I planned the party this year and thought to give her a retro-vibe with the Before Christ era better known as B.C. I was no religious nut, but definitely respected and enjoyed biblical stories, no matter how loosely based they were to the truth. The accounts of Christ created poetry I dug and wanted to share with my daughter.

I took in a deep breath, pushing my hands into the pockets of my bubble vest. Observing the fifty or so guests all around engaging in the ponies, food, games like ping pong ball and fish bowl and balloon and darts, rock wall climbing, or kicking it with the cast from the nativity play we'd just finished watching swelled my damn heart. It was dope as hell, captivating the kids as well as the adults. Chivon sat through

the whole production with her eyes glued to the small stage. That was my thank you from her. It was my satisfaction and reward for the bread I shelled out for this event.

Ashira handled the food, including the three-layered *Melanated Girl* cake. My little lady loved the company making dolls who resembled her in style and features. Chivon had been to the *Melanated Girl Doll House* a few times in New York City, too. She had at least four dolls between my place and her mother's. I took care of the animals, nativity production, and decorations. When I say *I*, I mean Ava, Consuela, Peach, and Amy. I provided guidance, accepted ideas, and wrote checks. And it had all been worth my baby's shy smile as everyone sang happy birthday to her.

“Okay. Time to make a wish, Chi-Chi,” Ines urged, swiping her reddening nose with a tissue.

The woman didn't smile much, but having gotten to know her over the years, I understood her love was in her actions. Ines adored Chivon...sometimes, even to the point of spoiling her. I never stepped on her toes, though, because other than Ashira, I didn't see Ines interact with anyone else with the evidence of dedication and protection as she did my daughter. Like today, Ines was the person who kept up with Chivon, who had been everywhere, greeting everyone. I didn't have to worry if she disappeared from my sight for too long because Ines had been on her heels.

“Ummmmm...” The smile was glued onto Chivon's face as she pushed that little index finger into her mouth.

“Ooh!” Lisa-Mare, Ezra and Lex-Dawg's oldest daughter shouted. “I know!” Her eyes quickly brushed over Ashira, then me, and she quickly reached down into Chivon's little ear and whispered.

Chivon dropped her finger from her mouth. “I vish,” she pronounced the word wish. “my Daddy and Mommy—”

“No!” Lisa-Mare yelled again, eyes skirting. “You can't say your wish aloud!” Those eyes again brushed over Ashira, then me.

We were several feet away, which made the shit strange. There were at least forty people around the table, but her eyes easily found us. Weird. But she was Bishop Carmichael's oldest daughter. I'd heard stories about her being a little eccentric and even prophetic. Too much for a kid to go through for me, but like her pops once told me when speaking about it, "*Our children are born through us, but not to us. They're vessels from their mothers' wombs just as we the parents are.*"

"Close your eyes, Chi-Chi," Ines instructed her.

Chivon did it as Lisa-Mare whispered in her ear again.

"*Ughn-ughn*, Miss Carmichael. Mind ya business until you get your slice!" Lex barked at her daughter. "Always trying to be the boss!" she murmured, eyes to Jade, Trent Bailey's wife.

I'd been seeing the Baileys at *RSfALC* since bringing Chivon. The kids would play together when I allowed Chivon to go to children's church or sometimes on the balcony in the back of the pews when I didn't. They'd even see each other when I visited the Carmichaels or Chivon was invited over. By being cool with the Carmichael girls, Chivon was introduced to these celebrity kids like Trent Bailey, [Stenton Rogers](#), and a few others in the industry connected to Ezra and Lex. Chivon had even gotten an invitation to the granddaughter of *Connecticut Kings* head coach, Launz Pierce's, granddaughter's birthday party. What a life my princess had. My daughter. A product of former inmate number 92810-752. The shit was wild.

"*Yaaaaaaay!*" the group cheered as Chivon made several attempts to blow out all three candles.

The photographer snapped away, and the videographer captured it live and in action. Consuela went straight to cutting the cake, and Ashira guided Chivon to the table where she'd have her cake. Amy suggested we do round tables for the kids, so no one felt far from the birthday girl. I personally didn't think it mattered, but what did I know? The type of birthday parties we had in Harlem as kids were nothing like this fancy shit my daughter and her guests were accustomed to.

The women went straight to assisting Consuela with serving cake. Both my phones had been blowing up all damn day, so I decided this would be a good time to see what's been in the mix.

“Everything to your satisfaction?”

I didn't have to look up right away to know it was Ava. I'd become that conversant with her voice.

“Uhhhh... Yeah.” I finally glanced up, acknowledging her. “Shortie's loving her party. But why the fuck is Moore requesting another meeting about the quote?”

“Franklin Moore?” She blinked, then cleared her throat and covered her mouth. “Because he's an asshole.”

“Pain in my fuckin' ass,” I grumbled.

“That mouth, Deacon.” Lex walked up from behind me.

I scoffed, firing off an email. “Lucky for me, His grace and mercies are renewed every day.”

“You and me both, bruh.”

This was our thing. Lex loved to fuck with me. She knew if she didn't get to me first, she'd be the victim when I was done with her ass.

“Nah. You worse.”

Lex sucked her teeth. “How you figure?”

“Ain't you over like seventeen thousand people?” I slid one phone into my pocket and went to the other. “I was on the church's site the other day. It said something about you presiding over like seventeen thou'. I was like, ‘Damn, Lex the Ruler!’ You got all them people—including me—under you, and your fuckin' mouth got bodies in it.”

“I'm sorry, sweetheart,” My eyes swung up from my phone at her tone. Lex was serious. “you mind giving us a second?”

“Sure!” Ava was quick to agree and tighten the straps to her coat as she left out of the tent.

“Damn. The fuck don’ got you?” I teased, voice hard.

She turned to me, giving everyone else inside the large tent her back. “Don’t do that to me.”

“Do what?”

“Don’t spew those lofty numbers like I’m with that shit. That’s one of the things I can’t stand about church people.”

Shit. Lex was serious as hell.

My forehead lifted as I tried fighting a laugh. “The fuck, yo?”

“Nah. Don’t!” She shook her head. “I don’t even go to the website. For business, I refer people to the *Christ Cares* site.”

“What’s wrong with the church’s site?”

“All the boastin’ and braggin’. It’s like PR stuntin’, and *that’s* what I can’t stand about church folk.”

“Easy, my nigga. You’s a first lady.”

“I know, and I play my role. One of the perks is the people with a real thirst for Christ and not the religious bullshit with all the rules and pompous rituals.”

Slowly, I turned to look behind me, outside of the tent. “Just wanna be sure Bishop’s still inside kickin’ Chivon’s grandfather’s ass in chess. I ‘on’t want that nigga flippin’ out on ya ass at my baby’s party. Ezra may be that nigga with the hands, but you know mine don’t play by the rules.” I was just fucking with her, even if Lex didn’t know it.

“You think Ezra would get physical with *me*?” She laughed. “I wish that nigga would—well, unless I make him.” When her tongue flipped out, and she waggled her head, I was sick.

“Let’s change the damn subject, man. I ‘on’t even like joking about my man. He too solid.” And he was. Ezra would be one of the few friendships I’d take to my death. “Then you wanna talk that nasty shit.”

“C’mon, my nigga. You know what it is,” her voice hiked in a melody. “That’s that *Harlem Pride*.” Lex found herself

funny while I read through an email regarding the maintenance needed for the jet. “Speaking of which, I see you didn’t invite Josie,” she whispered, eyes scanning the area.

That was silly. “Why would I?”

She shrugged. “That ain’t a critique; just an observation. My child mentioned it to her, though.”

“Who?”

“Who else? The big-mouth one who acts just like her daddy. Only difference is, she’s friendlier.”

“Lisa-Mare?” Lex nodded. “How?”

“After children’s choir rehearsal. We ran into her. I don’t even know how Lisa-Mare is aware of you and Josie knowing each other. I don’t talk in front of my kids. Neither does E. It’s an agreement we made long ago to prevent things from leaking about parishioners. And your boy, Bishop, ain’t with the hook-up. So, how would that child think to tell Josie she was coming to Uncle Jas’ daughter’s birthday party this weekend? She ain’t say Chi-Chi. The girl said her Uncle Jas’ daughter, Sin.”

I chuckled at that. Lisa-Mare was a different child. But sweet.

“Let her live. She a’ight with me.”

“So is her dad, but I don’t judge you.” I cracked the hell up. Lex was wild as hell. “Hey, Shi-Shi,” Lex’s tone had changed.

When I opened my eyes, I found Ashira approaching us. The first thing my attention went to was her long thighs covered in thick, cream tights. The knit jumpsuit gave away her edgy beauty. So many chicks I grew up with let their shit go after having their first baby. Even the ones who had kids young, some of them lost their waistlines the moment they got knocked up and couldn’t shed the weight once the baby was born. But Ashira didn’t appear to have had a baby at all. Her baby fat melted off fast as hell. And even now, at her daughter’s birthday party, in a fitted jumpsuit, a short cape,

and high-heeled boots, the woman looked more like the sexy, single auntie than mom. I respected that.

“Hi, there,” Ashira returned with a closed mouth smile. “I’m so happy you guys were able to make it. I know Sundays are tricky for you.”

“Are you kidding me?” Lex assured, “We wouldn’t miss it for the world. Another outstanding party, ma’am!”

“I wish I could take all the credit.” Ashira glanced around. “This was Jas’ vision.”

Lex’s eyes flashed wide as she gazed my way. “Say word!”

“Yup. My contributions supported his vision.” Ashira cleared her throat. “Great job, Sin.”

Lex found that shit funny, and I was sure that was Ashira’s goal. She’d use that reference for me strategically. I was unimpressed.

“You know,” I quickly sent a call to voicemail, holding the one phone in my hand. “over the past few years since Chivon been born, I’ve kicked it with a number of millionaires...a couple of billionaires, and I realized when all of them talked about their kids—the ones with them—they talk about the sacrifice of time. How they were able to pay for wonders like this—some, I’m sure, more lavish, but sometimes they didn’t attend it.” I shook my head.

“I knew from the gate with Chivon, I ain’t never wanna be that type of pops, man. I don’t wanna just be the wonder-provider, I wanna be front and center when she cries, falls... when she’s cranky. I wanna be right by her side while my baby grows. So, while I’m here, it’s like a full-circle moment for me. It’s like...renewing my pledge to never be too busy to be her pops, you know?”

“Wow...” Ashira whispered, nodding her head as she looked over to Chivon laughing at the table. “That’s so profound.”

“It is!” Lex agreed. “We didn’t see that coming up in Harlem, Sin. We ain’t see these extravagant parties either. I keep telling my girls how different it was growing up for me. I

keep reminding them to be grateful for God's favor and provision."

Ashira nodded, humming her agreement. "Was the one helping Chi-Chi with the wish your oldest or the middle girl?"

"Lisa-Mare is my first. Can't you tell by her bossiness and need to be with the celebrant? Sometimes I think she forgets she's not an only child. The personality on that one is endless." Lex rolled her eyes.

"She's gorgeous! I always get those two confused because they both look like a mini you with the big, natural, wavy hair and your rich mocha complexion. Your baby girl is all daddy, though."

I snickered, silently agreeing.

"You think?" Lex asked her. "They change faces every few months, it seems. My Mia Grace reminds me so much of the late First Lady Carmichael. Spitting image." She demonstrated with her hands.

"Funny shit because lil' Christ Harmony be giving me Big Tiny vibes," I cut into the conversation.

"Really?" Lex gasped with wild eyes. "You know, I felt my mother's presence a lot when I was pregnant with her? Like...even when I was delivering her, Ezra was on one side, and I really felt my mother's heat and smelled a little of her scent on the other side. It was weird, man."

Wow... I nodded, absorbing that shit.

Ashira tightened her cape around her breasts. "I take it Tiny was your mother, and she's passed?"

"Yup. My girl's gone on to glory, but her memory is still strong. I just think it's wild how my girls have no grandmothers," Lex shared. "And their granddaddies ain't shit." Ashira cracked the hell up, surprised by her tone. All I could do was shake my head. "It's crazy how we don't think of DNA and genetic behaviors when having babies with folks. We don't think past our partner." Lex laughed. "When there's a whole legion of demons behind that partner just'a lurkin'!"

We all fell out, laughing.

“Oh, my god!” Ashira shrieked. “That’s so true!”

Lex nodded, cupping a thermos with Chivon’s image and name filled with hot cocoa. “I’m telling you, if you found a good balance after having her,” She pointed toward the table where Ines was wiping frosting from Chivon’s face. “you should consider finishing up and having what your heart desires before you find yourself too old to have more.”

My face turned hard. “What you saying?”

Lex pivoted my way. “I’m saying, your old ass is getting even older. If you want more kids, now’s the time to do it.”

That shit had me so vexed I couldn’t think of how to reply. Now, I didn’t kick it with Lex like I did Ezra, but anybody who really knew me, should have known being a goddamn baby daddy wasn’t my vibe. I hated the reminder of it when it was pointed out during times like this.

“I’d be down,” Ashira’s grin was timid. Then her eyes swiped over to me before falling away. “I mean... If the timing was right with my contractual work, but...” She shrugged. “Yeah.”

I blinked, fucking offended. “So, I’m just a breeder—”

“Mommy!”

Lex and Ashira’s heads whipped back to the tables at that cry.

“That’s me,” Lex murmured before taking off.

“I just got finished mapping out the clean-up plan with Corinne, Consuela, and them. Chelsea has to get back to the clinic, so she started in the kitchen. Consuela told her what to do.” Ashira pointed over her shoulder. “I’m going to head up to Chi-Chi’s room to pack a few things she acts like she can’t live without. That cool?”

It was time for the party to end. People had already begun grabbing thank-you bags to go. It was all good with me because my mood had suddenly gone south.

That fucking Lex...

“Yeah.” I grumbled, going back to my phones. “You got it.”

Chapter Seven

Part III

March | Three Years Later



Chivon would not let me put her down.

“Baby girl,” I tried to reason with her, but her crying was so loud, Chivon may not have heard me or didn’t care about shit I had to say. “Chivon,” I tried again as she wailed, wiping her wet eyes.

“C’mon now, Chi-Chi.” Ines held out her arm to Chivon.

Chivon jerked away, clinging to my shoulder tighter.

“Oh, no!” My mother found her stubbornness funny.

“Blueberry,” I called out to her again, rubbing her little back. “Why are you trippin’ on Daddy like this?” I hated seeing my baby cry, not to mention the shit I had to get done now that the party was over.

The women still here, who didn’t bail when the guests left earlier, were gathered in the kitchen, wrapping up food, packing up goods to be donated to a shelter in Paterson, and cleaning. Ashira looked on, waiting patiently.

“I no wanna go!” Chivon cried. “No, Daddy!”

“Sweet pea, we talked about this,” I tried again.

“Don’t do that, Chi-Chi!” Even Juggy tried helping out as he leaned into the wall near the fridge.

“No!” Her body tensed and knee jerked. “No!”

I dropped my face into my available hand. When she did shit like this, it felt as though my chest was being ripped in half. It tortured me.

“Chi-Chi, let’s go,” Ashira’s voice was firm.

“No, Mommy!” Chivon screamed even louder as Ashira tried removing her from me.

It was so bad I backed away to end it all.

“Hang on,” I mumbled, needing a breather, a moment to calm her little ass down. Chivon needed comfort, so my hand automatically went to stroking her back. As I began to bounce her on my arm, taking on a rhythm, her cries continued with a closed mouth, lowering slightly. “*Shhhh... Shhhhh...*”

I turned just slightly and found Ashira still there. Her eyes were red, likely from being tired. She’d been on go since seven this morning, getting ready for the party. Other than that, I assumed she was concerned about Chivon’s sudden decision to stay at my place instead of going to her moms’ as we scheduled.

“Is it your new birthday toys, Chi?” Ashira asked, head at a slant, voice soft. “Uncle Man put them in his truck already to bring home.”

“No!” Chivon cried, lifting her head from my shoulder to address her mother. “I wanna sleep in my bed.” She pointed to her chest.

Ashira blinked, standing straight at that news. “Okay...” Her eyes swept the floor. “You don’t have to sleep in Mommy’s room tonight. You can sleep in your bed.”

“No!” Chivon yelled even louder, angrier. “I wanna sleep in *my* bed up there!” She pointed to the ceiling.

Chivon didn't want to leave *Lake Sha 'Ron*. That was what she'd been arguing.

I saw an emotion heat up Ashira's face when she processed my blueberry's baby dialect. She folded her arms across her chest. "Chivon Ojasvi, we will not have this fight tonight. You're coming home with Mommy. Daddy has to work *tomor* —"

"No!" Chivon started wailing again, legs and feet swinging as wildly as they could against me. "I no go, Mommy! No!"

"Chi-Chi!" Corinne and Jug called at the same time, seeing how upset she was.

That's it!

"She's good. She can stay with me tonight. I'll drop her off in the morning before hitting the airport."

"Are you sure?" The apparent attitude in Ashira's tone couldn't be missed, but I had to make the call. "She hasn't been home since I've been back. She's got to come tomorrow. She should just get used to her bed tonight to *prepare*—" Her head fell to the side again. "Chivon!"

I turned to leave the kitchen. Chivon's death grip on my neck and shoulders ate away at my conscience. "I'll be a'ight. See you tomorrow. Man'll drop her stuff off tonight, though."

We left them behind, and I took my baby upstairs, bathed her, and prayed with her at the side of her little bed. The moment her head hit the pillow, Chivon was out. I was grateful and could now get some shit done to prepare for this meeting tomorrow.



ashira

I scanned the fields of the charts on both screens, being sure the numbers on the adjacent monitors were an exact match or, at least, a few pennies off.

So far, so good...

With tight, dry eyes, I reclined in the leather office chair and exhaled deeply. This shit was intense. How could I continue getting by, by the skin of my teeth? My eyes traced the brick walls of my office at my dance club, *Kucheza*. It had been months since I'd been around. Since leaving Chi-Chi at her father's last night, I'd been brooding, effectively restless in thought and action. Instead of crashing once I hit the door, I stripped down to shorts and a sports bra, plugged my ear with blasting music, and scrubbed her bedroom at my apartment from ceiling to floor. When I felt no exhaustion, I did the same for my bedroom, master bath, and closet. And when that was complete, I found myself in the middle of moving the furniture in my living room around after disinfecting it when my first yawn hit. That was after three this morning.

My eyes fluttered open minutes before six this morning with the inimitable panic to finally stop putting off coming into *Kucheza* and crosschecking the quarterly report my accountant drew up, which crosschecked that of the club manager's.

And speaking of which...

From the corner of my eye, I caught movement from the security monitor. I watched him saunter with endless confidence through the slush from last night's pouring snow to the club's back door. My phone chirping had me reaching for it. It was Ines asking me to stop at the pharmacy on my way home when I'd pick up our overnight bags. As I was texting

her back, agreeing to her request, Sergio was leaning into my office door frame with just a shoulder, his book bag strapped to the same one. His brown knitted hat covered his even longer pitch-black, silken tresses. Today was an administrative day for him, where he'd perform loads of paperwork and oversee a deep cleaning of the place by a contracted partner.

“What the hell?” He griped playfully. “I was expecting you this week, but not this morning.” Understanding how off-kilter I'd been operating, I nodded, scoffing. “How long have you been here?”

I glanced at the clock above his head. “Since just before eight.”

His eyes flashed wild. “*Eight*—you've been here for over four hours, woman?”

I groaned, reclining once again in my chair. “I've been away for months. This has been past due, dude.”

Sergio stood straight, taking a couple of steps into the doorjamb. “Let me ask you a question. A serious one. Why are you doing this? Why do you own a club? You're never here, traveling around the globe, chasing your dreams—and accomplishing them all. And what you earn from here is modest. I estimate about eighty percent of it goes to the bookkeeper you hired to look over my shoulder. You can spend what's left over on your shoe shopping sprees at *Bergdorf Goodman*.”

I shrugged, slightly embarrassed because Sergio's words weren't untruthful. “Because this *is* my dream.” *Or at least was...*

“Are you sure about that?” His curious regard locked on to me. “Because I know of at least three investors, *now*, who'd take this place off your hands for a premium price tag.” His eyes gestured around the room. “Your choreography success has made this place a hot spot since the grand opening. That, and my superb expertise, has this place packed five nights a week.”

“Don’t forget my vision and intuition.” My smile was crassly applied.

The curving of Sergio’s thin lips was cute. “All I’m saying is I’m here—” My phone rang. “—if you decide to take a detour from this venture.”

Chi-Chi...

“I’ve gotta take this!” I hoped my urgent tone wasn’t perceived as rude. “Hey!” I answered Jas’ call, prepared to tell him Chi-Chi could be dropped off here instead of at my place.

“Hey... We’re at Teterboro—”

My face wrinkled in confusion. “We? What do you mean?”

“Chivon’s with me. She did that crying shit again...did it all morning, saying she wants to come with me. She was like... She worked herself up to, like...convulsing. She said she didn’t want to go.”

“I’m her mother!”

“Ah, man!” he snapped. “Not you, too! Don’t do that shit, Ashira. Who said you ain’t?”

“You’re diminishing my role by buying into her tantrums. I would’ve come to get her myself if you would’ve called. Jas, I have plans with her for the *next*—”

“I get that. I swear, I do. But all that fit-throwing shit she doing ain’t cool. I’ll just bring her to Miami with me. We’ll fly back in two days, and I’ll bring her straight to Edgewater—”

“Unless she cries some more?” I couldn’t be more offended.

Betrayed.

Ashira—

“Why are you letting a three-year-old trump the plans her parents have made? You have to work. I’m just coming off of work. It’s my time. That’s our agreement!”

“And you know I ain’t got no issues with the agreement.”

“Then why is my child at Teterboro airport when I’ve been waiting on her since last night?”

He exhaled into the phone harshly. “Look, man. Say less; I’ve had to deal with her lil’ demanding ass all morning; I can’t deal with you, too.”

“You don’t have to *deal* with me. You only had to be a father and put your soft ass foot down!”

“That’s what the fuck I’m doin’, Ashira. My daughter is saying and demonstrating not wanting to separate from me. As a parent, I ‘on’t know how to reject that *cry*—look... I gotta go. I’m outside the jet. Captain Willie and his crew’s waiting on me. I’ll have her call you tonight.”

My heart shattered explosively in my chest. When had this become a thing? When did Chi-Chi not want to be with me... in her home?

When I felt my chest bubble from an impending cry, I hung up the phone.

Slamming back into the chair, my eyes shot blindly to the wall, and I ran the tip of my long, coffin-shaped index fingernail over my bottom teeth. Jas and I hadn’t exactly been friends over the past three years, but the care of Chi-Chi was one topic we never fought over. He’d never not been a flexible partner as a parent. Whenever I needed to go, Jas would almost facilitate my travel. He had no issues making time for our daughter. He never complained about being there when she’d awaken from a sleep learning her mother left for work again. He didn’t mind dealing with her tears as a result. But now, it felt like he didn’t have my back.

“Knock-knock.” My head swung over to the door. *Shit!* I sighed, adjusting the chair to move closer to the desk. So caught up in my feelings, I missed her arrival on the security monitors. “Did you just roll your eyes at me, girl?” Chuckling, Peach walked in and sat in a chair against the wall. “I haven’t been back here in forever.” She scanned the office.

“That makes two of us,” I mumbled, closing out of the files and programs I’d been poring over all morning.

“Where’s Miss Missy?” Peach glanced around for evidence of Chi-Chi’s presence.

Rolling my eyes, I explained. “On her way to Miami.”

“But I thought we were hanging out today.”

So did I. We had this planned for days now. When I decided to come into *Kucheza*, I called Peach this morning, asking her to meet Chi-Chi and me here instead of at my place. We were going to grab a bite before hitting up *Short Hills Mall* for a little shopping.

“Yeah. I booked a suite and services at *Crystal K. Spa* down in Central Jersey.” Bruised. My heart was bruised, and my mind was running overtime with feelings of betrayal. I refused to cry. It would be overreacting.

Right?

Chivon was just three years old. She was still, by many standards and definitions, a baby. She was selfish and underdeveloped. I couldn’t take this personally.

Right?

“You’re hurting.”

I wouldn’t look at Peach. Nope. I’d swallow this in silence, be the big girl Chi-Chi couldn’t. Gazing blindly into the brick wall, I shook my head.

“You are.”

“I’m not. She’s a baby. He’s a weird ass, megalomaniac of a felon.” I felt myself pouting as my thigh bounced, vibrating my whole body.

Peach dropped her face into her hands and groaned, “You don’t mean that, Shi-Shi!”

Not the felon part, but it felt good to say at the moment.

“I do! He is! He’s so damn frustrating.”

“No. What I mean is you don’t mean to label him according to his past. Jas is a long way from inmate number 12345. You know that.”

“You defending him?”

She shook her head. “I’m balancing your good senses with your hurt.” Peach stood, taking a deep breath, then reached inside her purse for her phone. “How are you going to salvage your plans now that Chi-Chi will be with her father?”

“I don’t know.” I rolled my eyes.

“Well, we had a brunch date.” She tapped into her phone. “What were your plans right after? *To hit Crystal K’s?*”

“No. We have hair appointments at ShawnNicole’s salon.”

“You were taking my goddaughter to ShawnNicole’s?”

Biting my lip, I nodded. “She has great braiders there. My appointment is with ShawnNicole. I thought I’d treat myself and let my baby girl flex, too. Do I judge you when you spoil her?”

Peach shook her head, eyes rolling. “Anyway. Today’s a pretty open day for me, other than a committee meeting. I just sent my apologies for skipping. I still feel awful about missing *IDC* and Chi-Chi’s party yesterday. She’s not here, but I want to, at least, celebrate you. I know I’m not a gorgeous, three foot three-year-old, but I don’t do bad for myself.” She winked. “I’ve been known to be good company.”

That’s why she wanted to take Chi-Chi and me out to brunch today. The Carmichaels were able to attend Chi-Chi’s party yesterday because it began after church hours. Peach wasn’t unable to make it because of after-church obligations. It was their church’s anniversary week, and all hands were on deck. My best friend was clearly still regretful for missing the event.

“Bitch, you’re known to be the *best* company.” Peach laughed when I tossed a pencil at her. “That’s why you’re *my* best friend. I just hope I can be the same. And you’ve already sent me the *Cartier* cashmere stole.” It was waiting on my dining room table along with bouquet arrangements from my father, friends, Austin, and Haris.

“That was a congratulatory gift. Today will be the making up for missing one of your biggest accomplishments live.” She

went back to her phone. “We’ll have to skip brunch. We can grab something on our way to the salon, if you’re that hungry. I need to stop at home to pack an overnight bag for the spa stay. I hope these places don’t have a problem transferring services from a three-year-old to an adult.”

With my purse clutched beneath my arm, I grabbed Peach with my free hand to leave the office. “Oh, they’ll make the adjustment. I’ll make sure of it.”



“This shit is so nice,” I groaned, gazing out of the floor-to-ceiling window of one of the meditation rooms at *Crystal K’s Spa*. Outside, nestled in the dark air, was an alluring light show. Countless bulbs flashed on a timer, creating calming and fascinating designs and patterns as we sat in full view of it in robes and booties. “Really nice.”

Our bodies being fully massaged, hair finger-twisted and clipped close to the scalp while covered by mesh wraps protectively, fingers and toes manicured and colored, bellies full, and a mild buzz were all just what the doctor ordered.

“For sure nice.” Peach raised her champagne flute toward me in the air.

I met it on a clink, and simultaneously, we fell into giggling fits.

When I was able to stop, I shared, “I truly do love you.”

“What made you say that? I sense a strange motive.”

“You. You’re the motive. I love when you let your hair down with me.”

“Don’t I always?”

Peach didn’t drink much. She said she’d do it when the occasion called for her to acclimate to the moment. So, while I’d taken an edible upon check-in to enhance my relaxation, Peach requested a flute of champagne when the meditation

room server took our order. I loved this full-service luxury spa and my company for being in the moment with me, too.

I nodded, tongue swiping over my glossed lips. “You do. You always have.”

“I mean, I know I’m no replacement for my favorite tot, but I’m glad to get in some one-on-one time with you. I needed this.”

“Tell me about it,” I sighed. “Chi-Chi would’ve conked out on me by now, but she would’ve been fun all the way down. Just no gummies when she’s around.”

Peach laughed. “I’d hope not.”

“Do you get sick of people asking for advice from you?”

She hummed, considering it. “Not so much as it’s exhausting for me to have told folk thus saith the Lord to be ignored, only to have them come back crying, asking for more guidance. It lacks grace. If I can be real with anyone on this planet, you’re that one.”

“I can dig it.” My head rolled to the side of the lush recliner. “That’s why I keep my circle small, too.”

“Can you believe it’s me that giveth the relationship advice?” Peach scoffed. “It’s my least favorite duty and expectation. I enjoy spiritual and career topics.” Her head shifted to face me. “You ever feel some kind of way about us still being single?”

I thought about it for a moment, taking a sip of my bubbly. “Nope. Not at all. The years old society would say we missed out in holy matrimony. I like to think we instead used the time to further develop ourselves. You’ve gotten advanced degrees, you own property, and have traveled up the ranks in your organization. I’ve been on the move, too. Even got a baby out of wedlock”—Peach spit in laughter, torso curling over her lap. —“as a notch on my belt.” I took a moment to cackle with her. “I’m serious. You know I’m not ashamed of my motherhood journey. It’s a part of my fabric. It simply wasn’t planned, and that’s my only regret.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s made a mess of my relationship with Jas— wait. Let me correct that. Jas fucked up what we had from the beginning with his games about his full name, then high-jacking my father’s company. I got played like a *fuckin’*—”

“Don’t go there,” Peach implored.

I rolled my eyes back to the light show. “I know.”

“Yeah. You do. Not only was *I* never running with that conjecture, but you said it yourself how you intellectually walked through the possibility of Jas simply just being ambitiously corporate-minded and saw an opportunity he couldn’t refuse. You told me yourself you would have done the same thing, given you were in his shoes. Mr. Witherspoon was already selling his firm.”

“I know!” I acknowledged, my volume higher. “It’s just having these events occur successively makes me question... me. And then...” My head whipped toward her. “He imposes this ‘you can’t fuck anybody else’ rule only to stop fucking me. *See!* Megalomaniac. How does he think he’s going to control *my* body? And now this stunt with allowing Chivon to cry her way out of our arrangements? Not my best decision to go raw with a Harlem nigga.”

“And let’s not forget about the cosmopolitan ingénue from Millburn.”

I gasped. “Isn’t that an oxymoron? How can I be worldly and naïve at the same time?” Still, I sat back and found myself nodding. “I get what you mean.”

“Yeah. The one who judged him from the very beginning. You questioned how a thug could afford your therapist. You assumed his lifestyle as a trade laborer.” Peach sucked in a breath then her resonance lifted significantly. “*Although*, you didn’t flinch at his felon status. *But—*” It resumed levels. “— you only thought he’d be an adventurous lay when you first slept with him. Let’s see. What’s next? Ah! You almost broke things off when you learned the backstory of his conviction.” *He’s a murderer...* My stomach flipped. “*Then* the D was too good to sacrifice for a body or two or three—”

“Wait! Give me that damn champagne!” *Thank god we’ve got this room to ourselves.* I leaned over to Peach’s reclining sofa for her flute, but she smoothly evaded my reach. “Not even a half a glass in, and you can’t control that tongue?”

“And,” she continued, humor in her voice. “...we don’t need to revisit how you handled learning his government name.” As she counted out my alleged offenses on her fingers, Peach performed a palatal click, using her tongue and teeth. “Won’t go there. You *needed* to be checked by your therapist the way you were—”

“Fuck her,” I hissed.

My therapist’s unyielding admonitory words on my reaction to learning Jas’ full name at my baby shower three years ago still stung.

That bitch...

“And your perfectly planned and executed tentacles on him when you were pregnant. The man agreed to your every request. He even bought you a sixteen thousand-dollar diamond necklace for a push gift, to your surprise. Oh. By the way, does he still have your engagement *ring*—”

I gasped. “Now, Peach! We don’t know what type of ring that was!”

“If a man, crazy, even past insanity, shows you an *Andreatta’s Promises* box, referencing marriage, how can we deny it was an engagement ring?” When I didn’t have an answer, she continued. “Oh! Here’s a cold one!” She snapped her fingers. “He bought a plane to aid in your *travel*—”

“He travels, too! Extensively!” I was sick of people throwing the same assumption in my face—including Peach!

“Yeah.” She nodded, flashing her thumb into the air. “Okay. I’ll allow you to remain peaceful, you ingénue, you—*oh!* And when you finally go out and get your nightclub, you hire Sergio to manage it!” Peach fell into tears, cracking the hell up.

My investigative gaze shifted to the flute wedged between two fingers and a thumb. “What the hell does that mean?”

“C’mon, Shi-Shi. Are you serious?” Her wide eyes questioned me. “That was your way of snubbing Jas!”

I sucked in a breath. “Snubbing?” Blinking at her audacity, I shared, “I’m too old for snubs.”

“Nah, you ain’t. Especially when it’s done in romantic passion.”

I snorted a hard laugh. “Passion. There’s no passion between Jas and me. It was short-lived for a good two months, maybe.”

“You don’t have to have the spirit of discernment as strong as I do to feel that.” Her voice turned soft, eyes strained, peering out of the window. “You and Jas have this... like...untethered frenetic passion storming beneath a tough layer of stubbornness...ego.”

I gulped my champagne. “I told him I’d be willing to have another baby.”

Her head whipped so fast and hard my way, I felt a gentle breeze from the force. “You did not,” she breathed.

I nodded, not wanting to talk about it but feeling enough emotion from it to want to confess it to a confidant. “I’m so fucked up now, Peach.” My attention slowly rolled over to her.

“Do you want another baby?” Concern edged her tone.

“I want more for Chi-Chi.”

“And that’s giving her a sibling? Now?”

“It’ll be giving her more than me. I’m not—” I turned away. “I feel like I’m not enough for her. I haven’t given her enough.”

“Wait. What does that mean?”

“I love her...with all my heart, I adore my little girl. I just don’t want her to be like me, an only child. It got really hard for me when my mother left. I had only half a family then. Noelle’s great, but she came so late, and her birth caused a rift in my family. I don’t want any of that for Chivon. I want her to have an ally beyond her father and me. I want her to have the

world and never feel like she's the deciding factor of three. The third vote that becomes the deal breaker."

"You're projecting."

"I'm preparing. Her. She's what matters most here."

"And what about her father?"

"What about him?"

"What about his needs? Where is he in this equation? Where are you? What about what serves your soul...who supports you? Who's your companion? I understand being concerned about your daughter's future, but aren't you neglecting the genesis here? You and Jas? You two have unfinished business, far more self-serving than giving Chi-Chi a sibling."

I shook my head, tossing back the remainder of my bubbly as I gaped at the pretty lights. Then a thought occurred, and I turned back to her.

"Peach, how's Kema?"

"Kema who?"

"Your parishioner. The one you brought with you when I invited you to *Karsyn Cove*."

She thought for a minute before suddenly and very dramatically rolling her eyes. "Don't even speak her name too loudly. I've been ghosting her for a few months now."

"You? That's not your style. Why?"

"Because people don't understand how human my experience is. I'm not just a spiritual leader. It's like what I was speaking about earlier. When you speak prophetically to people, they have a better chance at heeding spiritual and professional matters—heck, anything but relationships. I told that woman not to marry Jeff. He wasn't ready. They lasted nine months before he moved out and eleven before she filed for divorce. Jeff got engaged to a stripper before it was final."

"Oh, damn."

“I like the stripper, too. A lot,” she emphasized. “They seem more compatible than Jeff and Kema. Kema still needs to focus on Kema rather than every hot topic around her. It’s like she’s on sensory overload with the happenings of other people’s lives. She isn’t centered.”

“Am I centered?”

Without peering my way, Peach shook her head, answering no.

“Sometimes, *I*—” I struggled for my thoughts. “I don’t feel empty. I feel...hollow?” I chuckled at my ridiculousness. “I know that doesn’t make sense, but...”

Peach reached over and palmed my arm gently. “Your truth is real whether it’s chaos, bliss, certainty, doubt, or evolution. Don’t feel insecure about that. We all are on a path ending in death. James chapter four, verse fourteen says, ‘*Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.*’ Tomorrow belongs to tomorrow, but today, we live with what’s in our hearts and minds. We have control over our actions and intentions today.”

She pointed toward the giant window. “That’s why I’m here with you tonight. I wanted to be intentional about my commitment to our friendship. I’m pouring in today.”

I turned, lying my back flat on the recliner, and nodded. “You think it’s weird we’re still single, doing sleepovers like this?”

“Shi, I’ve not turned down the man God has whispered a word of confirmation of. In other words, I’m where I’m supposed to be. And as Paul says in Philippians four, ‘*Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.*’” She winked at me, lifting the flute to her mouth. “Baby, I am single and content.”

And I had to get centered before reaching the contentment stage.

Shit...

I grabbed the kiosk from the table. “And *I* need *Mauve*.”

Chapter Eight

Part III

March | Three Years Later

ashira

“I like that nail design,” Noelle murmured from the opposite end of the sofa in my living room. “Is that glitter?”

I glanced down at the nail design on my index finger specifically. “It’s gold foil.”

“You got that at your regular spot you used to take me to?”

Shaking my head, I folded my bare legs underneath my butt, curling my frame even more. “I went to the spa. Peach told me to go for it.”

“You went to the spa without me? Wow,” her delivery monotone. I didn’t know if Noelle was offended or not. “I could’ve hung out with Peach. She likes me.”

My face folded. “Peach loves you.” All my friends did. “It was a last-minute plan. Peach wasn’t even reserved for it. It was a mommy and me date until Chi-Chi went to Miami with her father.”

“Which spa?” Her top lip curled in disgust.

I invited Noelle over on a school night to spend time with her now that I was home and done with *IDC*. I still hadn't decided on touring with Pixie. It kicked off in the fall, and the clock had been ticking. I'd been praying and weighing my options. It had never been this hard to answer to work for me, but these encroaching feelings fogged my brain. Either way, I was home now and with the desire to plant my feet. My attempt at doing that was spending time with my sister. I asked her over for the night. *Damn!* Had this been awkward? Noelle, once a loving, vulnerably sweet kid, was now filled with attitude and...anger.

“*Crystal K.*”

“Of course, I don't get an invite.” She rolled her eyes into the air.

The doorbell rang. When I stood, I tried explaining, “I'm still adjusting to being off the road, Noelle. It was supposed to be something special for Chi-Chi. You can understand that. Right?”

Noelle's response was rolling her eyes toward the other end of the room as she picked up her phone and began tapping on it.

My eye roll was to the floor, so annoyed and confused about how to deal with her. Noelle had been giving off teenage vibes since she was eight years old. However, I could now see how much hormones played a part in attitude. That and the fact of her still being in mourning. She hadn't shared any grief with me, but I knew it was there. If only I had an idea of how to resume the fun, loving relationship we used to have.

I didn't even check the peephole before opening the door. It was Chi-Chi and Jas. My building did not allow for unexpected guests who were not given special permission to access it freely. Jas was one of those granted entry whenever he showed.

Time froze for mere seconds, and I could see a familiar beam in his eyes as he processed my being. There was a

distinct dilation in those pupils. His countenance, towering, thick, and commanding were all attributes forcing him to your awareness. A flash memory of his head between my quivering thighs as he ate me with those penetrative irises seizing more than my mind and body besieged me. A charging energy he emanated electrified me, surging through my veins.

“Hey!” I tried for a smile, observing Chi-Chi asleep on his shoulder.

The crocodile eye slide materialized, effectively obliterating the beam once there. “Yo,” was all he returned while sauntering inside with her suitcase and duffle in his other hand.

Jas headed straight to Chi-Chi’s room, leaving an enticing aroma in his wake I didn’t know could still cause my pulse to leap. Strangely nervous all of a sudden, I followed them to the back of the apartment, observing his stride in a dark gray wool overcoat. It was one of my favorites of his.

He parked the suitcase the minute he entered Chi-Chi’s bedroom. I clicked the light switch as he lay her on the bed and removed her coat. We crossed over each other when Jas went for her duffle bag and began pulling things out. I finished removing her coat, unable to help stealing kisses from Chi-Chi’s soft skin. She, too, smelled amazing. Her natural scent and a smear of her Dad’s cologne on her face.

“I had Jug pick up a few of her favorite fruits, snacks, and juices.” He pulled a shopping bag from the duffle. “She’s been killing kiwis lately, so I figured she’d like to see them here.”

My eyes lit with curiosity. “So, Juggy drove you home? Does that mean he’s feeling better?”

Jas shrugged noncommittally. “Jug ain’t Jug. Ain’t been Jug for a minute. I told him to chill. I was good for the night, but he wanted to come out. He picked us up from Teterboro, and now he’s about to run me somewhere. He brought his crossword puzzle books, so...” He shrugged again.

Carrying Chivon’s coat to her closet, I realized his companionable tone.

“I think that’s a good sign.”

“It is what it is. You mind if I chop it up with you real quick?” He thumbed over his shoulder, gesturing away from Chi-Chi.

Quietly, I obeyed, ambling out and heading to the kitchen. Once inside, I plucked a grape from the half-empty charcuterie board I’d been working on almost all day.

“Oh. Damn.” Surprisingly, Jas did the same, grabbing diced pineapples and plopping them into his mouth. “Look...” He chewed and swallowed it all in under six seconds. It was so raffishly masculine. So uncomfortably adorable. “I want to apologize for the other day. My tone was out of pocket and not the way I should feel okay with speaking to you. I was stressed as hell, trying to make the best of the circumstances of traveling with her and Amy at the last minute.”

He swung his arms, trying to explain. “I was frustrated at the time, but speaking to you in that way ain’t something I wanna get used to. To be real, having Chivon cry like that ain’t something I can ignore. I get teaching her tantrums ain’t the way to get what she wants, but as a parent, ‘bout to leave out of town, I couldn’t do that with her in that condition. I’m not built for that. Chivon’s my number one priority in life, making you my number two. If she’s good, I know you’re good. My spirit’s been fucked up about the way that conversation went and...” Using his hand, he gestured between the two of us. “I know we beef on the low because we’ve got our shit, but I can’t have it over Chivon. We’re already unconventional: I ain’t tryna have us dysfunctional, too.”

So badly, I wanted to burst his “holy-rolling” cherry and explain having unwed parents is no longer unconventional in the twenty-first century. Rather yet, I kept my humor to myself and welcomed his humility.

“I appreciate that.” I really did. “I guess I need to be more patient with her.”

“She’s constantly going through changes with our schedules, so I get it. But I kicked it with her little ass twice while we were down in Miami and explained how she wasn’t

behaving like a big girl. I told her there will be times she can't come to work with us, and she can't cry about it."

I nodded. "Thank you."

"I don't know if it'll change anytime soon; she's only three years old. I figured if I keep reminding her and stick to our plans, it'll get easier for her and me."

Again, I nodded, taking all of Jas in. His favorable height, his arresting presence, and the entrancing storm veiled behind his eyes. Beyond that, it was the energy of effort, forward-thinking, morality, and peace he carried, all wrapped in wisdom. It all warmed me suddenly, especially at a time when I wasn't "centered."

I hated the vulnerability weakening my heart. It fucked with my mind and had me too distracted by the lining of his full lips contrasted by the dark, full spikes of his mustache and beard. Once again, a flashback of his pillowy mouth drawing pleasure from my tingling nipples took over my thoughts. The sinuousness of his inspired tongue when grazing over every inch of my body.

Jas enjoyed watching me, measuring my pleasure. There was a bit of insecurity in his need to watch. I loved having that power over him. Maybe because it felt like retribution for the shit he was able to pull over my head: his wealth, full identity, murderer-level insanity, and plans to expropriate my family's legacy. Or perhaps, it was a genuine expression of my adoration for the refined, rehabilitated, and spiritually reformed guns dealer from Harlem. Either way, this brief and unexpected act of humility caused a moment of ceasefire for me.

"Matthew five and nine."

His thick brows narrowed. "Pardon me?"

With a shaking tenor, I quoted, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

Slowly, the muscles of his face relaxed, his irises darkened, and his voice husked when asking, "You reading your Word, Ashira?"

Bizarrely embarrassed, I rolled my eyes, hating the stupid grin on my cheeks. “I got the email from Ava. I haven’t responded yet, but I’ve been thinking about the destination.”

Jas’ forehead stretched in shock. “So, we’re doing the vacation this year?”

One of the few things Jas and I could agree on when pregnant with Chi-Chi was being a family unit *for her*. We’d both been raised as single children and vastly different. Giving our child the world—something more we didn’t have—had been a mutual goal. That something was a solid parental unit. Through therapy, we agreed this would provide an advantage in life Jas and I didn’t have.

For two years, we’d vacationed and struggled to get along outside of passionate, feverish fucking, marking every land charted. This would be the first family vacation where sex wouldn’t be a medicating factor in getting along. So, when Ava sent the email on Jas’ behalf, asking if I was interested in doing it and, if so, to provide destinations of interest, I took my time to think about it. Also, the sender of the correspondence irked the fuck out of me. Why was I discussing such personal matters with the girl who never transitioned from being basically Jas’ pestilent personal assistant? *And about that*: she was a building firm’s employee. Why had she always handled the matters of his personal life? The bitch infuriated me.

“It was our agreement, was it not?” I scoffed.

Jas nodded with touted lips, eyes swiping the ceiling. “You have any ideas for it?”

Nodding with twisted lips, I murmured, “I was thinking Paris.”

When I got the heart to look at him again, Jas’ eyes appeared dilated, and jaw collapsed. My chest thundered almost painfully, and mouth dried at the sight of the lens flip in his eyes. I caught a flash of the storm.

“I thought I heard you in here!” Noelle sauntered into the kitchen, expression transitioning from confused to elated.

“Young N.O. Elle,” Jas greeted at first with a glower, though not a trace of it in his voice. “What it do?”

She fell into his chest in a tight hug. I watched as my sister’s eyes closed in complete trust and admiration for my daughter’s father.

“Why didn’t you come and speak?” She took her time breaking their embrace.

Jas’ eyes shot up to me. “Oh, I ain’t know you were here.”

Shit...

Not that it was done intentionally, but the last thing I needed was for Noelle to think I’d slighted her again.

“I—” *Uhhhh...* My eyes bounced between the two of them, still joined by one arm. “I told you Chi-Chi was coming home tonight.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t say Jas was the one dropping her off. I thought Amy was bringing her. Or Ava.”

Insulted, I quickly supplied, “Ava’s an employee. She’ll never drop my daughter anywhere.”

When Jas’ attention swept over to me, I noticed the momentary strain in his eyelids. Commanding every muscle in my body, I remained stoic. I didn’t know what arrangements he and Ava had, but I’d had my boundaries set as far as she was concerned.

“Nah,” he answered Noelle. “We just got back into town. It was time to get the little lady back to her moms. How you been, shortie?”

A sunburst of joy lit Noelle’s face even more. “I’m good. We found out coach Smith isn’t gay. Wanna know how?”

“How?”

“Because she kept staring at you at the game. She even asked me if you had a girlfriend. I died!” Noelle curled over in laughter.

Jas went to Noelle’s basketball game? I, unfortunately, hadn’t been able to attend this season because of work.

But he did?

And had my sister just expressed being okay with other women seeing the father of my child as a love or lust interest—and in my face?

“Say less, shortie,” Jas snorted rather shyly, making me wonder if he was just as put off about it as me. “But everything good, though? Sophomore year still treating you right?”

Noelle nodded, plucking rolled salami from the charcuterie board. “I’m good. The spring dance is coming up. I need to start getting ready for that.” Her brows met. “You think Ava can help me out again? She was so legit for the Winter Wonderland Ball. Please say she can help me again!” She clutched his arm, and my eyes blew the hell up.

In that instant, I knew I should have spoken up. In the past, I would have been all over Noelle’s ass for not just having Jas’ assistant do something I could have for her, but also for me not even knowing she had a need. Why wouldn’t she tell me? I could have also asked her, but with her temperament lately, I didn’t know how she’d react and I truly didn’t want to break my sister’s spirit. Life had already done that; she was still grieving the loss of her mother. Instead, I applied a poker face and fought to control my emotions.

“I think I’ve got Ava wrapped up in enough shit. Matter of fact...” He looked my way. “...don’t forget to reply to that email.” Shaking his head, Jas admitted, “I ‘on’t know about Paris, but we can kick it about other spots.”

When he made it to the doorway of the kitchen, Ines appeared. Though surprised to see her, Jas greeted her with a kiss on the cheek, usual for those two. It was one of the few things that guaranteed a grin from her. I stood, leaning against the island, stuck. So many emotions charging my belly like shooting missiles. My attention lifted to Noelle, who refused to look at me. She nibbled on cheese from the board and appeared lost in her phone.

“No—” I cleared my throat. “Noelle, why didn’t you ask me to help you with the dress for the Winter Wonderland Ball?”

I attended *John Yancey Christian Academy* my entire primary and secondary educational experience. I could have taken you to the seamstress and boutique who the board has approved.” She wouldn’t look at me, spurring my anger. “Noelle, I would rather you not use Ava as a resource. I don’t...” I swallowed hard taking a deep breath. “I’m here if you need anything, you know that.”

Finally, her eyes rolled up to me. Softly, Noelle shook her head. “No, you ain’t. You ain’t here for nobody. Not me, not Dad, not Chi-Chi, not Jas, not your old friends.”

With a clenched jaw, I informed her, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m here for my family and *frien—*”

“You got the celebrities, your new dance troupe. You ain’t got me.” After a rolling of her eyes, she ambled out of the kitchen.

My eyes began to sting and throat closed up, preventing upending emotions from exploding. Not knowing what else to do, I whipped my frame from the island and shot into the hallway to slip on boots and my coat. I let myself out on the balcony, fighting to adjust to the freezing winds of the night. It took seconds for my vision to blur against the nightlights of my view, eyes pooling with tears and throat burning until I opened my mouth, surrendering to the blow to my heart. In no time, I was silently bawling.

“Why, Shi-Shi?” Ines’ gruff abruptly sounded. Then her hand was on my shoulder.

“Because,” I wailed. “...it’s either this or me cursing her ass out. I...don’t want to do that. She’s grieving.”

“She’s calling out. That’s all that’s about.”

“She’s mean. Horrible!” I lifted my head from my palms. “I’m a working mom. No, I don’t have the time to hang out with her like I used to, but don’t forget the times I did. So, now it’s okay to be rude and bitchy?”

“She’s a young girl, fighting for her big sister’s attention is all. Don’t let her get you all worked up like this. You’re just going to have to figure it out.”

“Figure out what? I make a living—a damn good one. I’m no longer my father’s nine-to-five puppet. I’m getting it off my blood, sweat, and tears, and now I’m the flaky bitch who doesn’t deserve loyalty? Ava! She goes to Ava! I can gut that *bit*—”

“Now, now, now,” she murmured, coarsely. “Don’t start that shit. Leave it there. Dry your face and get back in there with your chirren!” The weight of her hand on my shoulder disappeared.

I glanced up, and Ines was inside the apartment, closing the door behind her. The cryptic energy from her had me more perplexed. Noelle basically called me selfish...and traitorous, something I felt she was demonstrating, having dealings with Ava.

This was all fucked up. Adding to my discomfit were the cold winds. I could withstand the low temp if I’d had brandy or wine in my system, but I wasn’t in the mood. Just as I thought to go inside my phone rang in the pocket of my sweatpants.

My lungs emptied immediately from a deep sigh. I was not in the mood, but understood, I had to catch up with my crew, and blowing them off since being home wasn’t cool.

“Hey, Cecil,” my tone underwhelmed.

“Bitch, guess who going to *Club Sin* next Wednesday?” his yelp opposite of my energy.

“Who?”

“Us, bitch! Our crew banging down the fuckin’ doors, bitch!” I could hear the spit flinging from his mouth. “You know why?”

I really wasn’t in the mood, but figured the sooner I got him to make the point, the quicker the conversation would come to its completion. “Why?”

“Because my husband gon’ be there, bitch!”

“Who?”

“Who? What is you saying, Shi-Shi? I ain’t a nasty bitch—well, maybe I am, but you know this pussy beats for one man!”

“No.” My lips protruded as my head shook. “I don’t know that to be true.”

“*Ooooh*, you funky hoe! You know this pussy belong to Ra-muthafuckin-gee!”

I rolled my eyes. All of that preamble for this? “Is he going to be at *Club Sin* next week?”

“Yes, bitch! What the fuck I been saying all this time? And don’t try to say you can’t come because I’m sick of your ass throwing shade about me finally meeting my husband because I’mma punk! He may *really* like punks. Free us, bitch!” he yelled into the phone.

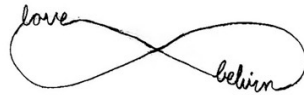
Yeah. Cecil was a huge Ragee fan. He crushed bad on the man. But Cecil crushed bad on everybody. He was worse than a teenage, boy-crazy girl; simply a crush-whore. I’d worked with Ragee and had never made the introduction with Cecil, and with reason. Cecil would fangirl him, and that didn’t seem right, knowing Ragee’s reputation for his sexuality. I’d been a fan of the man’s for years. I heard the rumors, but they were no different from any other R&B or Hip-Hop artist. The problem was Ragee’s propensity for privacy. It allowed the fodder to fester.

While working with Ragee and his team, I was introduced to a real human being who seemed to live his life a world away from all the rumors and naysayers. He was an incredible talent, evidentiary spiritual, and family-oriented. Ragee didn’t own the rumors, neither did his conduct in my presence contribute to them. So, hell no, I wouldn’t bring Cecil’s colorful ass to meet him. I didn’t want to be responsible for putting him in that position.

“Alright,” I sighed. “I think I’m free, but I need to check my calendar. I’ll make a few calls to get us in.”

“And backstage, bitch! I already saw him at *Club Sin* a few years ago.”

Rolling my eyes closed, I shook my head. “Bye, Cecil.”
Before he could respond, I disconnected the call.



“There’s this bakery we passed on the way here.” Her attention shifted from the window of the restaurant. “I think it’s like two blocks down and around the corner. I’ve been told they have the best cheesecakes but haven’t been able to try them yet.”

My face wrinkled. “*Junior’s?*”

She nodded hard as hell with her pretty ass. “Yeah,” she answered, her voice so soft.

“So, you come to New York—Brooklyn often? You’re from D.C. Right?”

“I’m from Maryland, Baltimore, to be exact. I moved to D.C. when I saw B-More had nothing for me.”

I processed that information, dropping it into the “Josie” file in my mind. “Born in B-More, and we were born in the same year, same day, just a month apart.”

Those long lashes parted, and high cheekbones disappeared when her jaw dropped. “I know. Right! I’m still tripping off that from last week. You’re a month younger than me. Crazy,” she whispered while shaking her head.

Josie went for her glass to take a sip. That gave me time to peep her features again. The girl was pretty as hell; soft spoken at times, expressing hella femininity, and not afraid to laugh when appropriate; charming and sexy as hell. She was

petite, bow-legged, with bite-sized tits that surprisingly didn't take away a point from her overall score. The short, jet black, curls on her head gave her an edgy appearance, and shortie's conversation was cool, too. This was our third time going out. Wednesday, after I'd dropped off Chivon, had been our second, and when I decided I wanted to get to know more about her.

"What do you like to do on your birthday? Any traditions since you were a kid?"

I scoffed, rubbing my hairy cheek, and found myself glancing out of the window. "That's a crazy question to ask."

"Why?"

My phone buzzed on the table with a text.

Jug: They just ordered dessert.

I liked the message and returned the phone.

"Uhhh..." I transferred my thoughts back to the conversation, managing the churning in my gut. "Uhhhhh... Traditions? Nah. I spent so many of them behind bars. No way I could bring traditions into the pen."

"Oh! That's right!" she gasped. "How long did you do?"

"You gon' run out of here when I tell you?" With that cute grin, she shook her head. "I little over ten. Went in, in oh-nine and came home in nineteen."

"Wow." She nodded slowly. "May I ask for what?"

"Gun possession."

"As in violence?" Her eyes squinted, disappearing behind the lashes. "Who you pull out on, Ojasvi?"

That shit had me cracking up. Josie laughed, too.

"Nah. It was found in my car. I sold them." No way I'd admit to busting them. This pace was good.

"Ahhh. That explains the lengthy time."

Kind of. It was a mandatory sentence for a single automatic weapon, but I wouldn't give a lesson on federal

charges. Not tonight. I had other shit brewing in the back of my mind.

“I hope you’re not embarrassed about a simple human experience?” Her head dropped to the side and she leaned into the table with concern in her whole posture. “We all have something we’re not proud of, but by the grace of the Lord, we’re still here and making better choices.”

My phone chirped again.

Miguel: one in the whip and one inside by the private room. # 2 carrying

Just as I had with Jug, I liked the text to confirm I’d gotten it. I then rolled my attention back up to the light-skinned cutie. “Oh, yeah?” I asked, not necessarily with intent, “What’s yours?”

Her hand brushed the back of her neck as she smiled. “Well...” Josie straightened in her seat, licking her lips. Lips I wouldn’t have minded tasting. “My work in D.C.” I dropped my chin, encouraging her to continue. “Courtesan work.” I had no idea what that was and lifted my brows to show it. “I worked for an escort company.”

Oh...

“For how long?”

She shrugged as though embarrassed with that alluring grin. “About two years.”

In a rapid succession of thoughts, that’s when her charm made sense. Josie knew how to behave in the presence of a man—paid men, too. It also explained her knowing how to present herself so well physically. From her hair, small but attractive frame, bubbled ass in soft fabric dresses, high heels, and ability to carry conversation, looking me directly in the eye. Yeah. Other women without that experience could do the same, but it was something about her forwardness that had me engaged since meeting her last month at church.

I went for my water. “How does that work, exactly?”

“A man like you has never used a service?” Her eyes widened. “Not once, especially after your long incarceration?”

“Nah. My silly ass try to go about it the Christian way.” I chuckled at myself. “I came home and had a few in rotation, but to find a wife. Then my silly ass got caught up with one nowhere near my list and fucked around, and fell in love.” My honesty was not only funny, it was easy.

“So, out of your entire rotation of women, this particular one you slept with—out of them all—got you to fall for her?”

I shook my head, needing to clarify. “I wasn’t fuckin’ my rotation. We just kicked it.”

Josie’s forehead creased. “You were celibate when you were released?”

“For like...a year and a half. It was my vow to God.”

“And how long before you broke it with her?”

Now uncomfortable, I thought for a moment still. “Maybe...two months.”

“Oh. Okay.” She began counting off on her fingers. “That’s not too long.”

“What you mean?”

“We’re almost a month in. I know the timeframe I’m working with now.”

We both laughed.

“Are you celibate?”

“I am.”

“What’re you waiting for?”

“A good man.”

“A good man or a husband?”

She looked at me for a while over the wine glass touching her lips. Then she lowered it and answered, “Both.”

“What’s the criteria?”

“Well...a man of God is first and foremost. Good looks.” She waggled her brows. “Monogamy, intelligence and self-awareness, an appreciation of family, world traveler, and an adventurous lover.” Her wink almost dissipated the tightness in my chest.

“Shit,” I breathed, sitting up in my seat. “That’s a lot of pressure.”

“You’re looking for a wife, you told me. Why is what I’m looking for pressure?”

“Because you got a lot of experience with men—mentally and intellectually. I’m being compared to a collection of no-nos and must-haves. If you don’t mind me asking, how many men from your clientele had the potential to be your husband?”

“Let’s see.” She let out a breath then pushed her lips out. “Maybe out of all the men I’ve encountered in my life, non-platonic, half had at least two of those attributes. Then the pool shrinks to about three dozen having half.” The muscles in my face dropped. “Then when you get to the last dozen—or maybe ten—they don’t have the same spiritual beliefs or lack the tools to please me sexually, long term. The biggest issue isn’t even monogamy. There are men who can be with one woman, but they tend not to be appealing physically or lack culture. They know nothing about the world at large, some lacking ambition.” She rolled her eyes.

I nodded again, processing the bomb she’d just dropped. It was a lot. I wasn’t a judgmental type of guy. God knew I had no right to be, but when it came to matters of my wife—my forever—chastity had to be reasonably measurable, and virtuousness was a must. Josie had fucked more people than I had.

She went for her purse, register low, “And don’t think I didn’t realize you finessed me into telling you how many men I’ve been with.”

I could tell she wasn’t happy, but before I could address it, my phone chirped again.

Jug: now!

I pulled a stack of bills from my pocket, estimating the bill and tip.

After standing, I reached for her hand. “I just got an emergency text and need to see about something.”

Josie took my hand, giggling. “Our date is over? Was it something I said?”

“Nah. The night ain’t over. It’s just been extended and complicated due to unforeseen circumstances. Did you like *Junior’s* menu?”

“I did,” she spoke up while following me out.

I motioned to our waiter, who’d just come into view, delivering drinks to another table. He acknowledged me before continuing.

“We can stop by there to pick up dessert. You one of those women who stress over their waistline?”

“If you ain’t complaining, why should I?”

Cracking the hell up, I escorted shortie down to my waiting truck.



I tapped on the monitor I had installed in my *G-Wagon* for Chivon, typing *Junior’s* web address into the browser.

“Here you go.” I tapped her thigh. “You can figure out what you want while I handle this.”

She giggled as she began swiping the screen to scroll the site. “Why do I feel like a child?”

Shit...

“My bad, Josie. It’s not my intent. It’s just that I may be a minute, but once I’m done, we can finish our night.”

“What kind of finishing?” Her grin was loaded with wickedness.

I'd already been aroused on the four-block ride over here for reasons other than anything sexual, but that toss of a flirt may have intensified it.

I snorted, thinking it was best not to respond for so many reasons. Instead, I stepped out of the truck and let Jug close the door. One of Tommy the Hitta's boys was on the other side of the truck on watch duty. We crossed the street quickly, causing a fleet of screeching breaks and angry horns. Miguel was at the restaurant's door waiting for us to go inside. I followed him to the back, feeling my mind segregate. That familiar surge of energy rushed in as my fingers flexed, balling into tight fists and opening again.

Once at the back of the restaurant, I could hear the commotion. The waiter walked out backward with wide eyes, and his palms stretched out into the air. A brolic ass nigga was barking at him with bass.

"We got it from here, Jack," Miguel told the waiter. "Y'all may wanna close off this part of the restaurant back here."

"The fuck?" the big ass brolic nigga barked, reaching into the breast of his coat and pacing backward, deeper into the room.

Jug whipped out the metal and pointed it to his head. "Don't."

I walked into the private dining room with a pulsing tension taking over my body. The first face I peeped was Austin Seers. His eyes were fucking big with fear, as they should have been. He glanced at his bodyguard first, almost like a silent cry for help. Then the nigga looked down at Ashira, still sitting in her chair, realizing what the play was.

And her. The mother of my child looked fucking shocked and frozen, with one hand wrapped around the arm of her chair and the other doing the same to the table.

I smiled at her. "Mufuckas around here got short-term memory. Or they think I do."

Chapter Nine

Part III

March | Three Years Later

ashira

The fine hairs of my neck lifted from my skin as I gripped my chair and the table. I was just about to stand before the melee began with the guys at the door not letting Jerry, Austin's security, out of the private dining room. My limbs shook uncontrollably, joints locked in place. Beyond startled, I was terrified. The last time I'd felt terror like this was on *Red's Island* when the explosion happened in the bathroom. Mayhem, guns, bravado, and Jas all in one event, rendering me under duress.

And Jas...

His presence here was its usual vastness, but his energy was dark, as was the sinister, breathtaking gorgeous smirk on his face. His darkness was seductive, alluring, and frightening at the same time as he stood at the top of the room, almost surrounded by men I knew were armed. Juggy was not the only one. The father of my child had a documented history of firearms.

This was not the man I'd cursed out a number of times. The one I'd expressed resentment toward even as of recent times with fury. I'd slapped him with violent abandon before and had gotten away with it. I'd been subdued under his wicked lure, totally defenseless to his every evil capability. Nonetheless, I was aware of the vicious degree of his temperament, yet I had never seen Jas unleash this venom toward *me*.

"First comes your likes on her posts on the *Gram*," Jas murmured thickly. "I let that ride. Then came the comments, *especially* after my daughter was born." How the hell would he know? Jas' *Instagram* account was just as inactive as when I'd learned about it. Then was just the one picture of his project buildings in Harlem. Now, there were two. That one and one of him holding Chivon in the hospital room after she'd been cleaned and swathed.

Jas' wrist yanked, tossing his palm into the air. "I ate all of them, even the ones about her being as beautiful as her mom and shit. Then the texting started. Short, sweet, and innocent. When she started to bite, the calls began. When I ain't trip, you wanted to take it even further and see her, even flew out to Costa Rica. That was some bold shit—" He wagged his index finger. "—And I *still* let you live." Jas turned to me. "Speaking of which, I was just about to let you start fuckin' other niggas," My bladder leaped. *The hell...* "but I find it to be poor judgment that *this* was gonna be the one you started with."

Stunned, I croaked, "Jas, I was not going *to*—"

"It ain't like that, bro!" Austin's tone was of an alarmed warning, eyes big, breathing visibly uneven. "It's just Shi-Shi, and I go back. You know...we got history, and I fucked up. You gotta understand, we had something deep, and I needed to address some *shit*—"

"Muthafucka, y'all was posing for the cameras and fuckin'. You put a baby in her? Y'all bury a nigga together? What history do you have with the mother of my child other than playing dress-up on red carpets? Because you knew, and

she knew, and I now know you couldn't make that ass splat." Jas' tone was so low, it was menacing.

A tendril of fear spiraled down my spine, and I was speechless, utterly dumbfounded by Jas' arrogance.

"*Kin*—can we just talked about this?" Austin, so scared, he stuttered as he pushed his palms out defensively. "We just agreed to be friends. Before y'all ran up in here, she said she just wanted to be friends, and I respect that, man. I swear I do."

Jas' tight gaze was on me again. "So, you *do* have some sense? Because when I met your silly ass, this Hollywood nigga ain't spend one dime protecting you. Even when you was with him, he ain't cover you. This what your dense ass want?"

Dense?

With anger burning like acid in my belly, I jumped to my feet, "Jas!"

"Yo, whatever y'all two got going on is between y'all," Jerry, Austin's security, interjected. "All I want is to get the lil' homie out of here with no problems."

"Ain't nobody talking to ya big ass, bitch," Jug gritted, switching the angle of the gun.

Jerry's face darkened. "Put down that gun, and let's handle this like men."

What in the fuck is going on?

"That's what I'm saying," Austin agreed. "Two Black men can't handle business the old fashion way?"

"Your lil' ass can't fuck with me, bruh. And I'mma show you. I'm 'bout to eat ya little ass up like I did your offenses... until now." Jas glanced my way. "Tell your lil' boo bye-bye for good, Shi-Shi."

Shi-Shi?

Austin started removing his coat. "You eating a grown man's ass sounding a little gay-ish. Your jail sentence

showing, bruh.”

Jas turned to Juggy and the guys standing at the doorway, and all fell into a chorus of laughter. This was some mafia shit if I’d ever seen it on film. Austin was scared; it was evident no matter how tough he tried to act. His bodyguard was furious. And I was stuck. Just stuck.

“Fuck you know about me?” Jas took a step closer, cocking his head to the side. “The fuck you know about me except for staying the fuck away from her because you being with her means you being around my daughter. Now, whatever happened between you and Ashira—”

“It’s just like you said, bro,” Austin argued. “You don’t know shit about me and *her*—” His head reared, and his tall frame stumbled backward. Jas had hit him—*punched him*—hard as hell in the face. My pulse raced, and mouth soured. The ease and lightning speed of Jas’ blow made me wonder who this thug I’d been too comfortable around really was.

“Uhn-uhn.” The gun cocked first, then Juggy stepped closer to Jerry. Two guys at the door ambled into the room now.

“Jas, please!” I begged, my whole body trembling.

Why was this necessary?

“You sucker punched me?” Austin swiped his nose leaking crimson liquid. “You gotta sneak me to get one off in front of her. You’s a bitch, nigga.” His ire was evident, but delivery nowhere near as coarse as Jas and Juggy’s.

My heart bled for Austin. He was out of character. The man couldn’t portray thug energy if he had the entire city of Harlem coaching him. It wasn’t his nature or comfort, though it was clear to me he felt forced to rise to the occasion. I could only imagine the fear and pressure Jas conjured in male opponents. But Austin wasn’t about that life. This was an unfair fight.

“Let’s kick it in the bathroom for a minute.”

“Nah. Fight me out here, nigga!” Austin’s voice cracked.

Jas tossed his chin calmly. "I've terrified my daughter's mother enough. No guns. Just one man and a boy."

No... No. No! I silently begged with audible lungs. It was all happening too fast.

After a moment of consideration, Austin broke. "Fuck it. Let's go!"

With lightning speed, Jas threw out his leg, clipping Austin as he walked backward, pulling on all the bravado he could toward the bathroom. Austin fell on an arm but smoothly pulled himself up and into a defensive posture. Jas, sporting a taunting expression, threw another short jab; this one only sent Austin's head back. Finally, he thought to swing back with a weak punch Jas blocked as though pillow fighting with Chivon. Jas' long reach grabbed Austin by the neck, dragging him toward the door. Austin tried forcefully to pry Jas' grip from his neck with no success. Jas managed the door open, pulled Austin to his feet by the neck, and threw him into the room, dodging another punch from him.

The closing of the door triggered a response that had me jumping to my feet. I lunged their way but was yanked back into Juggy's chest.

"Easy, Shi!"

I heard smacks I knew could only be punches. The sounds of a body violently colliding with porcelain were sharp in the air. My chest levitated in the air, lungs hardly emptying enough. Palms grew clammy, scalp misting, and mouth tangy. The sounds of violence behind a door removed the need for a visual, especially when they turned vocal. Husky grunts proceeded the punches. Then a shriek was clear. The same register of those turned into screams.

"Jerry!" Austin yelled worse than a child.

They were the cries of a tortured woman.

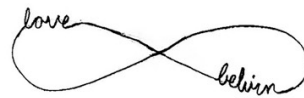
Jerry jumped toward the door, but before he could get within a yard, three big bodies raided his efforts, descending upon him. Powered punches and brutal stomps hailed upon Jerry but still didn't drown out Austin's cries for him. Jas'

grunts were almost rhythmic, eliciting the most high-pitched yowls from Austin.

Finally, I was able to command some control over my body, and I twisted to leave.

“Nah, Shi-Shi!” Juggy warned, reminding me it was his hold I was in.

I sucked in a breath too deep for my already-filled lungs. The gun. It was an arm’s length away from my face in Juggy’s right hand. That was the last thing I cognized before seeing black.



juggy

I tried telling the girl she ain’t know “Sin.” All the time he wasn’t giving up his full government to her before they had the baby, he was deadass being Ojasvi, this new mellow cat. She was safe with Ojasvi. Sin was a beast and only made for the streets.

A painful ass cough hit my chest. I hated these shits in public. Once they started, I ain’t know when they’d stop. This Josie chick in the backseat probably thought I was dying with the AIDS or some shit. When the last cough came, I lay against the headrest, feeling tired than a motherfucker. My ass should have been in the bed, but I was sick of being bored as hell in the house. Being sick was for the fucking birds; being in the streets was better suited for me. This was the most action I’d seen in a while.

And here, once again, Shi-Shi was putting that nigga, Sin, in danger of losing his freedom. When they first started

fucking, I was game for however Sin wanted to move, even if it was on some stupid “love” shit with Shi-Shi. But now... *Shit*. My body was all fucked up. I couldn't throw the ones like I was once known to; I had to carry that steel. Holding them poppers came with a risk, though, because I liked to bust. Getting locked the hell up would be the death of me. Didn't matter, though. I'd spend the night in hell if it meant looking out for my mans.

When Shi-Shi fainted in the restaurant, shit went from fun to real. It wasn't for long, though. I lay her down on the floor and shook her a few times before she came to. By the time Sin let off her ex, he was able to get her to stand and calm the hell down. I didn't know what he said to Shi-Shi, but her ass didn't flip out the way she did before passing the fuck out.

I had to take her keys out to Bob, one of the dudes Sin paid to protect her. That's how we found out about her being out here in Brooklyn with her ex. Shi-Shi tried to be slick and dismiss him for the night, saying she was done for the day. His shift wasn't over, so he stayed on from his car in the parking lot. The nigga, white boy Bob, peeped Shi-Shi leaving and called to ask what he should do as he followed her.

“Here he is,” Josie in the backseat voice was perky as hell.

She had been out here in the truck for about forty-five minutes. I came out here after giving Shi-Shi's car keys to the other dude Sin hired to look after her. We called him out to ride her home. No way she could drive after passing out. Plus, I had to grab Sin a clean shirt. That's when I checked in on Josie.

Damn...

I looked out the window just when Sin held the door open for Shi-Shi over her head. They walked out of the restaurant like they didn't know each other. Shi-Shi tightened up her coat and headed to the right for her car. And Sin walked out straight to cross the street for us in the truck.

Yeah. This shit started out as fun—even got my ass out of the house—but something about it didn't feel right. Sin had come a long way, going legit. I ain't know how I felt about

him going back to his grimy ways. Yeah, I loved that Sin, but this new Jas seemed...happier. The nigga was a millionaire with a daughter on his back. I ain't think he'd last this long in the legit lane, but he did. It always fucked me up to see the freedom of this new Jas threatened by his dealings with Shi-Shi. No disrespect to her, but the only time I saw the old Sin was when she was involved.

Sin hopped into the backseat and closed the door.

“So, cheesecake?” his voice was smooth as hell, sounding like he ain't skip a beat from when he left.

“I thought you forgot all about me,” shortie told him.

“Nah. Never that. Had some family issues in there that ran longer than I thought. Which cake did you decide on.”

“I'd like to start with an apology.” Her voice was weak. “Then we can talk about dessert.”

I peeped them through the rearview mirror.

Sin turned to shortie, his hand on his chest. “You're right. My bad. First apology is for the unexpected wait. The second is not doing it right away.”

I took a deep breath at that shit and turned my attention back to the road. These bitches really think shit's sweet.

Better him than me...

“Oh my god!” She was kind of loud. “What happened to your hands? They're bloodied!”

Shit...

I fucking snickered.



ashira

Chi-Chi handed Chelsea the manila envelope. Her other hand was balled into a fist near her right eye.

When it exchanged hands, Chelsea praised her. “Awwww! Munchkin!” She hugged Chi-Chi from behind her desk, wiggling her little body.

We’d just arrived to the clinic Jas’ cousin owned and ran in Harlem. I pledged my winnings from the *IDC* competition to her facility when my troupe registered to participate. The money took weeks to process, and I was finally ready to make good on my promise. Having been beyond proud of Chelsea’s work and vision, employing a team to implement medical research specifically for issues striking the Black community disproportionately, I was compelled to support.

Two years ago, she secured a location and with funding from sponsors, was able to hire three physicians, a pharmacist, a second medical researcher, and three drivers to tend to underserved and unserved local residents. It was one of the most badass things I’d seen a woman I personally knew do. So, of course, I’d find ways to help out. Funding meant the lifeline for organizations and services like this.

“Chi-Chi,” I heard called just over my shoulder, and like always, I answered, believing it was for me. Jonathan, Jas’ younger cousin, tossed his chin to my daughter, his approach to her with its usual tenderness. He looked handsome, too, in a white v-neck scrub top and khaki pants. “You still turning up for your born day?” With her finger near her mouth, Chi-Chi nodded, not appreciating an ounce of that question. “A’ight. Let’s go get some lollipops. I’ll give you three for ya birthday. C’mon.”

Slowly, Chi-Chi made her way over to his waiting hand. When she met him, she paid me a last glance.

“It’s okay. But just one for now. I’m sure it’ll wake you up.” I smiled at her.

“She good?” Jonathan asked.

I nodded. “She slept the ride over and needs a few minutes.”

“Oh!” He wiggled their joined hands. “I got some sugar for that, lil’ momma.” His wrinkled face lifted to me. “You good, Shi-Shi?”

I nodded, too embarrassed to say more.

Everyone probably knows...

When they left the office, I turned to Chelsea’s desk and tried for a smile.

“You have no idea how much this means to me.” Chelsea waved the envelope in the air. “And just to think, your team could have taken this and split it amongst yourselves, but instead, you donated here and had *International Dance Competition* double it!” She pulled it to her chest as she pouted emotionally, expressing how the gesture made her feel. “I can’t say thanks enough.”

“Neither can I tell you how much of a pleasure it is to be able to do it. Don’t think you’re robbing my troupe. We get paid handsomely when we do tours, award shows, and things like that. *IDC* isn’t about the money so much as it is the title.” I shrugged. “We got ours. If donating means hiring and motivating young ‘Jonathans,’ I can’t wait to do more.”

“That’s because Jas cut into his butt,” Chelsea scoffed, rolling her eyes. “...telling him his time as a kid was officially over.”

Jonathan returned to his studies and became a pharmacy technician a little more than a year ago. He was also enrolled in college to hopefully complete his goal of becoming a pharmacist. I hadn’t seen anything to the contrary but had

witnessed Jas' threats to him as though Jonathan had fallen off the wagon.

My eyes involuntarily rolled away at the mention of his name. Chelsea dropped the envelope into a drawer. Taking a deep breath, she planted her elbows on the desk, bringing her fists to her penny-hued cheeks. "You okay?" Then her chin dipped. "I heard about the other night."

My stomach turned, and I swallowed deeply, immediately irritated. "Has everyone heard?"

"A few in the family, yup. The 'block' knows because a few people from it were there in action."

"A pack of faceless goons being led by the master thug himself," I murmured. When Chelsea's head fell to the side, I cringed. "I'm sorry. I know they're your loved ones."

"They are, and yet I understand what they represent to people without *Harlem Pride*. That was not Jas' best decision. I'm sure you're hurt and embarrassed for your ex. I heard he got banged up a bit." Her face dropped into a standing fist. "I hate that I'm saying this, but it could have been worse. I've seen them ravish grown men beastly, causing permanent damage. And I mean some unfair, inhumane shit I don't want to describe. Jas handled him alone, which—" Her head seesawed left to right as she contemplated. "—*this time* was safe for him. But I'm not with Jas not allowing you to have your own life. It all feels toxic and controlling."

I scoffed, eyes toward the pen holder on her desk. "What was most astounding wasn't Austin being confronted. After a day of consideration, I had to remember that fucker not only cheated on me, but put my health and life at risk of a bug I could possibly not be able to get rid of. Not only that, he hid away for years afterwards." Yeah, Jas told him to stay away, but Austin made the task seem too easy. "The fact of Jas being an asshole about another man he has reasons for not respecting and not wanting around his child... Bullshit, *but* bullshit I could live with; men are egotistical fucks.

"No. What really concerns me is that deathly violent beast being veiled by a thin layer of discipline. It's the one I'd

sensed in him before we ever became intimate. It's the one I'd seen when my life was endangered on *Red's Island*—something I could process. That violent monster is still alive and well in him. How can I reconcile my future with him as his child's mother?" Not to mention I offered to have another child with Jas at Chi-Chi's party. "What does that mean for me—Chi-Chi? *That* shit terrifies me. What keeps that vile beast within him tamed?" I shook my head, eyes dilated from entrancement.

"Are you regretful about having a baby with him? Like... ashamed?"

Ghosted, I shook my head and whispered, "He showed just how little respect he has for me. How easy it is for him to humiliate me that way in front of my friends and his. And you know what?" My mouth twisted as my eyes rolled close. "I'm embarrassed...ashamed that I'm not regretful. That's not who Jas is—*has*—to be. I didn't meet *that* guy. I didn't fall in love, head over heels, with a nefarious goon. I didn't trust my child's future to one either." I thought of the frightening sleepwalking he'd do. *Shit*. I remembered the desperate things I'd done to get him to return to full consciousness. The foreign language he'd speak when praying. The fact that the man didn't consume alcohol or take drugs. He ravished Austin with a sober mind. The man wailed in fear like a child. All of the scary shit adding up. "Who is Jas? *Who*?" My throat trembled with fear and self-pity as I finally peered up to Chelsea.

With sympathy in her eyes, she answered, "He's my hero. My gentle beast who has not faltered from his self-imposed responsibility to look out for me since we were kids. Yes, he has a flip side to his personality. I knew from a very young age my family had a penchant for violence, with Jas being the ringleader. But I've also seen him be fair, animatedly generous, and loyal. *Boy!* And when he was in prison, the man transformed himself like nothing anyone could ever believe. And that's when he provided us security he couldn't before, never being locked away from us for long periods. Yeah, he funded my educational degrees while inside, and he was enlightened while there, too, but that distance from him was a lot on some of us."

Chelsea's forehead creased as her head shifted to the side. "Now, I personally didn't grow up in church or with religious discipline." She swiped her hand in the air dismissively. "God was acknowledged, but not necessarily 'followed' in my household. But honey, when Jas began to write to me about his mental transformation and spiritual reconstruction, I didn't need to see it to believe it; I felt it. Drastic changes in beliefs and behaviors are considered weak in our family. The street is your spouse, money is your mistress, and law enforcement is the opposition. There's no God, Buddha, Allah, or Mother Teresa. If Jas said he was now a man of God, it had to be real. He'd never risk the weakness that could be perceived from his family." Her nod was soft but emphatic. "I hold on to that when I hear about his old ways rearing their head."

"Old ways? As in plural?"

Chelsea sighed, blinking fast. "I shouldn't have *said*—"

"But you did! That man brutally beat my ex-boyfriend. He makes money off his face. His cousin told me about the NDAs they're enforcing at medical facilities to keep his treatments in confidence. The project he's working on has to be postponed now. Again, I'm not crying any rivers for Austin, but what Jas did was traumatizing!"

She took another deep breath before pulling in her top lip for a nibble then blowing it out. "It was a few years ago—before Chi-Chi. I'd heard he, Juggy, and Man were at *Club Sin* and some guys tried to rob the place on the wrong night."

"What made the night wrong?"

"The fact that Jas, Juggy, and Man were there. Period. I mean, it was obviously the wrong place, too, because nobody in Harlem robs those guys. There still would have been hell to pay. All I meant was hearing what went down that night spiked my non-existing high blood pressure. Jas was still on parole. For sure, I thought he'd be in trouble with the law." Her hand shot up in the air. "But he was not...clearly."

That story seemed familiar. Jas had shared it with me, though his version was completely PG-13.

Sitting back, it was my turn to exhale deeply.

“What are you thinking?” There was a trace of concern in Chelsea’s voice.

I couldn’t let him control me. Jas would never dictate my world. I would date again at some point.

Damn him to hell.

“About how fucked I am.”



I sat back in the leather seat, tossing the highlighter onto the conference room table as she paced the side of the room. “What’s your point, Chelsea?”

“You humiliated and possibly traumatized that woman.”

Subconsciously, my attention went to my swollen knuckles splayed on the table. Air pushed through my lips, creating a silly ass sound. “Did not.”

She leaped in the air, turning to face me. “You did! Everybody knows Shi-Shi, the free-spirited, silly, life of the party girl. She’s been my friend for about four years now. She’s formidable, bodacious, and fun. The woman I spoke to yesterday was spooked, Jas. Spooked!”

Shit. She should be.

“Ashira’s good.”

“Is she?”

“I spoke to ol’ boy yesterday.” His bitch ass ran to Divine, and they called me. He apologized, and for his good senses, I

offered to pay for his dental work. “We have a better understanding now. Ashira’s good, Chels.”

Her head snapped back. “Is she? Because that’s not what I saw yesterday at the clinic.”

“Did she tell you she’s not?”

Chelsea took a minute to think.

C’mon, Chels...

It was the middle of the day at my firm. My schedule was tight, but when she called saying she needed to talk to me, impossibly, I told her I’d make time. Chelsea was special to me. I’d always make sacrifices for her...even in the middle of a crazy busy fucking day. I’d just dismissed one of my teams after a fucking two-hour meeting in here.

“Oh, she said a lot, buddy. She used terms like goons, thugs, monster, and violent beast. Things I know you’ve worked hard not to be associated with. You’re so much better than that, Jas.” Her arms shot into the air. “Look at where we are, the empire you’ve tirelessly built. Do you want her to assume those things about you? Because I sure as heck don’t!”

“She knows who I am,” my voice low, unlike hers.

“Does she?”

“Sweetheart, look.” I tried locking eyes with Chels to calm her down. “That’s been the problem. I was honest with her when I met Ashira. I told her my limitations and capabilities. Have I behaved in a manner that caused her not to believe me? Maybe. It’s obvious her ex didn’t believe me when I calmly but straightforwardly explained the situation to him years ago.”

“Which was?”

“Which was he was not to contact her again.”

Her eyes bulged. “Never contact her again!”

The conference room door opened, and Ava pushed her head inside. “Bishop Carmichael’s here?” Her attention went

from Chelsea's confrontational posture to me sitting at the table.

Bishop was my next meeting. Again, I fit Chels in. She knew my time was limited and agreed to come anyway.

I nodded. "Let him in." I figured I'd take that meeting in here since I hadn't been able to make it back to my office.

Ava acknowledged my answer and backed out but didn't close the door shut.

"Do you know how unreasonable that sounds?" Chelsea was back on my ass. "How is she supposed to have a life? Did you think she may possibly want to date? Are you going to scare him away, too?"

"I told Ashira she could date whoever she wanted." I tossed my hand in the air. "Where's the problem?"

Chelsea stepped closer, cowering over my general view, and placed her hands on the table. "The problem is you don't have a say. She's a grown woman, Jas. She can speak to whomever she wants. You can't control her social life because you have a child with her."

"I actually set that rule in place before Chivon was even a thought."

My cousin's mouth opened, and, at first, she was speechless. "You sound like Lenny. Remember how that worked out for him? Or Jamal, who scared Stacy away. She moved out of Harlem with June-June, afraid for her life! Is that the pathology you want to continue with?" she screeched, begging for reason.

My cousin, L-Boogie, was a stickup kid from St. Nick. He was now on Rikers Island, serving a life sentence for shooting his girlfriend, brother, uncle, and nephew in the head because the girlfriend had broken up with him. It was wild. Their shit was toxic from the gate.

J-Hammer was our second cousin. He did an eight-year stretch for slicing up his old lady's face and beating her in the head with a hammer. He ran from the cops for a couple of weeks. When they found him, he was speeding on meth, coke,

and some other shit, likely feeling remorse for what he'd done. The problem was he lunged at the cops, who then shot him to death. The nigga never made it to jail.

I cocked my head to the side. "Chels, you really wanna go there with me? You know them niggas were crazy out the womb. Let's not go overboard."

She scoffed. "I wish it was as simple as me overreacting. But you need to remember they were men you grew up around, your blood relatives. And if you're out here wildin' out violently over a woman who was once your lover, you need to be overreacting yourself." I stared at her, not thinking it was wise to argue. She was upset. I didn't want to exasperate her emotions. "Jas, you're better than that—than them. You're compassionate, caring, rational, and have a lot to lose. A whole lot more than you did when you went in the last time. I think it's time for you to start remembering who you are when you're dealing with Chi-Chi's mother."

A slight movement behind Chelsea had my head shifting to look toward the door.

Ezra had come in, rocking a long wool coat and fedora, holding a folder. His face was empty and pace smooth as he closed the door and placed the envelope on the table. Chelsea swung around, seeing we had company.

She groaned, turning away from Ezra, eyes closed in frustration. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't know we weren't alone."

Ezra removed his hat and coat, finding a rack to place them on.

My eyes swung over to my tensed little cousin, and I smiled. "You're good. It's my guy." I thought again. "Then maybe not because...he's that guy."

Chelsea's eyes squinted in confusion. She shook it off and whispered sadly, "I've got to get back to the clinic." I watched her grab her purse and head to the door. She turned to me with a long face while gripping the handle. "I love you, cousin. And thanks for the boxes of printing paper. That'll last us a while."

I tapped my chest. “Anything for you, fam.”

She nodded, whole mood dejected, and walked out, closing the door behind her.

I sat up in my chair. “Minister,” I joked, going for my laptop to pull up the last email I got from one of my crews working on one of his many investment properties. Ezra had been playing hard in the real estate market for years now, building, investing, and renting properties all over the Tri-state area. He’d even been nearing the finishing stages of a surprise vacation home for Lex on the Jersey shore. He kept me busy with his projects, and I was grateful for his business and trust. “Always good to see you.”

“And I detect the Samson in you has risen.”

I froze. “Huhn?”

“Samson. The book by Atteberry? I haven’t forgotten that conversation we had a few years back about your fear of spiraling like Samson.” When I studied his face, somewhat recalling that conversation because—shit—Ezra and I kicked it a lot and almost about everything, he continued, “When you’d first become—” He glanced over his shoulder, ensuring the door was closed and lowered his voice. “—intimate, you feared breaking covenant with Qanna.”

My eyes blew the hell up. “Qanna, the jealous God? Word? We doing it like that, E?”

He smoothed down his beard. “I’m infusing humor here, still recollecting that conversation. Some people prefer to fear God rather than to simply understand His love for us. I believe you were panicking. You mentioned having made a covenant with Him by way of...” He dropped his head, looking to be thinking. “...celibacy. If I’m recalling correctly, this was just after embarking on your sexual relationship with Shi-Shi. You said something to the tune of fearing you were on Samson’s path of self-destruction because you’d reneged on your promise?” His face got tight, unsure about that last part.

But it caused something to click in my mind.

Promise...

The promise.

A chill ran down my damn spine, and my chest felt tight out of nowhere. Memories of feeling the pressures and joy from believing I was on a singular course with my Savior began returning to memory in spades. We'd talked about what my future would be like in that season. I'd been checking off goals from my list, feeling the confidence that could only come from being on one accord with Him. I felt at peace naming those things that were not as though they'd one day be true. I recalled resting in the favor of having His hand on my life. Where had that part of our relationship gone?

Gazing up at Ezra, I shook my head. "I'm not Samson, man."

"Then perhaps you need to remember who you are, your weaknesses included."

"Whatchu mean?"

"The woman who was just admonishing you, she brought up violence. I'm going to assume it was because you ensued it recently." I sat back in my seat, not wanting to get into that shit. What was done was done. I had no regrets. It needed to happen. And almost as though Ezra could read my mind, he rasped, "I don't want to rehash the details any more than I'm sure you do. However, sometimes we need to check ourselves, and that includes recounting—not just our strengths—but our weaknesses, too. You're violent-prone, Jas."

While I rank as a black belt in martial arts and can defend myself and my family exceptionally well, even against multiple people at once, I'd think twice before engaging. I'd be afraid of the damage I could do. You, on the other hand, crave the destruction of a man. You're excited at the prospect of violence. Initiating a battle for you isn't an event at all. Your intent in combat is not only to injure the flesh but also to break the spirit of a man."

Looking away, I did consider his words. They were the exact sequence I'd heard from his licensed peers when I started my federal sentence.

“I’m aware of my relationship with violence. I knew how it could be detrimental to my freedom, which is why I didn’t drink, get high, or put myself in high-risk situations.”

“I see.”

“But what if I did?”

At this point, I remembered being in spiritual warfare when catching feelings for Ashira. Damn. Those days felt so long ago. Chivon separated my one-on-one relationship with her mother. Those feelings were a world apart at this point.

Ezra’s nose tilted up. “I’m sorry?”

“What if I did put myself in a high-risk situation? Ashira. What if me falling into my flesh with her broke the covenant?”

The promise...

“Your Samson spiral?” When I didn’t reply, Ezra shook his head. “You’ve not been spiraling.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you’ve been under my spiritual leadership, I would never allow that to happen. I’d have to answer to God for it.”

“You’re over a lot of people,” I chuckled, joking away my concern. “It’s easy for some of us to get lost in the herd.”

“Impossible. You have direct access to me...my personal world. And that of my wife.”

“*Harlem Pride.*” I nodded.

“Speaking of which, she mentioned Josie from *RSfALC*. I’m aware of you two having gone out a few times.”

“Yeah. J’s cool peoples.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. However, I’m not in favor of it.”

Huhn?

“Why?” I found that shit funny.

Ezra sat back in the leather chair, crossing one leg over the other while fingering through his beard. “It doesn’t agree with my spirit.”

“Again. Why?”

“We can start with recent events. If you’re ensuing violence on your former love interest’s ex-boyfriend, I don’t believe that puts Josie’s best interest at a fair advantage. Do you?”

Fuck that...

Laughing, I kept it a bean with him. “I like Josie.”

“Could it be because she doesn’t elicit the passion from you that cautions you to question your welfare and your future?”

The promise...

“Shit.” I rubbed my face with my palms. “Look, E, if you’re hinting at there being more between Ashira and me, I can tell you it ain’t. She never really got down with the kid like that anyways. The one time I felt like we were on the same page, that shit was like a jailhouse wet dream because it happened so damn fast. I’ve supported her dreams since she carried my daughter. I haven’t laid a hand on her in over nine months. I’ve released the possibility—that wasn’t a possibility at all.” I was frustrated. Fucking flustered, too. I needed a moment to calm myself. “I know we need to talk shop, so I’ll put it to you like this. I’m not sorry for what I did to her ex.”

“They say people with specific antisocial personality disorders are unable to feel remorse.”

“I ain’t crazy, E.”

“Oh, I know.” He scoffed while readjusting himself in his seat. “But you need to be sure Ashira Witherspoon does as well. Your behavior was reprehensible, and even if you cannot find it in your heart to feel guilt, I admonish you to find a level of human decency to express sorrow to the mother of your child. You’re building a legacy in this life, not perpetuating the pathology your cousin spoke of.” I nodded, accepting his discipline.

“Good,” Ezra answered my energy. “Because if you’re under my spiritual leadership and on my roster of friends, I’m going to trust you’re accepting my caution. Now, let’s work. Shall we?”

I shook my head, going back to my laptop.

Damn...

Chapter Ten

Part III

March | Three Years Later

ashira

“Do mine yike dis, Mommy!” Chi-Chi demanded, standing at the canvas with a dripping paintbrush.

She was asking me to draw the eyes on her clown as I had my own. Her speech was developing just fine, but there were still things that may not have been coherent to others, but Mommy understood everything.

“Okay.” I walked over to her on my knees and tried painting over her smeared attempts. “Oooh!” she marveled. “Pretty!”

My daughter was hyping me up, trying to get me to correct more of her tracing art. “Thank you, baby. You can finish it now. Right?”

“Yet me see, Mommy. Yet me see,” she wriggled between me and the canvas.

“Okay.” I backed up to watch.

“Chi-Chi,” Ines called from the doorway of the living room. “time for your bath, young lady.”

Chi-Chi spun around dramatically. “Bath time?” Her eyes flashed wide, and teeth clamped together.

I snickered as Ines rolled her eyes, beyond smitten by Chi-Chi’s charisma.

“Yes, lil lady. Bath,” Ines repeated. “Your momma got work to tend to. And if you don’t hurry up, I’m going to pick the toys you play with in *there*—”

“No!” Chi-Chi cried, turning to hand me the paintbrush. “Here, Mommy!” she hissed before taking off to her room.

“Wait.” Ines caught her. “Let’s take this off first, baby.” She quickly untied the smock from behind Chi-Chi and brought it over her head. Then she folded it inside out, so the soiled side was not exposed. “You’re about to handle that?”

I nodded, fully understanding what she meant. Ines had been encouraging me to get out of my feelings regarding Chi-Chi’s father along with my therapist. So, I’d been making attempts to. I closed the paint palates and wrapped up the brushes before sauntering to the powder room to clean up. Returning to the living room, I rubbed lotion into my hands before grabbing my laptop. Then I perused my inbox until arriving at the name that never failed to make my belly turn over. Last week before the vicious, brutal, and unnecessary assault, Ava Dallas reached out to me with Jas’ vacation ideas. Of course, they didn’t include Paris. Nonetheless, his suggestions were pleasantly surprising and strikingly generous.

Shaking my head, I continued to read words typed by an enduring sneaky link disguised as an erudite, efficient personal assistant, trying to stay focused. The doorbell rang, pulling me from my misery. I placed the laptop to the side on the sofa then toed to the door. The sight on the other side by way of the peephole tightened my jaw from surprise and curiosity.

I swung open the door with filled lungs, frozen by his unannounced presence.

“Yo,” was how Jas greeted thickly while rubbing the side of his jaw.

“Hi,” I dispelled the building air.

He snorted, “Can I come in?”

That’s when I jumped to my senses. “*Sha-sure!*” I backed away, inviting him inside. “You want Chi-Chi?”

“Nah.” He scratched his head, visibly uneasy. *Good.* So was I. “I was hoping she was busy getting ready for bed so I could kick it with you.”

Oh...

“She is. You know Ines fights me for that particular duty amongst others.” I motioned him farther into the apartment. “I was just in the living room.” Smoothly cutting in front of Jas, I bypassed his big frame to lead him. “Is this about the family vacation for Chi-Chi? If it is, I was just reading over the email.”

“Ummm... Yeah. That and some other shit. But I did wanna know if you’re backing out.”

His gaze held me intently, curiously. Did Jas think I’d renege?

I shook my head. “No. Have you changed your mind about us doing it together?” Jas shook his head, answering no. “Well,” My attention swept over to the laptop. “I see your suggestions are all generous. Yachting in Europe? I guess that’s right up your alley. Think you can stand me for that many days?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about, Ashira.” Jas pulled at the side of his coat, a gray bubbled goose. With his eyes locked on me, he shook his head. “Man, I don’t even know how we got here. I’ve been trying to go at your pace all these years. Been trying to support you and be the best father I can to Chivon. I knew having a baby wasn’t the best idea, but it was the only way for me. I was not going to abort my child. I don’t regret doing this—”

“Neither do I,” I spat defensively. “Jas, I was not dating or *thinking* about dating Austin.”

“I ain’t say you was. Matter of fact, that wasn’t about *that*.”

Really?

“Then what was that about?”

His eyes fell away, and Jas didn’t respond right away. “Part of it was my ego, not me trying to bully the guy. Truly, it ain’t that.”

“Then what about your ego could it be to humiliate him like that and then in front of me?”

Jas’ eyes trailed up to me when he murmured, “Because I never forgot how hurt you were when he fucked around on you. I remember how broken your spirit was for days. I ain’t even know at first what had happened, but knew it fucked you up.” My belly flipped, lungs seized. “That shit ain’t never sit well with me.”

I swallowed hard, trying to work around the sudden dryness in my mouth. “I would have never asked you to beat a man brutally because he betrayed me.”

“I know that. I do.”

“Listen... Jas...” My hands went to my head, fingering my scalp as I closed my eyes and exhaled harshly. “I’ve been working through this in therapy. Here are the facts: you are Chi-Chi’s father. This will never change. Like you said, it may not have been the wisest idea to have a child under our circumstances back then, but we did. I, too, refused to abort my baby. And because of this decision, I have to maintain a healthy relationship with you for the best development of our daughter. We’ve been so touch and go since she was born, yet I’ve never felt so disconnected from you as I do now.

“I will say this,” I continued with a tongue thick from anxiety. “Thank you for feeling as though you had to enact some revenge on my behalf with Austin. However, please never use violence to avenge wrongdoing for me. I’m not into violence. I’d like to embark on a healthy relationship with you.

Being friends sounds *impossi*—” Jas scoffed, rubbing the side of his jaw again. “—yeah, I know. But we need something as close as we can get to that for the sake of our daughter. In doing that, we need to build boundaries, and by doing that, we’re not infusing toxicity into our relationship. If that’s what we produce, that’s what gets injected into Chi-Chi.” I shook my head. “I don’t want that for her, and I know you don’t either.”

He shrugged with his brows and a quick flicking of his neck. “Yeah,” he exhaled. “Me either.”

Jas resembled a block boy tonight in the bubbled goose, black thermal shirt exposing the contour of his broad chest and carved abdominal muscles, dark jeans framing his spaced thighs, and black *Timberland* boots. A rapid wave of intoxication washed over me. Clean construction boots caused a sudden flashback of how I met him. He was dangerously understated, ruggedly gorgeous, and otherworldly to me. Apparently, I’d been taken by a thug. Jas code switched a lot. His delivery ranged from Harlem World proper to a dialect that didn’t alarm his corporate contemporaries. But at the end of each day, he’d always been...Jas. What had that said about me, the promising girl from Milburn armed with degrees from the incomparable *Blakewood State* and *NYU*? My nipples tingled from the embarrassment of the countless possibilities.

Rubbing the back of my head with building anxiety, I blurted, “I will date...other men. *Well*—not Austin, but other men.” The dryness of my mouth returned when I forged ahead, voicing my boundaries. “And I will not be shadowed by your security when doing so. It’s a bit intrusive.”

And there it was again. That crocodile flip in his eyes. The veil had been applied, but not before I could catch the brewing storm in the recesses of his irises. The sight of it pinched my already tingling nipples, caused flips in my belly, and stroked my clit implausibly all at once. My breath hiked, rendering me speechless.

“Daddy!” screeched from a distance, followed by echoing pitter-patters. “Daddy!” Chi-Chi was upon us within seconds,

breaking the tension. She leaped into his arms when he reached down to receive her. “You here?”

I took a step back, calming myself with crossed arms and a fidgety hand at the nape of my neck. Ines appeared in my peripheral, fighting a smile, which was the norm for her when observing this pair.

“Daddy’s here,” Jas’ voice was soothingly calm before he graced her cheek with a kiss.

“You come get me?” Chi-Chi pointed to her chest with wild eyes. “I at Mommy house.”

Mommy’s house?

That “FYI” stung. This was Chi-Chi’s house, not just mine.

“No, Blueberry. Daddy didn’t come to get you.” Jas answered, pulling a box from the pocket of his coat. A long one, clearly jewelry. “I brought you this.”

It dawned on me how deft my daughter was at opening jewelry boxes. Chi-Chi didn’t fumble the box at all, and she knew to place the lid under the bottom portion and remove the cotton strip in order to observe the jewelry.

“What’s that, Chi-Chi?” Ines quizzed her.

Chi-Chi’s little hand went to her neck, believing it to be a necklace.

“No.” Ines shook her head.

Jas lowered Chi-Chi onto her feet and began to place the diamond bracelet on her wrist.

“Bracelet,” Jas coached her.

“Braeslit,” she attempted. “Pretty, Daddy!”

Chi-Chi’s appraisal reminded me of when my father would perform romantic gestures in front of our family, namely my mother when I was a child.

Did my mother feel as left out as I am feeling right now?

Rationale admonished my childish thoughts with the reminder of my father being her husband, so if she felt slighted, she had every right to. I wasn't married or attached to this man by nothing more than this little person standing between the two of us now, twisting her wrist, checking out the beautiful piece.

Another kiss of adoration was pressed into my daughter's chubby cheek by her father. Then his chocolate irises rose to my stiff frame.

"You're good on seeing who you want...except him." He fingered Chi-Chi's beaded braids. "We can revisit the security thing at a later date. Let's see if the next one you choose can protect you. If that can happen..." His attention returned to Chi-Chi. "I'll fall back."

His words. Why did they sound invective? Like a prison release to omens of things to come.



"You are holy, oh, God. Your truths and redemptions knows no bounds. Your power is infinite, Father. Your mercy is endless, and Your grace is undeserving. Your love is faultless, and presence is pure," from my knees and elbows, I cried out in the spirit.

Forgive me for my sins, oh, God. Cascade me with Your forgiveness and mercy. Seize my ego and temper my flesh. Quiet my anger just enough for me to receive Your daily guidance. Lord, continue to teach me how to love my inner circle even when it is not being reciprocated. Remind me each morning, noon, and night of my charge to express the love

demonstrated by Your begotten son in flesh form,” I continued, not knowing how long I’d been at it.

I was fucked up...tired, and desperate for change and redirecting. She stressed me the hell out. Nobody—not even my daughter—could infuriate me the way that woman could. Even when I’d allow her space away from me and my needs, Ashira would always find a way to disrupt my walk of faith. Having her in my world exposed the crimson stain in the pureness of my wool. I was a good man—could be. I knew I could walk a wholesome life, set on the path of God Himself. But the rage I’d come to manage so well came alive only in matters concerning Ashira.

“It is Your holiness, God, that I seek after. It’s Your redemption I fight to achieve. It is Your righteousness I submit to daily, Father.”

What could I do? Cut her off? That was impossible because of Chivon. She offered a solution of working toward a peaceful relationship, and while that was cool, I deeply wanted to eliminate a relationship with her. If I could be real, there had been days over the past three years when I wished I’d never met Ashira Witherspoon. Too many times, I caught myself fantasizing about a do-over the day she introduced herself to me in *Brown Baristas*. I knew it wasn’t a look. Knew she went against the brand: my list. I was one thousand percent sure of it. But I allowed my flesh to overtake my good senses.

What’s more was how now, four years later, I was almost miserable. Alone with no woman and a daughter I had to quickly mature for to avail myself in ways a single parent transformed for the betterment of their child. Even having her beautiful, bright light in my world was complicated. I’d come home some nights to a lifeless building when she wasn’t here. I missed Chivon. Before her, my place here was an imposing, safe shelter. The house always seemed empty without her forceful nature. Mood-lifting sounds of her little feet stomping onto the floors as she ran, hopped, or jumped made the place feel vacant in her absence. I hated leaving my baby for the

night but accepted my fate as I'd been doing since I caught feelings for her mother.

“Help me, oh God, to accept my fate. Activate Apostle Paul’s resolve of each of ‘us remaining in the condition in which we were called.’ Lord, may I ‘learn the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.’ My heart is heavy with longing, but I know I lack nothing. As stated in Philippians four: I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.’ You’re my strength and strong tower when my spirit is adrift.”

And as a result of submitting to my flesh all those years ago, I had to figure out a fucking way to find contentment in my self-exiled wilderness.

“Mercy, God. Grace.”



ashira

Screaming the lyrics to Ragee’s “Do You,” a track produced by Young Lord, as he sang it, I temporarily forgot the level of annoyance I’d reached tonight. I loved this song—hell, I loved Ragee’s artistry. Seeing him here at *Club Sin* felt like a family reunion. Some of his band was here, and the two dancers on stage with him tonight I’d seen around the circuit. *Club Sin* was decent in size but patently smaller than the stadiums Ragee had been known to fill.

Bringing Cecil and our friends tonight may not have been the problem-free escapism I was hoping for. However, Ragee’s undeniable talent temporarily cured my frayed nerves.

A tap on my shoulder slowed my sway. One of the waiters reached over to yell into my ear, “They’re saying he’s closing his set now. So if y’all wanna beat the crowd, now is the time to make it backstage.”

I nodded, understanding my arrangement with Man when I called last week about attending the show tonight. Cecil had been lowkey upset with me for having Corinne, Shizu, and Peach come backstage to meet Raj and the crew without him when I joined his tour. So, I had to make this happen for him.

I flagged my arm to get their attention. Then I leaned in and shouted over the music, “He’s done. Y’all wanna head to the back now?”

Cecil and Shizu shook their heads. “He ain’t sing, ‘*Blue*’ yet. You know that’s what he’s going to close to, and I’mma go straight jacket in this bitch!”

“Yeah!”

“Okay. I’m going to potty,” I informed them. “I’ll go to secure the spot until you guys are done fighting through the crowd.”

My last words fell on deaf ears as they went back to the show. I looked over to my left, where the waiter was with a single security detail waiting. After grabbing my purse, I explained I’d be going alone. The two gentlemen sandwiched me on our way to the back of the club as we threaded the sea of teeming onlookers, entranced by the vibe Raj had set.



I sighed, appreciating an empty bladder while sauntering out of the ladies’ room and into the hallway. My buzz remained reasonable, and I looked forward to post-club drinks as I brushed off the lent apparently picked up from drying my hands in the restroom. I was feeling the new, gold one-hundred-twenty millimeter *Louboutins* I paired with leather harem pants and a thin tank bodysuit revealing the sides of my breasts. The thirty-five-inch gold necklace with a triangular

pendant either distracted or forced you to zero in on the contouring view of my chest.

The sounds of chatter ahead had my gaze ascending. Immediately, my steps halted.

You've got to be fucking kidding me!

Every ounce of irritation I had from earlier had suddenly returned in spades. I continued down the hallway in hopes of seeing Man. I'd cuss his ass completely out, not caring he's now the official owner of this club. In fact, he should be my exact target for this in the first place.

"Excuse me," someone had the nerve to call out when I brushed passed the crew gathered in the hall near the door. "We're waiting in line."

I had no idea who shared those useless words, but to them, my response was, "And you'll continue to wait."

I opened the door to the room they were waiting near. It was the same one the waiter asked me to go into when I was done with the restroom. But the lavish room had been empty but for two people I was sure were Raj's crew.

"Is Man in here?" I asked.

When the two bulky men on either side of the room shooting to their feet shook their heads, another voice warned, "Don't be rude, Ashira."

That's when my head whipped to find the bold face I *knew* those words had come from.

"Let me ask you a question. Have I ever introduced myself to you as Ashira?" I asked Ava, to which she rolled her eyes. "Couldn't have because I didn't introduce myself. My daughter's father made the introduction. And I'm sure Ashira wasn't the name he used because I don't introduce myself to people like you as Ashira."

Ava shook her head, rolling her eyes away. Her friends huffed and puffed, some even daring me with their eyes. I didn't give a damn. The shit with this wormy bitch being too

familiar and intertwined in my world had gnawed at me to the point of pain already.

She was here. Ava and her crew came tonight to see Ragee perform at *Club Sin*. My mood took a nose-dive the second I'd seen them inside the main room earlier. And yes, I would have been irritated seeing her anywhere on the planet, but the fact that she was here, entertaining guests—at the place Jas had once owned primarily but had still been in the family of his businesses—disturbed me to a degree of agony.

Admittedly, it was weird seeing her dressed so casually in an *Asè Garb* monogrammed long-sleeved bodysuit with high-heeled *Saint Laurent* knee boots. The bodysuit was from the recent fall line, worn by the model during Fashion Week. I knew this because I'd worn my very own a few months ago and was sure little Miss Prolific Ava here knew as the images were all over social media.

Ughhhh!

She was like dust, just landing everywhere at all inconvenient times. I was generally an easy-going, upbeat, fun, and all-inclusive person for the sake of a good time. However, Ava Dallas, Jas' right-hand man at *Prism Built*, was one person I damn near hated. *I mean...* What was the point of her existence in my life? She was a pest...a nuisance...an interloper!

She tried tucking in her lower, high-glossed lip, maintaining her composed demeanor. "Please don't start. It's all good." Ava's head swung softly, side to side, stating the fucking obvious. "We're just waiting and all."

I shook my head. "No. It's not all good. You're always just...around. Couldn't you find another venue? You know my schedule. You know I'm off the road."

Her friends, three in all, had reactions. Two sucked their teeth, and the other mumbled something I couldn't make out beneath her breath. I'd never been so forward with Ava, but my emotions regarding her had never felt so imminent. I'd had enough!

Her brows met. “Another venue, Shi-Shi? Come on, aren’t we both adults? Man is family.”

Acid flushed my veins at that false familiarity. “Man is not *your* family. You’re an employee. You get paid and bossed around, Ava, by his best friend. I’m sure your ‘do girl’ duties had extended to the place a time or two over the years. You shouldn’t play where you get paid.”

She scoffed but controlled her volume when countering, “I’m free to go anywhere I please. I’m not on the clock.”

“Are you not? I’ve received texts and emails from you at ungodly hours.” Then I dropped my head to the side. “Or do I only receive those when you’re in bed with him?”

When her eyes widened, and her chin pulled in, Ava still appeared unruffled. A smooth and antagonizing smile darkened her face seductively. “Don’t go there.”

Between that warning and the gasps and snickers of her party, I was officially livid. So, I shrugged. “I know. I get it. His pipe is amazing—one of the best I’ve had,” I lied. Jas had pathetically been *the* best I’d had, but I wouldn’t tell her that. Wouldn’t demonstrate how narrow my experiences had been...or nonexistent. “But even with a child by him, I’m not stuck with my mouth around his balls.”

“Shi-Shi!” I recognized Cecil’s ‘grandmommy’ cry.

I turned to see my friends approaching but was too far gone to care.

“You’re pathetic,” I continued directly in her face. “You know that? Don’t you have a *Blakewood* degree? One of the most distinguished in the world, all just to work as a damn apprentice.” I scoffed. “Who the hell from *BSU* becomes an apprentice for a home-building firm? First joke!”

“Hey!” one of her friends interjected. My hand quickly shot up to cover her face from my peripheral.

Ava hushed her quiet. That shit infuriated me, too. Ava was no damn damsel in distress. She was no angel. The woman was calculating and long-suffering. I just didn’t get her end game.

“My alma mater doesn’t produce apprentices of that kind. And what’s your title now? Personal, dick-sucking assistant?”

“Whoa!” Man appeared, his hand in the air. “The fuck’s going on?”

I pasted my palm on one hip. “Oh, there you are! Who’s idea was it to have Ms. Dallas here the same night as me?”

Man’s palms pushed into the air. “Both y’all wanted to come. What you saying, Shi?”

“What I’m saying is stop mixing us as though we’re the same! I don’t know her and don’t want to be in the same circle as her. Whatever Jas has going on with her is their business, *but damn!* How long am I expected to be forced into this fake ass community with her as though I don’t get to choose who’s in *my* life?”

“Yo, Shi-Shi,” Man’s tone, stance, and dialect was Harlem for sure. “That’s between you and that man. I ‘on’t see why you trippin’!”

“Because I’m tired of *not* tripping! Show some respect, and don’t mix us ever again.” Shizu neared me, rubbing my back and gently asking me to calm down. “I’m tired of being calm. Tired of being tired while this manipulative, unambitious, no-life-having, sneaky link has privy to my world!” Then I looked Ava dead in the eyes. “You can fuck *him* and not fuck *with* me.” I leaned into her with my ear. “Or does he not want you?”

“Shi-Shi!” Corinne barked.

“No. It’s okay,” Ava finally thought to speak, shaking her head while bouncing her palm against the air. “You’re absolutely right, Shi-Shi. This has gotten out of control. I’ve been nothing but nice and attempted to be resourceful to you since the day we met. You’ve been cold, nasty, and insecure.” A few people wheezed. “I’ve taken your cruelty over the past four years, understanding one silver lining: you’re an example of what not to be.”

“And what am I?”

“Blind. You have a woman’s fantasy: the world at your beck and call. One request, and you can be on a jet to *Saint Justin* within an hour. You need accommodations for your next girls’ trip to celebrate a birthday, just pack a bag and build your itinerary. You’ve got last-minute plans, and childcare is a hindrance, all you have to do is send a text, and you’ll be free to go within thirty minutes. If you’re lonely and tired of playing super-achiever, a text can get you the company you crave all night—or weekend if you play nice.” Fuck! She was referring to me sleeping with Jas over the years since having Chi-Chi. How did she know about our sex life—when it existed? That shit braised my skin. “You want a man to support you and spend everything at his disposal on keeping you happy and safe?” She shrugged with a lascivious grin. “All you’ve got to do is open your eyes.”

What?

I could feel the muscles in my face contorting.

“Okay. I get you don’t like seeing another woman with so much access to your ex-boyfriend. But, Shi-Shi, let’s make one thing clear: I don’t want a man who is so far up another woman’s ass that she can’t find him because she can’t see or feel him. Where would that leave me? *That* is the silver lining. *That* is what you’ve taught me. Always appreciate what you have at your disposal and stop traveling the globe searching for goods you already own.”

Then her face dropped, and Ava paid her companions a cursory glance. “Let’s go. Maybe when he hits the *Garden* or *Hotep*, we’ll get the privilege others here can’t recognize.” Her eyes rolled to me. “Am I attracted to Sinclair?” She shrugged so casually. “Perhaps when I met him. He’s a handsome, rugged, kind, filthy rich, spiritual, and brilliant brother. But once I saw where his heart was, which didn’t take long at all, my attraction waned. I’m not desperate. And no; I’ve never touched him, and he’s never laid a single hand on me. It’s pretty gross considering his devotion to another woman and one who’s so indifferent to him.” Ava visibly cringed and then took off, followed by her friends.

By this time, I was speechless and stunned. The narrow hallway had filled to its capacity, with even more people having populated since I'd left the ladies' room.

"Everything good here," a deep subterranean timber sounded. It was louder within seconds and Ragee's burly frame appeared. "You good, Shi-Shi?" His eyes were wild, body defensively postured with his chest hiked and face screwed mostly with concern.

I should have been thrilled Raj recognized me right away and in front of my friends. Maybe I should have been embarrassed, but I was too angry to be. I felt crazy and out of control, but not insane. This was what it took for me to finally voice my truth after all the years of her lurking the parameters of my world via emails, texts, calls, meetings, personal parties—my life!

I took a deep, calming breath, realizing how much of a show I'd caused. My eyes closed tightly, then rolled beneath my lids. "I'm sorry, Raj. I really am."

"Nah. It's all good." He tried, towel still in hand for his sweaty frame. "I ain't even know you were here. What's good?"

I shook my head. "My people wanted to meet you. We're celebrating a birthday," my energy audibly depleted at this point.

"Oh, word?" Raj gazed around, referencing my crew. "Let's take some flicks and get some merch to the birthday celebrant. Come on." He rounded me for his room.

Cecil squealed then his big, grizzly ass leaped in the air, swinging his feet toward his ass. "I thought I was gonna have to fuck her up then do you next, bitch," he grumbled before following the small line into the room.

"Can you go keep an eye on him?" I asked Corinne, not in the mood to fake pleasantries.

"You sure? I don't want to leave you like this." Her hand was on my back.

I nodded, fingering my edges, avoiding my face because of the makeup. “I’m done showing my ass. But he’s about to start.”

“I got her,” Shizu assured. “Go get that boy before we all get kicked out.”

Corinne took off, and I realized Man was still there. I rolled my eyes at him. Yes, I was mad at him, but I understood his position. It still stung, though.

“Like I said, Shi-Shi: you gotta take that up with Sin.” His voice, cadence, and dialect sounded much like his friend’s, reminding me that they were not for the feminine dramatics.

It didn’t matter no ways.

“As a matter of fact.” I snapped my fingers. “I will!”

Chapter Eleven

Part III

March | Three Years Later

ashira

It was bold of me to let myself in under these circumstances. Jas now used a keypad, giving the option of entering digitally or inserting a key. Of course, I didn't carry the keys to his home, but because of Chi-Chi, I'd always been given access. Tonight, I was using it, not wanting to disturb Juggy, likely the only person here with him.

Was I ready for this conversation with Jas? I'd asked myself that very question all the way over the bridge from Harlem when I abruptly parted ways with my crew after their meet and greet with Ragee. Being preoccupied with this impending conversation with Jas, I didn't have the mental capacity to think of how I'd make it up to Cecil.

The house immediately doused me with a warm, tranquil, inviting energy. It flickered a memory of my first visit to the *Lake Sha'ron* estate, the plushness screaming wealth, but also its vibe that offered promising practicality. I recalled thinking this was an *Airbnb* rental Jas managed to get his trade-stained hands on to impress me. I even believed his magical efforts

had worked before learning the name on the deed. The peaceful calm still remaining from that first spring day lightened my mood, convincing me of the potential success of my impending announcement to Jas.

The foyer was dim, smelling of a winter bouquet. Muffled sounds pushing from the lower level could faintly be heard. But as I journeyed along the dark wooden floors, a soft glow appeared from the family room—or den. I hadn't decided on the type yet, seeing there were two community rooms here on the lower level other than the living area and dining space.

A stroke of a musical chord rented the air, slowing the stride of my heels. My heart rate increased, and the muscles in my face collapsed. Too sharp was the memory of...the anticipation of intimacy. A breathy chortle sounded next, causing my belly to flip. Suddenly, I was transformed into the gatecrasher, but couldn't turn away to leave. *Could it be Juggy entertaining?* My desperate hopes wanted the satire of Jos-Renee being in that room with him, confessing her undying love. Why? Because that would counter the nightmare knotting my belly.

Another key rang out, followed by several more, creating a jingle. I crept closer to the room's entrance, being sure to rest in the shadows. There were candles and...rearranged furniture. That shit nearly wiped me clean out. It brought back my first visit here again when Jas and Juggy cleared out this very room for me to rid Jas of his jailhouse virginity. And now, there was a similar set up, just not as rearranged, less candles, but a feminine presence was amid the romantic aura.

I recognized him almost right away. Jas sat on the plush antique-styled sofa with cabriole wooden feet. His long legs were crossed, giving him a rare cosmopolitan appearance as his chin rested on his curled fist. His smile was through his eyes, and contentment widened his face into a doting grin. *At who?* Chi-Chi was home, long asleep at this hour. Toeing backward, being sure not to have the heels of my boots clack against the floors, I finally got a view of his subject.

She's a...woman...

Tortilla-hued skin with a curly, tapered Betty Bop cut in the traditional jet-black tint. Her jewelry was modest in size but expressive with studs and miniature hoops running the entire crest of the earlobe I could see of hers. She was tiny... petite. A Black woman, I surmised after a few seconds of studying each feature of hers I could make out. The long floral dress she wore with combat boots told me lots about her style: contemporary hippie, modest in cost, yet intentional.

She played for nearly a minute before rolling her head over her shoulder to peer back at him and giggling breathily. “Are you really going to make me do this? I told you it’s been so long.”

Jas nodded, then he smiled—actually fucking smiled a smitten fucking smile. “I tried to make it easier for you by having your back to me.” His tone was soft, appealing, and engaging.

I’d seen the man converse with countless women over the years, but never in a romantic gesture or pursuit. I couldn’t even determine if he’d been so “soft” with me when we dated. This was weird, and I should have left, but I couldn’t pull my eyes away from this romantic scene.

“Okay,” she exhaled softly, pretending defeat when turning back toward the keyboard he’d arranged in there for her.

Within seconds, she played again. A soft melody ensued, and I listened with a fixed gaze on Jas. The solo was simple but effective. It had him locked in. His head tilted to the side as though he paid keen attention to the notes. Innocuously, his tongue grazed his lips. It wasn’t a seductive gesture behind her back, I knew, but every movement interested me. Similar to Chaka Khan’s claims, with each chord, she strummed the nerves of my belly.

She played, and Jas observed as I admittedly stalked. Helplessly. Jas was with another woman.

I’m back outside...switching gears again in life. To be real, I’m looking for somebody...for me.

Speaking of which, I was just about to let you start fuckin' other niggas.

You're good on seeing who you want...except him.

Those were his words. That and the fact of him not touching me in nine months. Jas had reset the rules at some point, and I didn't know it. There was a changing of the tides, a shift in the dynamic between us. Had my animosity for him been so thick I couldn't hear him?

See him...

Jas' eyes were on me. Quietly, he stood and promenaded my way. Once he crossed the threshold of the door, I began backing away, slowly cognizing the situation. My mouth hung agape, eyes wild. I didn't know how to begin to center myself.

"Everything good?" he asked thickly.

Guilt washed over me for the way my body responded to even his voice. I backed into a wall with him crowding over me. Jas reached over to flip on the light switch. The sudden illumination blinded me, and I blinked successively but still caught him scanning the area.

"Are you on a date?"

Jas peered over his shoulder. "Yeah." Then he spoke to her as she approached, having been made aware of my presence, too. Back to me, he asked, "You good?"

I nodded successively, feeling so awkward. "Ye—yeah! I didn't..." After a deep breath, I asked, hardly audible, "Is this a date?"

Jas turned again, this time his whole frame pivoted, inviting me to a direct view of the woman. "This is Josie." He tossed his chin. "Josie, this is Chivon's moms, Shi-Shi."

The woman had beautiful doe-shaped eyes with dark irises matching her hair, it seemed. The fuchsia lipstick paired well with her complexion, and she had me convinced her lashes were natural.

Then it happened.

My face split into a full smile. “Hi, Josie!” I waved. “So sorry to interrupt. You’ve been playing for a while? You sound good.”

Josie’s attention admiringly swept up to my child’s father. *My Jas*. She gushed. “Thank you. Not really. I told Ojasvi I played up until high school. Life got hectic for me. Hormones took over and I lost interest. Then...” She giggled, swinging her arm back to the room he rearranged for her to play for him.

Ojasvi?

That reference answered my question about their date.

My beam receded to a deep grin as I acknowledged Jas. “You are a fan of the arts, aren’t you?”

He loved my dancing, never making a secret of it. Always had supported my choreography efforts.

Josie’s expression darkened to confusion as she continued to look to Jas for assistance. Then she laughed and tossed her thumb backward. “I’m going to give you two a minute.”

“It was nice meeting you, Josie.”

“You, too.” Her eyes sparkled. “I follow you on social media...have been since the *Asè Garb* commercial.” Her eyes fell. It was fine. Just as it was awkward for Josie to have appreciated my work, it was for me to have met her this way in my personal world.

Ojasvi.

“Thanks so much for that. I promise not to take up too much of your time.”

She nodded, smiling, before returning to the room.

Jas followed as I sauntered into the foyer, this time allowing my heels to meet the floor.

When I turned to him, I almost forgot why I had stopped by.

And I didn’t have to. “Man hit me up almost an hour ago. What’s the problem with Ava now, Ashira?”

In a flash, my anger had returned and, with it, the reminder of my visit. But somewhere back in the hallway, watching them...him...I lost my stamina.

Unable to feel my lungs, I answered, “I don’t trust her.”

“But what did she do?”

“That’s the thing: she does too much. Too much for you, which in turn gives her privy to my personal life: my businesses, my travel, my child. I was never asked if she could have access to sensitive pieces of me. You worked out a relationship with her before *Prism Built*. I didn’t get it then, but didn’t feel it was my place to say anything. Now,” I sighed, exhausted at this point by it all. “...she’s been to *Della*, my dad’s home countless times, to my sister’s mother’s funeral—she’s everywhere you are. I didn’t sign up for Ava. You did.”

Jas shifted his weight, leaning into his pelvis with crossed arms. “And how do you suggest we reconcile this?” Far gone was the thug from Harlem who pummeled my ex-boyfriend to the point of gut-wrenching wails.

Was this his professional deportment because the topic of conversation was his employee, or had Jas’ bravado been neutralized by Miss Betty Bop Josie in there?

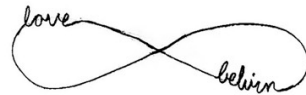
Another wave of exhaustion, followed by a deluge of defeat, washed over me. All I could do was shake my head. “You’re keeping your company waiting. I’ll let you figure out the details of removing Ava from my and my daughter’s lives.”

Just before I turned to leave, Juggy appeared from the adjacent hallway. He wore a housecoat, a matching thermal set that he looked to be swimming in, grandpa slippers, a black skully cap, and his trusty oxygen tank. His face wrinkled upon recognizing me. Then his head swung to the right, which was the direction of the family room—or den. Juggy looked my way again, taking in my long coat and tall boots.

“Damn,” he muttered. “You good, Sin?”

Jas turned away from him while shaking his head. Juggy studied my presence for seconds more before hanging a right; I was sure for the kitchen. He didn't speak, and I believed he understood that for me, it wasn't a good time.

I couldn't even look at Jas. "Goodnight," hardly pushed from my throat as I finally left his home.



April | Three Years Later

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "jas". The letters are stylized and cursive, with a small blue dot above the 'j'.

"Oh!" Monk called out from the entryway. He clutched the door as he craned his neck to look inside. "Doobie from one-fortieth and Lennox coming home next month."

"Oh, word?" Man's forehead lifted.

"What he do?" Jug croaked. "Fifteen on a armed robbery?"

"Try twenty-two on a AR and attempted." Monk shook his head. "He popped the owner of the jewelry store, just ain't off him."

I sat back on the sofa in Man's office at *Club Sin*. We'd just finished chopping it up with Monk from another building in my projects. When he heard I was around the way today, he popped up to show love. After two short bids in the pen himself, Young Monk finally got his shit together, running a boxing gym around the way that Man helped fund a few years back. He was a good dude, just needed a few years to tire out that monster in him.

"We tryna do something big for his touch down party. Real fuckin' big, nah mean? 'Member he dropped a few for us back

in oh-seven?”

No one agreed verbally, but we knew. We understood the exact reference.

“What you got in mind?” Man asked, then reached for his brandy for a swig.

“Some epic shit. Food, drinks, bitches, trees... Man, fuckin’ water.” Monk lifted the *Yankees* cap to scratch his scalp. “What about Sin’s crib out in Jersey?”

“Pause!” Jug croaked loudly.

“Aye, man!” Man sat up in his seat, alarmed at the same speed. “That ain’t possible, and you know it. A bunch of *Harlem Pride* niggas at the O.G. crib? Next thing you know, them young hoppers gon’ be back on some snake shit with them thangs.” He curled his thumb and extended his index finger to mimic a handgun.

“And you know a nigga there all the time, and I stay hot with the steel.” Jug used his arms and hands to gesture a rifle.

“A’ight, man.” Monk smirked, but was obviously disappointed. I had no idea why. The nigga knew that plan wouldn’t fly. I’d never thrown a *Harlem Pride* party at my place. The closest to it had been my daughter and her mother’s parties. “That shit would be up and stuck as fuck.” Shaking his head, he finally left the office, closing the door.

“That muthafucka crazy as hell! The fuck?” Juggy grumbled.

Inclining toward his desk, Man blew it off, mumbling, “He should know better than that. Anyway. What it do, my nigga?”

Jug gathered us tonight to kick it. Man was now the sole owner of *Club Sin*, but even before that, here was where he spent most of his time. I was around the way at the tea shop, kicking it with Frankie about business, and agreed to meet up here. It was good to see Jug out of the house. He’d been laying low for months now.

“Look, man.” Jug waved his hand to communicate. “Y’all been my niggas since the birth of me and will be to the death,

ya heard. Niggas know ol' Jug ain't no bullshitter; I shoot my shit straight. Y'all know I been fucked up for a minute now. This shit ain't getting no better. A nigga feel like..." He hesitated. "Fuck it. A nigga living in his last days."

Damn...

Man sat back in his seat, sighing hard from frustration. Seeing Jug's health decline all this time had been hard, but hearing him talk death was fucking painful.

"Nah. Nah!" Jug argued with his hands, accurately perceiving our displeasure with the topic. "Just hear me out, my nigga. Just hear me the fuck out!" he barked. "I'm gonna always keep it real. You know we all on a journey. None of us know when the shit gon' end and the credits gon' start to roll. I'm G'd up for life. Came into this bitch swinging, but I'm going out salutin'."

"Come the fuck on, man," Man groaned, raking his face with a hand.

"I need to make sure my kids eat when I go, nigga."

Man smacked his teeth. "Fuck you mean? They gon' eat. You set that shit up. They eating good now *and* when you go. Whenever any of us go. You know that shit!"

They were taking brolic tones with each other, not being disrespectful, but out of frustration from the topic.

Juggy's head swung side to side with heavy, droopy lids. "Nah, my nigga. I mean long after I'm gone. I put in work and got them *M's*, but I need to make a few more investments for them to be set for life or, at least, longer than what I'm sitting on now is gonna do."

Man's fist slammed against his desk, rocking the shit. "And how the fuck is you gon' do that?"

"I got some fuckin' ideas, Man. I ain't asking for no fuckin' handouts, my nigga!"

Man's eyes blew the hell wide, and he asked me, "Did I fuckin' say he was asking for a—" He turned to Jug. "Why the

fuck would I say you asking for a handout? We doin' that, nigga?"

"I'm tryna prepare for my seeds, muthafucka, and you here bitchin'!"

"Nah, nigga!" Man shouted. "You here on some death shit. Like...you giving up!" He jumped to his feet and grunted to me, "Yo, talk to ya mans. You got more patience for bullshit now." He grabbed his drink and left us in the office. "I got shit to do downstairs."

Jug sat back and exhaled. I knew him well enough to see his brokenness. My niggas lack emotional intelligence and proper communication, two skills I'd been working on for years through therapy, and trying to master.

I brought my elbows to my knees. "You know he ain't mean no offense. Right?" Jug, stuck in his feelings, didn't answer, but I knew he was listening. "We ya family, bruh. You being down like this been fuckin' with us, too. Nah, it ain't shit we cry all day about. But trust: you being sick with some shit we can't even find a diagnosis for is fuckin' with all of us. It's the death shit."

Jug sucked his teeth. "The 'death' shit. 'Death' shit," he repeated with cynicism. "Okay!" He wouldn't even look at me. But, again, I understood his feelings.

"You scared. I get it, bruh. Shit, I cry when praying for you. That fear shit ain't no joke when it comes to ya kids and homies. Nobody said this shit would be easy, but we swore we'd ride the damn wave. All I'm saying is be more optimistic."

Jug scoffed. "Nothing 'bout Jesus doing a miracle?"

I scratched the side of my face, subconsciously enjoying the feel of the bristles on my cheeks catching beneath my nails. "What He's capable of is what I'm sure of. It's what He'll actually do that I ain't got a clue on, bruh. But my faith is strong...and my prayers are regular."

Jug shook his head, exhaling again, though his lungs were weak. If I could guess, he struggled to believe anything good,

whether it was my faith or simply his karma. Jug was down on the inside. That was a dangerous valley to reside in.

“You sure you ‘on’t wanna come out East with us?”

His eyes met mine. “You and Shi-Shi?” I nodded uneasily. He wrinkled his mouth. “Shit. I go out there with y’all, my ass ain’t coming back. Y’all niggas’ll kill me! On some heart attack shit.” My head dropped back as I laughed. “I’m better off dying here on U.S. soil from some shit I ‘on’t know than fuckin’ with y’all.” I cracked the hell up. Jug wouldn’t even look me in the face, but the nigga found it funny, too.

I stood. “My bad on Man bailing like that. He ain’t mean no harm. We’re just tryna cope and keep our hopes up.” I slapped my chest, trying to loosen the tension of the topic. “Ya kids’ll eat whether you’re here or in another dimension. But you ain’t going nowhere, man.”

“Word? How you say that with your chest?”

“Because who’s gonna replace you as my protector? Ain’t nobody built for this shit like you.”

I tapped his shoulder, excusing myself, before taking off for the door. I was hungrier than a motherfucker and had a double with cheese, all the way calling my name from *B-Way Burger*. The one closest to here in Harlem tasted better than the two near my crib in Jersey. I was ready to chow.

“Shi can.”

I turned back to Jug. “Pardon me?”

He twisted in his chair with poked lips, his head bouncing slowly with confidence. “You know me, fam. A good bitch ain’t good for nothing but a warm and clean house and a warm and clean pussy. I ‘on’t need much. But that one? Shi-Shi built right. She a mean ass dog with hers. Heart is solid like a solider. She got all her shit together but that attitude.”

I scratched my brow. “Jos-Renee had everything Ashira has: a steady job, own her shit, education, keep herself looking good, cook, and clean.” I shrugged, trying not to clown his ass. “What’s the difference between the two women?”

“Jos ass ain’t loyal. She ain’t patient either. You know my code, bro. I may have fucked up, and you took that bid because of my dumb shit. But when you went down, I stayed solid. You came home with the same level of respect and protection you left this bitch with. Jos-Renee?” He spit air, swinging his head. Jug couldn’t even finish his answer. “All I’m saying is Shi-Shi pop mad shit, but her prissy ass ain’t fuck another nigga, and she still here in her own way.”

“Because we got a child together, G. How far can she go?”

“Nigga, I got three baby mommas. All three of them bitches was out of my life and on to the next lick before my kids was one.”

I pointed over my shoulder with my thumb. “You forget I just hemmed up her pussy ass, movie star ex when she was out with him?”

“Yeah,” he chuckled. “Shi a wild one for sure. She ain’t pressed, though. Remember, you ain’t stop fuckin’ lil’ sis until *you* made the call, not her. You can’t leave a bangin’ ass dime piece like that with no attention and no lovin’. Man, of course, she gon’ fuckin’ roam. She ain’t being tended to.”

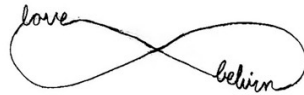
“The fuck, Jug?” I barked, surprised and offended by him knowing such personal shit.

“Aye, man,” he snickered, arms moving in the air. “I may be down, but I ain’t out. I know shit. Some shit I ‘on’t say ‘cause I’m still figuring it out, but I know. Shi-Shi got her shit with her, but she been a dog. Shortie ain’t ya average. My money’s on her, bruh. Fuck that.”

“I thought you said we weren’t right together.”

“Yeah...” His head bounced, eyes toward the floor. “...but y’all asses ain’t no good apart either; I see now.”

His ass had been grumpy lately, or at least, that’s what Chivon said about him. I chuckled as I left out for delicious greasy beef.



ashira

“And one, and two, and three. Now go!” I snapped my fingers then watched Sherry fall in a swirling maneuver to the ground. “And one, and two, and three. Now go!” I snapped again and observed Kiera do the same. “And one, and two, and three. And...” Then it was my turn to execute the same technique. Once done, I held in half a split position as they were. “Did you see that?”

“Yes!” Kiera cringed and dramatically screeched, then slapped the floor in frustration.

“Your timing at the start was better this time.” I suggested, “Maybe you got anxious about crossing over into my timing and sped yours up.”

Sherry swung her leg around to stand, then Kiera and I followed.

“I’m going to work on it some more. It’s killing me that I can’t get this shit!” She groaned, annoyed.

I checked the time, trying to be sure I stayed on schedule today. After leaving the dance studio, I had to head to *Kucheza* for a meeting. Then Chi-Chi and I were baking cookies and painting each other’s toes with clear nail polish to protect the pedicures we’d gotten yesterday. I loved letting my princess pretend to be a nail tech on me. She’d roll her eyes, waving her hand and neck, and suck her teeth as she made up conversations, mimicking what she’d see at the salon. But what made it funny was the stories she’d “make up” were her Gam-Gam’s latest rants. Jas’ mother, Charmagne, was a colorful character even to her granddaughter.

“Oh, shit!” someone shouted behind me.

I turned to see a group had gathered near the table.

“She better watch out,” another advised.

Rotating my shoulder by windmilling my arm in the air, I ambled over to them. “What’s going on?”

Everyone was so entranced.

“It’s that little heifer, Jenn ‘the Bull’ Davies talking mad shit about Tori McNabb!” Mel finally answered me.

“Didn’t she say something just last—” My attention was taken by the video Denise played from one of [*Spilling That Hot Tea*](#)’s social media platforms.

Jenn, a middleweight boxer, was seen on Ocean Drive in Miami by *TMZ*. The “reporter” asked her about Tori McNabb’s comments about not knowing who Jenn was when interviewed last month.

Tori had been in retirement for almost five years now, but Jenn didn’t believe Tori was unfamiliar with her. She felt Tori disrespected her by saying she didn’t know who the new, undefeated middleweight champion of her division was. Since that interview, the young “Bull” had been taking shots at Tori, calling her old and out of shape. She challenged Tori to a workout session together.

Tori’s assistant replied by uploading a video of one of Tori’s workout sessions where the retired champ was putting my ass to shame with her stamina. The woman had children and still maintained a mean six-pack. Tori commented under her assistant’s post: *Young buck couldn’t afford time in my gym. Six belts, four titles, undefeated. She’s gonna need more than a workout session with me to get on my level. She can’t afford a session in my gym.*

That had the internet and traditional news outlets all a buzz. Tori had been leading pretty much a quiet life since retiring. She’d gotten married and began having babies virtually back to back. So, having this rivalry played out publicly gave even non-sports fans a bit of entertainment. From her assistant’s video, anyone with a quarter of a brain

could perceive Tori's incredibly preserved physique to mean she still had a few rounds in her. I was sure she'd still be able to kick my ass.

Jenn, holding the femme woman's hand as they crossed the street, smirked and answered the *TMZ* rep, "I'm taking my girl shopping. Tell Tori I put my money in my bitch. Ask her if she wanna be my next bitch."

"*Ut!*" I gasped.

Mel covered her mouth, a reaction no different from my own. All the girls, in fact, had some type of dramatic expression.

"Y'all think Jenn would beat Tori?" Shawn asked.

Tinka, a newer member, offered, "Maybe."

Kaz sucked her teeth. "What year were you born?"

Tinka answered, "Two thousand-one."

Kaz scoffed. "You Gen Z kids wear me out. And they used to clown millennials about our social shit. Y'all have short-term memory and loyalty. Tori was just at the top of her game since you've been out of undergrad, and you bet against her."

Rolling her eyes with a dimpled smile, Tinka twirled away. "Whatever."

As the group laughed, my phone vibrated. Stepping away from the table, I noted it was Amy calling.

"Hey," I answered.

"Shi-Shi, look. I'm so upset I called Jas first. He's on his way over *here*—"

Panic flared. "Over where?"

"To your father's in Millburn."

"What are you two doing there?" I tried to think of the hour. "You guys should be back at home by now."

"That's what I'm trying to say. We were leaving Chi-Chi's playdate with Tabitha at the aquarium, and I got a call from your father asking where you were. Then he asked where were

Chi-Chi and I. When I told him, he asked for her to stop by, saying he had a surprise for her. I hesitated but obeyed. When we got here, I was brought to the living room, and Mr. Witherspoon took Chi-Chi, saying they'd be right back. I waited for ten minutes, then asked the housekeeper where Chi-Chi was. She told me to relax, she'd be back in a few minutes. I started losing my shit after another five minutes. No one will tell me anything. So, I called Jas, and he's on his way. Then I remembered Mr. Witherspoon is your father, and I don't want any bad blood. Then I thought to call you. Shi-Shi, I've been here for damn near thirty minutes separated from Chi-Chi!"

My head spun. This was all strange. My father hadn't called me all day. And why would Marabella not provide Amy answers to Chi-Chi's whereabouts in the house? Something felt off about this whole story.

"I'm on my way, Amy."

Chapter Twelve

Part III

April | Three Years Later

ashira

When I pulled up to my father's home, Jas had just arrived himself. He waited for me to head to the door before approaching it alone. I rang the doorbell several times then dialed my father's cell again while waiting. It took a little more than a minute before Marabella opened the door. The moment she recognized me, terror flashed in her eyes.

"Where's Chi-Chi?" I asked, shouldering my way inside.

"Shi-Shi, why are you so upset?" Marabella posed, closing the door behind a heavily observant and imposing Jas.

"Because my nanny called me upset that she's lost track of my child inside her grandfather's mansion. Why would you not just take her to see Chi-Chi? Why keep her waiting?" I moved again, pacing the foyer into the hallway for the main rooms. "Amy!" I called.

"Shi-Shi, I think there's been a misunderstanding," Marabella tried. "Chi-Chi's perfectly fine!"

“Amy!” I called again, ignoring my father’s housekeeper.

Just as I was about to call again, even louder, Amy appeared. The poor girl was completely flushed when exiting the great room where they obviously had her waiting for nearly an hour now.

“God!” Amy cried, visibly shaken. “I didn’t mean to cause any trouble, but she’s my responsibility!” A facial tissue was clutched in her fist, and Chi-Chi’s travel bag was strapped over her shoulder.

I turned to Marabella, who still tried to reason with me. “Jas...Ashira, Chi-Chi’s with her grandfather! She’s perfectly fine. I assure you!” I saw the tears mounting in her eyes from obvious fear.

Jas demanded, “Where?”

Then Marabella, unable to keep the tears within, covered her face and sobbed. “They’re in the solarium! She’s fine! I would never allow anything to happen to my girl!”

Registering the location, I began toward that wing of the house.

Behind me, Amy was still apologizing for the mishap. “I didn’t want to offend you, Shi-Shi, by only calling Jas. I’m truly sorry for all of this and will totally accept if you two think I mismanaged today’s event at all.”

“Don’t trip,” Jas’ voice was authoritative and comforting at the same time. “We’ll get this shit under control.”

I was too angry with my father and Marabella to provide Amy any support at the moment. She was obviously railroaded, but for the life of me, I couldn’t think of why? My father was no weirdo or perv. He wasn’t an unpredictable evil man who would harm my child—any child. Hell. His only other child was conceived in error, and the worse he did was ignore her. He’d never been violent or temperamental with us.

As we entered the vicinity of the sunroom, Chi-Chi’s laughter and apparent lack of awareness for the tension looming could be heard. “Nooooo!” she insisted, then giggled.

“You no see me!” Her titter was powerful and generous, something that warmed my icy disposition.

But what I didn’t expect to see seized my damn lungs.

“What is going on here?” I shrilled in utter disbelief.

My father removed his necktie from over his eyes, glancing every way until he found me at the door.

“Daddy!” Chi-Chi shouted before running to her father.

My father stood from the sofa, attention swiftly swinging to the last person I’d ever expected to see in this home again.

“Daddy, Pop-Pop try to get me!” Chi-Chi laughed, trying to describe a game it was clear to me they were playing, using his tie as a mask while she hid.

“You okay?” Jas asked Chi-Chi. She giggled while nodding her head; her rapt attention and humor were still on their game. “Okay. Amy’s gonna take you to get a snack. Daddy’ll be right with you,” Jas murmured before handing her over to Amy.

Balloons, several *Melanated Girl* dolls, a double stroller for dolls, and quite a few designer shopping bags filled with clothing populated the table and even the floor next to it. It was all the generous touchstone of one Celestine Witherspoon.

She stood from a sofa across from my father. “Good afternoon, Jas.” She smiled affectionately before acknowledging me. “Dear.”

“What are you doing here?”

Her beam deepened but without the tenderness. “Well, isn’t it obvious?” She smoothed down her pencil skirt distractedly. “I’m visiting my beautiful granddaughter.”

“Did you forget to check in with her mother?” I turned to my father. “What ruse was just played on my nanny? What is going on here?”

“Oh, calm down, Shi-Shi.” She waved me off dismissively. “Let’s exclude the dramatics. I’m her MeMa. I can have the

pleasure of seeing her whenever I like. It's called grandparent privilege. Even Jas spoils me with my cravings for her."

"Don't dismiss my concerns regarding my daughter." My attention bounced back to my father, heart still racing from having to come and search for my child. "And you. How dare you disrespect my staff this way? We're talking about a three-year-old! She was taken from the care of her nanny!"

"You don't think you're the only one who's employed a nanny, do you, Shi-Shi?" My mother's brow raised. Her gaze ping-ponged between my father and Jas. "You're here now. You see, it was just a visit from her *grandmother*—"

"I don't give a shit about her grandmother's wishes to see her. It's random. Selfish!" I'd lost my breath. "Just like you."

"Shi-Shi!" my father warned.

"Just chill." I felt Jas' hand on my arm.

"Awwwww! Look at the mommy, running to the rescue of her only baby," my mother heckled. She pretended to cry.

That surged my fury. "You know what? She will *always* be my baby. Even when her dad does things I don't want him to do, it would have *nothing* to do with my girl. That love is unconditional. Unlike yours. You're the most selfish maternal figure on the *planet*—"

"That's enough, Shi-Shi!" my father tried.

"No! It's true! She abandoned me as a child. Refuses to support me as an adult—even from afar. But wait. I guess I'm supposed to be grateful because you love my little girl. Right?" I wouldn't bite my tongue. For years, I lived with the pain of her abandonment. But today, I'd protect my baby girl. "Well, you can keep your conditional interest masked by love. I don't want her heart broken by it. I won't perpetuate it."

She broke out in a robust laughing fit while clapping her hands. It was rude. It was evil.

"Come on, Celestine," my father murmured cowardly. "You see she's shaken up. She's a mother now. You can understand her concern."

“I’m sorry.” My mother covered her mouth, trying to slow her amusement. “You’ll have to forgive me. It’s the irony!” She pinched her nose in an act of calming herself. “It’s just that very thing you accuse me of—” More snickering. “You forget DNA is strong.”

“Excuse me?”

“You.” My mother straightened. “Chi-Chi’s father did something in the past you didn’t agree with, like revealing his full identity. Because you’re so weak, he knew you’d run. When he finally disclosed his name, I’m surprised you didn’t run faster.” She spit out a giggle. “Then, when he absorbed your father’s firm in his acquisition, you ran. And when my little lamb was born—can you guess?” She slapped her palms together. “Yup. You ran again. You’ve been running her entire little life.” She pointed behind me to Jas. “Because of him and your resentment for him, you’ve not been a part-time mother to my lamb, but perhaps a quarter. No wonder MeMa goes to these lengths to see her. At least when you were that size, you had all of me all the time. Nothing in my world competed with growing and developing you.”

My father stepped in front of her, whispering, I was sure, pleas for her to stop.

She craned her neck to peer around his stout frame. “Oh, no. Sweetheart, don’t ever forget you’re my child.” Her eyes brightened, and her voice hiked. “Yes, *my* child! Your apple has fallen, but it hasn’t rolled far from the old root here. You don’t believe it? Look at how Chi-Chi ran to her father when you both barged protectively in here together. She didn’t see you. See. Same tree. Same type of apple. Different seeds.” My father’s voice raised, losing patience by now. “Oh, stop it, Noel! I will not be disrespected. Not by her. Not by anyone!” Then she stormed into the corner where her purse lay on the chair.

Completely shattered by her judgment, I left the room.



I felt her body trembling as she walked around me to leave the room. The sadness and fear in her face fucked with me.

Noel's pussy ass was at Celestine's side in the corner of the room, trying to talk to her. For comfort?

"Yo," I called out into the all-glass room. "I 'on't know what this bullshit today was about, but if you try it again, you'll cancel your 'grandparent privilege' with Chivon."

"Jas," Celestine was first to speak. "I cannot stand for disrespect," she cried. Crying. The lady showed emotion after her daughter left the room, running from a hail of verbal shots.

"That ain't got nothing to do with me. *But* about that. Your lil' flexing of me allowing you to spend time with Chivon can come to an end if her mother says so. I like you, Celestine. I really do, but don't get it twisted; it's for my daughter's sake. I'm about whatever it takes to give her the best life. And if that toxic shit between you and her mother spills out to her, I'll dead it."

"What are you saying?" Noel turned fully to face me. "We did nothing wrong here, and I won't allow you to disrespect me or my wife, Sinclair."

"You did nothing wrong? You just let her slaughter your child. Y'all may be with this shit, but I ain't. Don't involve my daughter."

"Wait a minute *here*—"

"Noel, yo..." My hand shot into the air while I made sure to control my volume. "I play nice because of my daughter and the respect I have for her mother. But be clear, you know I don't fuck with you. The minute you co-sign this beefin' shit

with my daughter's mother and her mother is when I don't play no more. You got that?"

"Jas!" Celestine fell into a full-on cry I couldn't give a fuck about at the moment.

The first time I'd seen her flex on Ashira down in *Della*, I didn't like it then but didn't get involved. Now that they were involving my child, I had to draw the fucking line.

Noel's punk ass turned away, in his wise way, telling me he didn't want the smoke. Understanding that, I left the room. Not ten steps in, Ashira appeared with heavy, red eyes. She looked so broken, so embarrassed. My fucking chest tightened and felt torn. A part of me wanted to go back in there and cuss the Witherspoons the fuck out and hope Noel's fat ass tried me so I could finally lay him out.

A bit of me wanted to hold Ashira and tell her she'd be okay: Chivon and I would always honor her in ways her mother didn't. Then there was the part of me who wanted to ignore her. I could go straight to the door and resume my day because this woman was strong. She didn't need comfort. Ashira was every bit of the dog Jug described her to be. Nothing could hold her down. Not her mother, who blamed her for her father's decision to cheat. Not growing up without a mother because she resented her. Not her father, throwing his company on her instead of allowing her to chart her own path. Not me, dragging out the process of revealing who I was when I knew the girl had fallen in love with me.

In an open wool trench coat hiding a fucking mesmerizing body in a leotard and tights with *Ugg* boots, I hardly recognized the badass boss bitch who ruled in the boardroom and took the world by storm using her body. She had been the it girl in dance entertainment virtually since I'd put a baby in her. Ashira's horizon was beyond my protective corner in the world I'd created strategically. She'd been worldwide with social media followers surpassing the one million mark. So many niggas wanted her, and countless women wanted her juice. She was a leader and a winner.

But now, she's a fucking bruised girl, being hurt and ignored again by her parents...

She couldn't even look me in the face for long. I'd left her hanging last month when her little sister played her over the Ava shit. There was no way I could do it now. Without thought, I pulled her into my chest, and before I could wrap my arms around her small frame, Ashira's arms were clawing at my back, and face nestled into my chest. I didn't believe she was crying; she didn't move, not even the tips of her fingernails biting into my shoulder blades. We remained that way for a short while. Then I felt her take three deep breaths, pulling air from beneath my sweater then discharging it. Before I knew it, Ashira released me.

She didn't speak; she just squeezed my hand before walking toward the front of the house. I followed, passing rooms and turning a corner where Amy and Chivon were in the hallway near the entrance. Not having a clue about the drama concerning her, Chivon danced and sang while holding a juice box. Ashira reached her first, falling to her knees and engulfing her in a hug. Amy looked to me for instructions. I forced a smile, knowing it was fake. Then I gripped our nanny's shoulder gently to attempt communication that way.

After a deep sniffle, Ashira kissed Chivon's cheek. "Hey. How about we head home now and get started on those cookies?" Her smile was sweet and tone so soft.

But Chivon's eyes were on me, then turned long. "I want go home, Mommy. I go home. I go to your house tomorrow."

Amy's shocked expression met mine. I tried remaining calm. Where had this thing come from where not only Chivon preferred being with me but only referred to my house as her home? She had two homes—two *good* homes. Right now, her mother didn't need to feel less than adequate. My baby had no idea what had been resting over her head the past hour.

Dropping to a squat next to them, I tried, "Baby, you're supposed to be home with Mommy today. Remember? You like baking cookies at your house with Mommy."

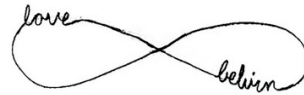
"No, Daddy. I go Mommy house tomorrow."

“Chivon—”

“No.” Ashira stood to her feet. “It’s okay.” She kissed Chivon’s head and forced a smile, but I saw the glossing of her eyes immediately. “She can stay at your place. I don’t want to upset her right now.” She cleared her throat. “Amy, you can take her to Jas’ place tonight. Call me if you need anything, though. Okay?” She took off before Amy could answer.

Falling back until my ass hit the back of my ankles, one word screamed in my head.

FUCK!



May | Three Years Later

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "jas". The letters are stylized and cursive, with a prominent loop on the 'j' and a long tail on the 's'.

“They don’t get the profit margin,” Sadik explained to a small group gathered on the deck of my home, just outside the den. “They come with all these ideas and focus on the cost investment, then wonder why they’re constantly losing money.”

I nodded, enjoying the view of the water. A passing thought of taking the boat out came and left as I peeped the small ripples.

“What was the most awkward business you purchased?” Man asked him.

“Ummmm...” he hummed, scratching his chin. “Maybe masters.”

“Masters?” Jug echoed.

Zebedee Baker blew out smoke from his cigar. “Music catalogue.”

“Yeah.” Sadik repeated, “Masters.”

“Damn! Like Michael Jackson,” Roberto Perez laughed. His accent was thick, but we followed the reference.

“That man is long gone with the fattest estate from buying up all those masters.” Zeb dumped his ashes into the tray.

“So, it’s like...real paper in that, Deek?” Man wanted to know.

“It can be.” Sadik shrugged, blowing out smoke. “For me, it was an investment in a music company someone I knew was launching. He had the talent but needed investors to roll out the business...advances, touring...all that.”

Roberto swirled his glass in his hand. “Which artists?”

“A few of *L.I.T. Music*’s earlier artists: B-City, Power-Grip, Liza Moon—”

“Oh, that crew,” Zebedee observed. “That was their first, first.”

“Yup,” Sadik agreed. “The earlier class.”

“B-City ain’t put out nothing in a minute. My cousin said something about the lead singer with the blond hair working at *B-Way Burger* or something.”

Zeb laughed one of those “knowing” chuckles. “Or something. They’ve been shelved, Sin. Contract trashed and future grim.”

“Yeah, but like...maybe two of their singles made me a bag. Licensing them for movies and shit like that,” Sadik explained. “That’s the trick of owning them.”

“I learned from Raj how you never know when a newer artist will reach out and ask to sample even something as small as the chord sequences or melodies,” Zebedee shared. “It’s insane.”

Sadik nodded, pulling from his cigar. My phones kept pinging with mostly birthday messages. Even Chelsea, who

was here, busy in the house, sent a link from her birthday post to me on *Facebook*. There were hundreds of likes and dozens of well-wishing comments beneath. It was sweet. She was sweet. I'd have to remember to read through them later.

"You still got them?" Jug asked. "The masters?"

"Most of them." Sadik nodded. "Yeah. I'm trying to buy Wally's."

"Word?"

"Lord ain't trying to give it to me, though." Sadik laughed.

"Why would he?" Zebedee asked rhetorically.

Wally had been one of the few new hip-hop heads constantly putting out hits. To be honest, the nigga couldn't be considered new after being out for around seven years. He was a wild one with arrests, DUI's, and public beefs, but that had seemed to fuel his music and following.

"Lord making money off his own," Jug surmised jokingly. "He shouldn't be selfish. Shit."

"Nah." Zeb shook his head.

"No, he's not." Sadik explained, "Lord don't own his masters yet. He's waiting out his term, but he'll get them from *L.I.T. Music*. He's good, though, because he's got the bread once the time comes. But he's also retained his publishing rights, so the nigga has never been a fool."

"Oh, damn," Jug breathed.

He and Man, on the low, always wanted to be in the music industry. Neither of their asses had a talent past Man's wack flow over Jug's human beatboxes. But both of them were hella curious about industry happenings.

"Time to cut the cake, fellas!" I turned from the water to find Corinne at the door of the deck. "Chelsea's calling." She smiled before taking off.

"Damn!" Roberto waited for her to leave. "That's the type of company you keep, Sinclair?" Luis, the guy he brought with

him today, cracked the hell up, grabbing his sack with one hand and dabbing up Roberto with the other.

“Yup,” Jug wheezed. “And that pussy worth every pound she weigh.”

Man’s head shot back, and he hooted hard enough for me to follow behind him. Jug was shot out. That was his way of telling Roberto to back the fuck off, which was hilarious because he and Corinne hadn’t fucked around in a couple of years, from what I understood.

“My bad,” Roberto offered humbly, understanding the play.

Zeb sat up from his seat on the sofa to dump his cigar. “Let’s get in there before we’re told again. I’ve been married for forty-five years and learned never to make her call me twice.”

Sadik was the first to laugh. “That’s a hard skill to explain to men who aren’t married at this age.”

“*Shiiiiit*,” Jug grumbled while everyone else laughed.

Zebedee and I were the last two to leave the patio, almost hitting the double doorway at the same time.

“Thanks for coming today, man.”

“My pleasure! Are you kidding me? I get to celebrate with you and see my girls at the same time. I can’t believe how big that little one is getting.”

I sighed. “And sharp, too. Y’all ain’t tell me how hard raising girls is. The little thing thinks she’s the damn parent: telling me when to go to bed, when to wake up...tries to come in the bathroom when I’m taking a dump. Man, I have to lock my bathroom door—been doing it since she started walking!”

Zeb shook his head, convincing me he understood my pain. “Wait till you get a lady and y’all start arguing, and she takes sides. If she takes your side, you feel bad for your lady. If she takes your lady’s side, your feelings are hurt.”

“Damn!” I patted my chest, feeling that shit already.

We found the crowd gathering in the dining room. Ashira entered from the other side, rolling in a big ass cake shaped as four corporate buildings in various sizes. It actually resembled my business park.

“Oh, damn!” my cousin Tanya shouted while flicking away with her phone.

“That shit lit!” Cousin Sean thought it was dope, too.

“Where’s Chi-Chi,” Lex added for clarity, “the baby?”

Why did I go along with a nickname spelled differently than her mother’s but sonically was the same? That was why it never caught on with me, and I referred to her simply as Chivon.

“She’s in her room napping!” my mother shouted in an answer.

Chelsea snapped pictures of the cake, too, as she asked, “You think we should wake her?”

“No!” Ashira, Consuela, Amy, and I managed at the same damn time.

The whole room seemed to react to that snickering. It was no joke. Chivon would be the crankiest little bear if awakened before her body was ready.

“If we want to get through any part of this event, we should let Miss Momma rest,” Amy sagely advised the room.

Consuela added while shaking her head, “Yup. She wouldn’t make for a great guest at her daddy’s birthday.” An echo of giggles rang out from that.

“Shi-Shi was like... *Unt-unt!*” Chelsea joked about Ashira’s strong and swift reaction to her proposal.

Ashira shook her head, emphasizing her decision. “*I’m wiser now. Think twice, act once now. Leaving the Glock in a locked box now,*” she rapped the lyrics to Young Lord’s latest radio banger, “*New Lord.*” Her hand and fingers formed a gun. “*Warn once, shoot twice now.*”

Her girls, Shizu and Corinne, joined in, “*Touch my lady, you see the flo’, clown. Fuck me twice, roll the dice, I fool you now. She ask for one; I give her two now.*”

What was once predictable wasn’t now even though it happened. Ashira snapped her fingers, kicked her leg into the air then dropped down into a butterfly twerk. She added a swinging technique to her hips as she quoted the next line. “*Two babies, four cribs now. Shit is smooth now, she claimed the crown now. Hijacked my name, pull up to the bank, withdrawing from my shits now.*”

The room went up in a mixture of laughter and shock, and I couldn’t help my reaction. Should we have been surprised by her antics? Likely not. Ashira was a natural performer. Good-hearted and funny to everyone in the room. It was cute. But not for me. Her ass was almost inches away, pointed in my direction. In just thin ass biker shorts, some of the baby fat leftover from Chivon’s gestation was still evident, and I knew this.

Unlike any person on the planet, I knew each inch of Ashira’s body by memory. That jiggle wasn’t there the first time I visited her place, four years ago when she was inappropriately dressed for company she didn’t know. Little did she know, I was a man who could’ve taken her pussy and snapped her neck with zero effort if my diagnosed proclivities had swung toward the path of sexual deviance. God knew she frustrated the shit out of me back then with her naivety and lack of awareness.

Still do...

That’s because I’d been cool on Ashira for about a year now, letting go of any hope I had of us being more than parenting partners. It had taken a while, but I slowly weaned myself from her hold as a couple and potential “forever.” It had been hard, yet a work in progress I’d been proud of.

But in this second, as I watched the effortless swinging act of her ass, I felt mesmerized. With shit being so crossed between us for so long, I’d forgotten this component of her personality. When her tongue pushed out and flipped up to

reach her top lip, I found myself fascinated by how wide and long it was. Had it been that long since I tasted it in my mouth and felt it flicker over my cock?

And when she stopped and smoothly stood with an expression morphing into something bashful, that shit turned me on, too. In that moment, I realized how long it had been since we'd been relaxed around each other. No, Ashira and I no longer shared the chemistry we once burned with. Casual conversations we once took on had waned to zero. Shit, the most passion expressed between the two of us was me beating her ex's ass while they were on a date about two months ago.

The chorus of the next few lines rang out in the room, snapping me from my crazy ass thoughts. Thoughts I hadn't processed in so long. *"Looking through my rear mirror before crossing lanes now. Fuck the money, fuck power, just my family now! On a beach, wow. No cameras, no rubbers, just my naked hoe loud."*

Ashira was cracking up with her girls. Peach had recited the lines, too, leaving out the profanity. Their chemistry was still strong and high-spirited, something I respected about the ladies. I mentally shook the shit off, not being able to afford to lose focus, which was something *she* was known to cause me to do.

"Alright," Chelsea laughed. "Alright!" She shook her head. "Leave it to Shi-Shi and her crew to start an impromptu concert—"

"We luh that shit, though!" my cousin-in-law, Antoine, shouted with his wife at his side, laughing.

Tyreek followed up with, "Word!" But I ain't like the look in his eye as he stared at Ashira lighting the candles on the cake. My cousin wanted to fuck my baby's mother since he got out of the pen last October after a four-year bid, and it was becoming more and more evident.

"C'mon, now," Chelsea tried again. "We don't have much time. The birthday boy doesn't care for the spotlight. Let's serenade him quickly before we get kicked out."

Laughing, she began the “*Happy Birthday*” song, and the group fell in line right away.

Shit. Chivon’s not going to like this...

It was my birthday, which fell on a Saturday. So the celebration took place at my crib. Admittedly, I was still uneasy taking all this shit in. I had no choice, though. Chelsea was going to find a way to celebrate my birthday, no matter how big or small. My family followed and listened to her, and unfortunately, Ashira would join forces with any celebratory plans my cousin conjured.

This year, I didn’t fight when Chelsea asked if they could do a small party here for me after I told her I didn’t want the formal dress-up shindig she originally proposed. This was our happy medium, and I guessed it was cool. What should have stopped at around twenty people on my mom’s side of the family extended to about fifty to include friends like Sadik and his wife, Bilan, Zebedee, Lex and her girl, Tasche, who came in Ezra’s place, my brother, Nicholas, and one of his little girlfriends, Corinne, Peach, and Shizu. Ashira’s girls were always down to celebrate. They were just as supportive as I assumed they were when we met. They’d even included me on their invitation lists a few times, although Ashira and I had been in an awkward place since she was pregnant with Chivon.

I made sure there were no gifts this year. It wasn’t something my family was into anyway. My friends, yeah, but I didn’t want the pressure for my family, who wasn’t wealthy like my friends and business associates. Which was why Man, Jug, Sadik, and I chilled in Connecticut last night, where they offered up their gifts. [Jordan Johnson](#) hosted us at *Arch & Point*, the official home of adult entertainment for the *Connecticut Kings*. [Ramsey Bishop](#) was in the building as well as retired professional basketball league’s [Stenton Rogers](#). My guys gifted me before we headed out to the venue. Jug ended up leaving early, something we anticipated. The smoke was too much for his lungs. Still, it was a good night, likely what had me weakening at the sight of Ashira’s sensual moves. One

of many things about the woman that had me going was her body and the way she expressed herself with it.

Like now. Being silly, Ashira made movements like a cheerleader, rocking a big smile as she swung her arms in the air, silently spelling out “Jas.” It was actually hilarious. So much so, she broke character and barreled over, cracking the hell up with almost everyone in the room.

Silly ass...

“You working that green sweater, Shi-Shi!” Brina, one of Jug’s lady friends, complimented out loud. It was a unique top with holes in the right shoulder she paired with biker shorts landing at her upper thighs. “And with those *Asè Garb* sandals! I love the gold heels.”

“Oh, thanks.” Ashira straightened, glancing down at her clothing. “This is old—well, my first time wearing it. It’s from the *Asè Garb* spring twenty-one line,” her words flowing slowly as though she wasn’t sure.

“Twenty-two,” I corrected her.

Ashira’s head shot up, and she looked at me. Was she shocked? Her jaw was slack when she explained, “I was pregnant then.”

I nodded and countered her memory. “You couldn’t wear anything from the runway when they sent you those clothes.”

Speechless, she examined my mouth before her eyes returned to mine. Did she think I’d forget? Shit that happened in her life was hard to. I was a nigga from Harlem, one with a long bid on his rap sheet. It wasn’t every day that we encountered people who traveled all over the world, dancing and meeting famous people. Even outside of the celebrity Ashira had created for herself, she had already been financially set by her pops’ business, the one she ran without him for years. The woman was a unicorn to me from day one.

So, hell yeah, I was going to remember when *Asè Garb*, on the strength of their relationship with her, allowed Ashira to pick pieces from their spring runway line. When they sent them over, she was going into her third trimester and cried as

she unpacked the boxes of shit they sent because she couldn't fit anything. The blouse was in there. I remembered the holes in the shoulder, wondering why would a top designer make something I found on the bums near the subway. The day she cried, I rubbed her shoulder and told her she'd be able to fit it all one day. When that didn't work, I ate her pussy to turn her sobs from sadness to bliss. Guilt—and fucking being hopelessly in love—would have you do crazy shit.

Breaking the tension, I turned away from her to thank everyone for coming out to celebrate me.



“I can't lie: I didn't know how you'd fair with her.” Sadik tossed his chin over the other side of the family room where Ashira was playing *Taboo*. She was up, holding Chivon in her arms, trying to describe a word or phrase. I could hear them in there, but was in a conversation with my guys on the opposite side. “When you told me you had a baby on the way, I didn't trip. Then when I got to know her and saw you two were just going to co-parent, I had my doubts.”

I scoffed. “Why?”

He sat back in his chair. “Because she's cut from a different cloth. Then right around the same time she got pregnant, her career took off. She's a mini-superstar,” he chuckled.

I plucked a grape from a charcuterie board on a nearby coffee table. They were all over the main floor for the guests. “She ain't no damn superstar. She just works with them from time to time.”

“Same shit, according to them kids on social media. And don't front: you copped my jet to aid in the lifestyle of her popularity. You forget I was there, lil' nigga?”

I laughed again. Deek was right. When Ashira's career had begun to ramp up to the point of her being exposed to all types of shit, I reached out to my friends with unicorn lifestyles like

Ashira's. Divine knew I needed protective eyes on her at all times when she traveled. So when I asked him, he recommended the agency I eventually contracted with. Bob was the first and primary guy assigned to her.

Before Ashira had begun traveling, I'd been on the road a lot. Actually, since my parole status dropped, I was on a plane, sometimes every week. I had to make my presence known to my affiliates in Cuba finally. There were networking opportunities to take on for *Por el Amor del Amor* and *Château Blevin*. There were distributing deals needed to be made as well as general expansion, not to mention developing opportunities for my building firm. I traveled more than ever in my life, which had become a growing expense.

So, it only made sense to cop a jet. They were fucking expensive, though, most out of my budget. Sadik came through with a deal for a reasonable price. Even after that, the maintenance and housing fees for the jet existed. Ashira's travel made the need even greater, making the jet one of my best investments yet.

"Yeah. Your ass was there. Still here," I joked, dropping my head back as though annoyed.

Deek chuckled. "You want more kids?"

I thought about that for a minute. "I want a wife."

He nodded, brows hiked. "They come with a price."

"Kids do, too."

"True. Both require sacrifices, but with kids, it's temporal."

"I think Chivon gon' be in my pocket forever unless she can find a lil' nigga who can afford her."

"That's the thing: kids go on and live their lives. Spouses stay and stay and stay—if you do right."

"Guess I gotta get one to get it."

"True. But you got it. I see the way you provide for Shi-Shi. You understand making sacrifices to protect your family...at large."

I laughed along with him. “Yeah. At large.”

“What y’all niggas over here tee-tee’ing about?” Man plopped down on the sofa next to Sadik. He reached for a slice of cheese off the board.

“I’m asking this guy if he’s really gonna allow Chi-Chi’s mom to get away,” Sadik answered.

Man scoffed, sitting back at an angle to view the opposite side of the room with his arm stretched over the sofa. “You asking the nigga that while he, on the low, trying to decide what he gon’ do about his cousin displaying blatant fuckin’ disrespect to said baby’s moms.”

Sadik’s head swung over in the direction Man was giving his energy. “The fuck?”

Ashira clutched Chivon in her arms while performing a two-step for her victory. As she slapped hi-fives with her team, Tyreek’s goofy ass, who wasn’t even playing, just watching for Ashira, stood to give her one, too. She met palms with him then turned to sit down on the couch. Ty continued to watch while holding his crotch. *In the same fucking room as my daughter, too.* This had been the fashion of his visit all damn day. It was beyond me being protective of Ashira. Nah. Even my dogs could peep his disrespect.

“I told Antoine and Shawn and ‘em to holla at my boy because he’s totin’ the line,” Man warned.

I reached over to grab a strawberry. “Say less.”

Chapter Thirteen

Part III

May | Three Years Later

ashira

The birthday song was just completed again by a smaller audience, this time as Chi-Chi kissed her father. Her small arms wrapped affectionately around his neck. The camera flashed, capturing Jas' unmitigated joy of being dotted on by his number one girl on the planet.

"Happy birthday, Daddy!" Chi-Chi played into the adoring energy of the room, emphasizing the occasion.

"Awwww!" a few sang.

My quick call to get another birthday cake just for her had been solidified in that moment. It made the decision to ask Jonathan as he was sneaking out of the house to go to the grocery store for a "few things to enhance the moods of the guests" worth it. He agreed to pick up a generic birthday cake if I'd keep my mouth shut about him going out in the first place. Jas would kick his ass, we all knew. I hadn't seen him since his return, which wasn't a big deal. It was nearing eight at night, and the party was still in full flow with people all

over the property: outside in the back and inside here on the first level.

However, one particular segment of the event was ending. Chi-Chi was leaving her father's birthday party. Amy was taking her back to my place. I knew the party could go on for hours and didn't think it was appropriate to have a three-year-old here while the festivities included wine, spirits, beer, cigars, and Jonathan.

Amy was still needed for the night. I, myself, hadn't planned on staying this long. My girls and I made plans to hang out in Brooklyn, but an hour ago, they asked for a change of plans. They'd already begun drinking and having a good time with Jas' family and decided to ride the night out here in *Lake Sha'Ron*. I acquiesced, seeing I'd been having a good time, too, other than picking up the weird vibes Jas' cousin, Ty, was putting down.

Did Tyreek think he had a chance with me? *Gross!* I had a baby with his cousin. Plus, Ty was really...gross! I'd been ignoring him and would continue to. In fact, now that Chi-Chi was leaving, I could have another drink. I took two shots with the girls and Chelsea while Chi-Chi was napping, but that had worn off by now.

"Love you, Blueberry," Jas' thick chords returned to his daughter.

They were certainly a sight, a permanent bond I was responsible for creating but was totally left out of. I was okay with that. Chi-Chi had a father who loved her just as mine had me. That was the best gift I could give, and was grateful it worked out for the two of them.

"Get in the pic, Mommy!" Lex encouraged, holding her phone in position.

Suddenly, dismayed by the idea, I shook my head. "Oh, no! That's not necessary." Remembering Lex was a first lady and likely "pro-family," I buffered it with a joke and smile. "I'm just happy I thought to get another cake so she could have this moment with him."

“I feel you,” Lex allowed it. “You know how we girls are about our daddies.”

“Mine wasn’t shit,” her friend, Tasche, interjected.

“Mine either, but I was still under his magic well into my adulthood.” Lex rolled her eyes.

“Time for you to go now, princess.” Jas put her down. “You look sleepy already.”

“I not sleepy,” Chi-Chi protested while rubbing her eyes.

I crouched down to help put on her jacket. “You did a lot today. You ran all around the property, ate lots of goodies, danced with Mommy, went downstairs to check on Uncle Juggy, and you even did Gam-Gam’s hair. Right?”

Chi-Chi nodded, and I took her hand to head to the door. Her father and Amy followed. All the way to the front of the house, people offered their goodbyes to her.

“You leaving?” A throaty, slimy timber sounded. It was Tyreek, standing just in the foyer with a few of Jas’ cousins.

Startled, I glanced around, noting Antoine, Quan, and Myron with him. Two of them shook their heads, while Myron couldn’t even look at me. They had to know Tyreek was a bit too forward. Why did men do this to women? If we showed no interest, why not back off?

“You good, TyTy?” an even crisper tenor rented the foyer.

Jas had walked up, slapping Tyreek on the shoulder, staying close to him as his body pushed forward. It was a rough-housing technique I didn’t understand. But *damn*, was I relieved Jas was there! I mean, I felt safe around all of Jas’ other cousins here today, but none of them felt as protective as Jas.

“Yeah, man.” Tyreek cracked a slick smile. “Just saying how fuckin’ blessed you are to have these two beautiful queens.”

Jas pointed to Chi-Chi. “She’s a beautiful baby. Her moms does well for herself, and she’s family. Amongst us all, she’s family, and family is guarded. You feel me?”

That was a message I'd need time to decode. Either way, I didn't like how Tyreek's expression morphed into a crooked smirk and empty eyes. He didn't respond, nor did Jas wait for him to before continuing with us to the door.

Jas gave Chi-Chi a final hug and kiss, and I followed her and Amy to the waiting car. While reaching inside to apply her car seat belt, I could hear chatter behind me.

"Muah!" I offered while giving her a final kiss. "See you soon, Chi!"

"Bye, Mommy!" She waved at me before I closed the door.

The car pulled off as I waved goodbye. A chill ran through me. All the month of May brought to New Jersey was a break from all-day cold temperatures. That was it. Because when the sun went down as it had hours ago, along with the blanket of darkness came a deep drop in degrees.

Rubbing my arms, I felt goosebumps beneath my palms. "Whew! I need a shot or a—" I turned to him and saw Jas finishing an embrace with Josie.

His attention arrived to me, and when she sensed the shift, Josie found me, too. "Oh! Shi-Shi, you're here!" She smiled.

I wrapped my arms around my torso and smiled, too, as I sauntered to them near the door. "I am. How are you, Josie?"

"I'm good." She beamed. I was sure to keep a comfortable distance not to give the slightest impression that I would greet her with a friendly hug. I was tolerant and respectful, two things I had still been waiting for Jas to exhibit regarding my dating life. "Sorry for coming empty-handed—I mean, I already gave Ojasvi his gift last weekend." She peered up into his eyes. Gosh, Josie was small. She had to be five feet two inches at best—with the heels she wore tonight. "I wish I could have brought something like a dish, but you said nothing was needed."

Jas shook his head before glancing my way. "My cousin, Chels, and Ashira took care of everything. You want something to eat?"

“Yeah. Can I use the bathroom first? I should have gone before leaving the house, but I was so excited about not being later than I already am,” she giggled.

Jas pushed open the door even further. “You know where it is.”

Josie didn’t take any time to go inside. I wasn’t too far behind her. When I reached the top of the steps, I asked, “She already has the benefit of your full name and knowledge of your name being on this deed so soon into knowing you. Are we allowing her around Chi-Chi already, too? Or do I not get a say on that?”

I didn’t expect an answer, but when I proceeded inside the doorjamb, Jas grabbed my arm, pulling me back. His thick brows were threaded tightly when he shared, “She’s late because I asked her to come when you said Chivon would be gone. Chivon left later than when you said.”

I thought about why we were a few minutes late. It was because of the cake. Jonathan had taken longer than I expected. However, as promised, I’d keep that to myself. But not only that, I didn’t know my schedule affected him. I didn’t know Josie was coming today. Maybe that was my bad, but it definitely felt shitty.

Taking a deep breath, I decided to leave our conversation there and went inside the house.

One shot, two shots, three shots, four...

I’d take as many as possible to get through this party. Changing the plans tonight for the girls and me may not have been the wisest decision. I would determine that after the shots, though.



“So you two know each other, and you two know each other?” Corinne asked Bilan, Lex, and Tasche as we sat out on the patio, where I indulged in a cigar.

“Yup,” Bilan answered.

Lex nodded. “Mmmhmm...”

“But me and her...” Tasche explained with her hands. “... grew up together on some *Harlem Pride* shit.” She referred to herself and Lex as Lex nodded, holding a glass of wine. “Me and B met mad years later on some, ‘this my girl, I fucks with her hard’ shit.”

“Ohhhh!” Corinne exclaimed. “And y’all know each other from Jersey?” Bilan continued to nod. “Then you two met from church?” She posed to Lex and Bilan.

“Something like that, yup,” Lex provided. “Bilan comes to my church sometimes. Tasche never comes.”

“The hell I do!” Tasche seemed to defend herself. “I come for christenings and shit like that!”

“Wow!” Lex teased her, and if I could laugh, I would. “Nigga, you’re like the godmother to eight of our kids!” She motioned between herself and Bilan.

The whole group burst into laughter. Again, I would have if I could.

“Shi-Shi, you seem to be so cool about Jas having a girlfriend,” Lex switched gears and too damn fast.

“That’s not his girlfriend, First Lady,” Corinne corrected. Tasche found that hilarious, and so did Shizu. “No, no, no.” She shook her head adamantly. “Because if Jas had a girl, we would *not* be in support of that. His ass would be celebrating being old by himself with his ‘*girlfriend*.’”

Peach nudged Corinne admonishingly, though she found it funny and likely agreed. Shit. I did, too. Fuck Jas. Fuck him having a girlfriend. I didn’t care if she was cute and faultless. Fuck them all.

“Excuse me. I stand corrected!” Lex laughed, turning to me. “She’s sweet. Right?”

I had no idea how to answer that. Licking my lips, I went with the first thing slipping from them. “At least he’s off that three-month trial period shit.”

Lex, Corinne, Peach, and Shizu fell out laughing.

“What that mean?” Tasche asked.

“When Sin first landed,” Lex explained, trying to control her laughter. “he would date chicks for no more than three months to see if it would work. They literally had only three months to convince him of being wifey material.”

“Shit,” Tasche breathed. She then snorted, “So, you made it past the three-month period?” I nodded. “How?”

My shoulders lifted of their own volition. “I fucked him. Good.”

“Oh, shit!” Tasche shouted, jumping in her seat. They all laughed; even Peach, who I made have a shot or two. Shit. First Lady had been drinking wine since she arrived. The sin wasn't in drinking. It was in controlling the amount and your actions while under the influence, in my humble opinion. Besides, Peach knew she was good with us. We'd always have her back. She clasped Corinne's thigh as her body curled over, laughing her head off.

I didn't get what was so damn funny.

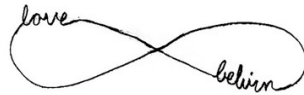
Admittedly, I was high as fuck. Not only did I take three shots within ten minutes, but I found Jonathan's creations of the day: cookies, and I ravished one without a breath. Then I started on my *Mauve* with a delicious *Suave Como el Amor* cigar by *Por el Amor del Amor*. Now, I was fucked. Zoned the hell out almost.

“That's it?” Bilan asked, unable to stop laughing. “That was your cheat code?”

I shrugged. “Them bitches were dry and dumb.” That had them cackling louder. “I used to fuck the shit out of him. Got his shit right out the mud.” As they hooted even louder, I cracked a smile, amused my damn self.

Good times back then.

Now, there's...Josie.



jas

We made our way to the deck. Sadik was ready to leave and needed to grab his wife. At the same time, Roberto and his friend, Luis, mentioned wanting another stogie. Zebedee followed behind us. Josie stayed stuck underneath me since she'd finished eating after she arrived. She seemed quieter, a little shy even. I chalked it up to her being around so many strangers and not wanting to compete with the energy.

As soon as we stepped outside, I noticed Ashira on a bench against the railing. Her long, thick legs were crossed, and a gold heeled sandal hung in the air. She held a cigar in one hand and a drink in the other. Lex, Tasche, Bilan, Corinne, Peach, and Shizu sat on opposing benches while howling their damn heads off. Ashira's eyes were low, and she seemed less engaged.

"I'm going to get out of here," Zebedee announced. "I've got to stop over at the office before heading home."

I immediately went to give him some love. "I appreciate you coming, man. You know I do."

"I do." His embrace was sincere.

"Did you get the box of stogies I had for you?" I turned, searching for Chels. We agreed to give cigar smokers a box of our latest product as a thank-you gift. "Ashira should know where it is." I was sure the cigar throw-in was her idea.

"I'll ask her. But here's an even better question."

"Shoot."

“How the hell can a non-smoker create a formidable brand?” He glanced over to Roberto to include him in the conversation. “Running the business has to be about more than numbers. You can’t just have corporate definition knowledge of the difference between harvesting, fermenting, and aging tobacco leaves. You have to understand the taste, the flavor, the nicotine levels from one stick to another...the body and how it holds in your mouth...the...blends that work best with your palate,” he offered with so much passion. “That shit has to be felt, not given in research reports for marketing. How do you understand the feel?”

I didn’t even have to think twice. With my chin low but eyes straight ahead, I pointed to the leggy broad with a lazy lean against the railing, pulling from our latest line she approved on my behalf without knowing it.

Roberto, understanding my process, snickered behind me. We were used to this question. It was widely known I didn’t drink or smoke, but I ran the hell out of all of my enterprises. Having an established smoker at this proximity had been a crutch. I’d never made secret of it...from anyone but her.

Eyeing me with respect and something else, Zebedee nodded.

“Let me go get my wife,” Sadik interjected. “Mrs. Ellis has been throwing them back all day. This should be an interesting ride home.”

When he took off, Josie was right behind him. “I’m going to talk to First Lady a bit. Be right back.” She rubbed my arm before heading that way herself.

Zebedee inched closer, getting into my private space, and spoke low. “Are you two good on having new love interests around each other?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

He nodded, eyes going over to Ashira, who hadn’t moved much since we’d been out here. “I just know a certain ‘agent’ I’ve trained to mask emotions.”

“Shit.” I scoffed, “You’ve trained a master.”

“She’s good,” his voice cracked, expressing caution about my doubts. Zebedee was protective of Ashira. The two had a bond built long before I came into the picture. She admitted to not being responsible with their friendship which was more of a mentorship. Sometimes he acted like a father figure. I knew he was simply checking the pulse of Josie being here today. I honestly didn’t expect Ashira to stay the entire party. She didn’t fuck with me like that. I was as shocked as everyone else to see her here and for so long. “She did mention running into your therapist at the mall last week. She tell you about it?”

I shook my head. Ashira hadn’t mentioned shit about the therapist to me.

“Talk to her,” he advised. “The therapist said some salient shit I can tell is weighing on baby girl’s head...heavily.” Zeb’s expression was hard. Serious.

I had too much on my mind to begin to process that. Too many energies under one roof. My roof. If Ashira wanted to kick it about the therapist, she would have to come to me. Most shit I discussed with her was confidential anyway; she probably didn’t want me to know.

“I got you, man,” I lied as I leaned in for dap.



ashira

“See! That’s why I don’t get down with that church shit like that,” Tasche shared her truth, laughing.

“Excuse me?” Lex demanded. “Why? What’s wrong with church?”

“It be fuckin’ with peoples’ heads. Lex, yo, you used to go and then came out married to the damn pastor’s son. Then I take *this* one”—she referred to Bilan—“to a random church, and she fuckin’...flees the state and comes back with a damn baby.” The girls gasped and laughed their asses off.

“And now, y’all telling me about Sin. The *Sin* from the projects. The nigga that used to terrify Harlem World, fuckin’ poppin’ them thangs so bad, and now he out here in Jersey with a house on the fuckin’ lake with armed guards outside posted up. I saw at least two of them, by the way. *That* nigga wanna get married, and get the shit done in three months? Nah, man. Fuck going to church. I like my sanity.” Her head swung harshly from left to right as she reached for one of the shots she had lined up on the table. “My ass risking meeting Lucifer!”

Now, *that* shit was funny as hell!

“Sorry, ladies.” Sadik appeared out of nowhere. “Mrs. Ellis has to say goodnight.”

“Damn. She ‘on’t get a say in that?” Tasche spit, shaking her head.

“Nah. She don’t. And don’t start your shit, T,” Sadik’s voice didn’t match his words. Although my faculties were slightly impaired, I could perceive the playful banter between the two. “You good on getting home?”

“Awwwww!” Tasche smiled. “That’s why you my favorite, Deek. That’s why I fucks with you. But nah. I’m good. Pastor sent Lex in a car. Y’all rich people don’t drink and drive.”

“Wait!” Corinne demanded. “That fine ass man drinks?”

“Nah! I wish!” Tasche shared. “It’ll damn sure help get the stick out of his ass!”

Lex swiftly slapped Tasche’s arm. “Tasche, his parishioner is here. Chill.” She wasn’t playing.

But who was the parishioner? Bilan had been sitting here this whole time, listening to them cut up. Lex used profanity and drank, and didn’t hide it. What had her tripping now?

“I don’t know about all that,” Sadik blew off the joke. “Just want to make sure you’re good.”

Bilan finally stood and gave her goodbyes to the group individually before taking her husband’s side. Shit. That man was fine as hell *and* had delicious swag. Bilan was more reserved in personality. I had noticed over the years she didn’t talk as much as her husband, but not in a weird way. She was sweet and very mannerly. I would have never thought she’d be so close to Tasche. Lex was more of Tasche’s speed, for the most part. Incidentally, I met Tasche over a year ago and had seen her a couple of times since. I liked her, too. She was great fun and hugely confident.

“Shi-Shi,” Bilan called out to me. “...my in-laws are having their wedding anniversary party in August. They’d love to have you over.”

“Where?”

“*Elliswoods*. Right?” Lex answered and asked at the same time.

Bilan’s smile deepened. “*Elliswoods Palace*.”

I knew why Bilan was excited to extend the invitation. The first time I’d been to that sprawling estate I didn’t want to leave. That family basically erected a village on countless acres of empty land.

I tried to laugh, but my face was too damn numb. “I’m getting married on the estate; why wouldn’t I come and begin the...” I licked my lips. “...preliminary planning?”

Both she and Sadik laughed, knowing I’d said that before.

“Who you marrying, though?” Peach asked.

“And what colors are we wearing? Corinne posed. “I need to start my keto for this shit.”

As the group laughed, I shrugged, licking my lips. “I have no idea who I’m marrying, but it don’t matter what colors y’all wear. I’m coming in a thong bikini.”

What did that mean?

High as hell, I had no fucking clue. But the girls thought it was funny.

“Night, ladies,” Sadik bade. “Great party, Shi-Shi.”

“Goodnight!” Bilan sang from beneath her man’s arm at the same time. They were a fucking fine couple.

I waved and even blew a kiss at them as they took off.

“You look good, Shi-Shi,” Josie observed out loud. “Speaking of dieting, Ojasvi mentioned you being off your dancing tour. What do you do to stay so in shape?”

Why the hell is he discussing me with you?

And where had she come from?

“You do look amazing. From one thick giraffe to another.” Lex offered me a fist bump. We’d spoken about our unusual heights as women before. Lex got teased a lot about hers. I didn’t get too many jokes since the boys my age who were insecure about being so much smaller than me hit puberty. After that, my height was never an issue. Some men got off on my length.

Yeah. Like your wanna-be boyfriend, Josie!

I wished I could scream that out loud. Would she be staying the night? Are they fucking?

Better than what we did?

I needed to go. Anywhere but here.

Would they fuck tonight in the bed I bought?

The place where my daughter sleeps from time to time.

In the house where I took his prison-break virginity.

I gulped back the rest of my brandy, not giving a damn that it was more than the swallow I’d anticipated.

“Wait.” Josie smiled, wagging her finger toward Peach. “You look familiar. Haven’t we met?”

“Kinda,” Peach answered. “Back in February at *Redeeming Souls*.”

Josie peered over to Lex. “Oh, yeeeah! That was the day you introduced me to Ojasvi.”

What?

“Mmmhmm.” Lex smiled then took a sip of her wine.

“Everything around that day was a blur,” Josie giggled, embarrassed. “I couldn’t see anything but that *fine*—” She shook her head, then leaned into Lex. “Let’s just say, ‘God is good!’”

Did she really just say that? Why was she so comfortable speaking about Jas in front of me? And why hadn’t I yanked the short, jet-black curls out of her pretty head?

Fuck my life!

I needed to go.



They wildin’...

It was official. Jonathan’s little ass brought his shit here. I’d been outside mostly since Chivon left, so I didn’t know, for sure, if he used my kitchen as a lab or imported his shit underneath my nose. But by the sight of him and the rest of my cousins and peoples from Harlem: Snoop, Deedot, B-Sure, Sheema, Myron, Tanya, Asia, and a few more, they were extra turnt. Rowdy. Their little cypher was getting a little too loose, pushing, shoving, threatening, and laughing too hard for this neighborhood, amongst other shit.

I leaned down to whisper into Josie’s ear. “Time to get you on the road.”

She checked her phone for the time. “It’s only eleven-ten.”

“Your sitter,” I reminded her. “And you gotta be up early for church.”

“Ah, man!” She pouted, not wanting to look away from the jumbo screen playing music videos over the pool. “This is *sooo* cool. I’ve never seen anything like it. How did you think to put this big ol’ thing out here? It’s like the perfect size and all. Look at how the sides light up according to the bass.”

“It’s a projector. Was a gift.” From Ashira last year for Father’s Day. “C’mon.”

I put my arm around her tiny waist, and Josie fell in line, walking along the side of the house to get to the circular driveway. “Hey,” her voice was syrupy. “You think Shi-Shi likes me?” She giggled. “Not like best friends or anything, but do you think she finds me cool enough to respect?”

“Does it matter?”

She nodded. “At least for Chivon, I guess. I have a child, too, remember? As a mother, you want, at minimum, to have a safe dynamic with the woman its father has around your child. Does that make sense?”

I couldn’t process her question or point. My head was spinning, adrenaline racing throughout my tensing body. When we made it to her ride, I waited for Josie to unlock it and opened the door for her. Slowly, she moved, passing around me to get into my chest. Then she reached up and kissed me. Without thought, I kissed her back. This wasn’t our first time. In fact, I liked kissing her and hated it at the same damn time. Almost every time we’d done it behind closed doors, my weakness as a man flared and flesh took over. Her body was nice: soft, generous, and responsive.

But tonight, I couldn’t be sidetracked by it. I pulled away first. With tight eyes, Josie wiped her mouth.

“Text me as soon as you get in,” I managed respectfully.

She saw I didn’t have much more energy for her, and I was too preoccupied to be regretful. I just needed her to get home safely. I watched her get inside, and when Josie pulled off, I

started my way to the back of the house, feeling my jaw clench uncontrollably.

Man was the first person I saw leaning against the house. He'd been waiting for me. I didn't speak, just kept it moving.

Chelsea was next, walking toward me. "I think it's time to wrap this party up. This shit is getting too wild. Too many of them are drunk beyond, beyond."

Above her head, I could see Tyreek bending over Ashira's chair with his phone in her face before it flashed a few times. I couldn't see her face because of the angle of his hand and arm, but her body language was off. Her legs were awkwardly crossed and the water bottle she held looked to be crushed.

"Peach!" I shouted loud enough to be heard over the music from the speaker. Ignoring Chels, I met Peach by the girls. Predictably, she was the most sober. They had used my crib for pool parties before, so it wasn't awkward for me to tell her, "Ashira's drunk. She ain't leaving. You guys're more than welcome to stay. You know Chivon's room got a full-sized mattress, and the other bedrooms are available to y'all. Chelsea and them may stay, too. I'll let y'all work out the logistics."

Looking back at her girls, she fingered her scalp through her long hair. "Yea—uhhhh... Y'all, I think we should crash here, too. Thank God I ain't gotta speak in the morning." Her face turned hard.

Ashira wouldn't look our way, her slanted eyes ahead. Shizu yawned hard, not even covering her mouth.

"Yeah." Corinne stood, trying to stretch. "I'll sleep on the damn floor for just a couple of hours. After that, I'm good. I have to open the store in the morning."

When Peach looked at me again, I tossed my chin to Ashira. "Go 'head up. Sleep that shit off." She nodded then walked right over to her girl and whispered close to her face.

The group's volume shot up again, Myron tripping onto the pool covering. I could feel my heart racing, even more, my scalp loosening on my skull like I was high. My damn heels

lifted from the ground, and I struggled not to bounce on my toes, anxious tension running through me. My right eye twitched as my fingers flexed and loosened, and my left shoulder rolled. When I heard the door to the house close, I counted down from sixty before a switch was flipped in my brain, and I charged the group.

I nudged B-Sure away with my left arm while my right elbow cocked back, and I fired off my fist, catching Tyreek in the chin just as he turned around.

“See!” a male called out. “I knew this shit was gon’ happen!”

“Oh, shit!” another swore as bodies around began shifting, moving out of our way.

“Daaaaamn!”

“Hold up, Sin!”

“Nah, Sin!” Antoine’s fat ass leaped into my peripheral. “We family. Don’t do it!”

“We tried to talk to him!”

“Fuck! Fuck!”

“Shit, Sin!”

“No!” The shocked reactions kept flying around me, transitioning me into the animal I was so fucking familiar with. The one I loved. The one that devoured.

“No, Jas!” I recognized as Chels’ cry of terror. That’s when I knew I had to shut down and get this shit done quickly. I’d already got it popping.

My calculation was off with that jab. I let it go too prematurely, which was how I missed his mouth, and he didn’t feel what I wanted him to. But now, he knew I was on his ass. Ty didn’t waste a minute getting into position. He jumped back, throwing them in the air.

“Yeah!” he grunted. “Been ready for this.” His chin was down, and fists near his face.

I danced with him for a few seconds, appreciating the cocky ass grin on his face. His hook came fast, catching me in the chest.

“Fuck!” someone shouted.

The shit even had the nerve to wind me on impact. That was the motivation I needed to go gorilla on his ass. I stepped into his personal space and threw a right, landing on his eye. Ty swung and then quickly dipped, rushing for my legs. I knew the move and kned his ass perfectly against his heavy launch. That shit sent his ass backward and me, too; the blow was so hard. I caught my balance, righting my weight, then quickly followed up with a hard ass hook as he leaned back, catching his fall. That one weakened his knees, and I caught him with a nice left that sent a sheet of blood gushing into my chest, neck, and chin. That’s when I knew I had his ass and blacked the fuck out, throwing blows until the bitch was on the ground.

“Wait, Jas!”

“No!”

“Oh, my god!”

“Back the fuck up!” I recognized Man’s voice. “You get close, you get caught!” he warned the small crowd around, a heeding I hadn’t heard in years, and the shit amped my fucking pulse even more.

“Jas! Please stop! Please stop!” a sob cut to my core, but there was no stopping now.

Fuck that!

I ignored all the pleas from the outside, serving this nigga all the shit I’d been trying to suppress since the first time he saw her at Tanya’s crib and grabbed her by the elbow while grabbing his nuts. This bitch knew she was mine; he learned about it in the pen. When he saw her at a family member’s house, my fucking name was attached to every goddamn piece of her rep, let alone each inch of her body.

Dropping my weight on his bloated ass stomach with my knee, I heard the air push from his chest. The cracking sound

of his skull meeting the cement told me the pussy was where I needed him to be. I kept going, pounding his fucking head, my knuckles connecting hard as shit with the bones of his fucking face.

“Sin! Hol’ up! Hol’ the fuck up!”

I laughed when Ty groaned beneath me, fucking accepting his penalty.

The greasy ass comments.

The slick eyes on her ass.

The licking of his fat ass lips in her face.

This bitch been trying my chin for months.

The nigga wanted this.

He did all that shit knowin’ Chivon existed. My daughter. *My fuckin’ seed!* I reminded my inner fucking monster as I dug into his ass.

Tyreek had this coming. Begged for it. Even as he stopped struggling to get up and his arms and chest went limp beneath my stomps on his face, neck, and chest, I felt his slick hands on my baby’s moms and my fucking child. I’d kill him. No more fucking playing it cool.

I kept firing off on his ass, feeling my dick swell from the smacks I felt against his bloody face on each impact.

Then, out of nowhere, I was swiftly airborne. The realization fucking infuriating me.

“Sin, hol’! It’s me!” Man yelled. “You got it, ock! You got it!”

“Chill, Sin!” I recognized Juggy’s wheeze. “You gon’ kill ‘im!”

That warning in a sickly tone I hated I’d become familiar with from my guy snapped me from my zone. I yanked hard as I could out of Man’s hold.

“Bro! He done!” Man yelled to me.

“He done, boss!” someone else shouted.

“Oh my god! Is he breathing?” I didn’t recognize the voice but saw Sheema waving her arms in the air with tears in her eyes, trying to get me to recognize her innocent attempt to help Tyreek before she reached him. “I just want to make sure he’s alive! Please!” she cried.

My fists were still tight, lungs on fucking fire. I wasn’t done. This nigga and every fucking body else needed to remember my fucking name!

I went over to him again, seeing his body twisted on the ground, his head near the ledge of my covered pool.

“No, Sin!”

“Jas, please!” The nervous cry almost split my fucking ears.

I hawk spit on his fat ass as he lay motionless. When I felt someone grab my arm, I yanked away hard, not wanting to be touched, just wanting the challenge. *Who’s next?* I had more in me for *any* fucking body.

“He down, man!” Man tried to reason with me; I could tell.

Slowly, with burning lungs, I begged the monster in me to ease.

“*GET THAT PUSSY THE FUCK OFF MY PROPERTY NOW!*” pushed from the pit of my fucking belly.

“It’s done, Mr. Sinclair,” my security, Joshua, tried assuring me.

That’s when the last of the fog continued clearing from my mind, and the fullness of reality hit first.

“Just go inside. We have it from here, sir.” The other security guard, whose name I couldn’t recall in the moment, was trying to direct me toward the house.

I obeyed and headed to the door.

“Your hands, my G!” Jonathan pushed me toward the sink in my kitchen. He turned on the faucet. “The shit’s proly gonna hurt, but let that blood wash off.”

“There’s blood all over the floor! Where’s the first aid kit?” Chelsea yelled, and my fucking stomach turned with guilt for her. “Somebody, please find me a first aid kit! I need an antiseptic and antibiotic ointment in case his fists are busted!” She could hardly speak, crying so hard. “Oh my god! Are you cut? I don’t want his blood mixing with yours!”

Her trembling touch on my arms made them vibrate. “Why did you do that!” she didn’t question, she demanded. “You’re...*sa*—sooo much better than that...than him!” her angry cry shuddering hard as hell. I didn’t want to look at her. “What if you killed him?” Chels sobbed, her head crashing into my shoulder helplessly, body slack against me. “What if Chivon was here? I told you, you’re not over her! You’re out of control...with *her*!”

When I turned my head away, not wanting to see her like that, Jug limped up to me on the right. His slender body looked weak, strife-filled his eyes. “Just fix the shit with her, bro!”

Samson... The whisper in my ear from within was so gentle yet with a powerful undertone.

Fuck...

Chapter Fourteen

Part III

May | Three Years Later

ashira

I shuffled against the pillow and mattress then rolled over to the other side. Pushing my arm and leg out, I collided against a plank of hard muscles and a bone. Then I was totally vacuumed from the dream I realized I was in. My lids flapped open, then head tilted up, and peering down on me were hooded eyes and pinched brows. *How?* He was shirtless. His coils were disheveled, and the muscles in his face were tight from recent sleep. Or perhaps the scowl had been exclusively for me.

Jas...

Again, how? I hadn't shared a bed with the man in over a year. And the last I'd slept in this bed was with just Chi-Chi.

Slowly, I recalled being shuffled upstairs with the girls in tow, then forced to shower and brush my teeth by Peach. Someone handed me a t-shirt—*his t-shirt*—to put on before Corinne's heavy hand pushed me into bed. I now grasped it

was Jas' bed and not the one I'd use when staying over with Chi-Chi.

My eyes squeezed closed. It now made sense. The scent embedded into the bed's fabric was responsible for the content of my dreams. "Good morning," my dry chords produced.

"Maybe." His shrug was faint. "Or maybe it ain't because I got no sleep, thanks to an unexpected, drunken visitor in my bed snoring hard as hell all damn night."

"Who was the guest you were expecting? Josie?" I held his deep gaze, feeling the resentment and conflict.

The first thorned my heart; the second provided a sliver of hope. Jas' eyes were windows to his soul for sure. They veiled the darkness of his convoluted core and exposed his vulnerability to me. It was something I sensed but couldn't articulate until recently. Being high brought revelations a sober mind couldn't comprehend. Yesterday the eye-openers wouldn't relent.

I ran into the therapist I shared with Jas at *Short Hills Mall* last week. It was a uniquely bizarre occurrence as I never saw the woman off the block her practice was planted on. It was in the *Asè Garb* boutique where she was shopping with a friend, unapologetically tipsy and patently loquacious. We shared discourse over the latest line as she waited on her friend to finish being rung up. On their way out, she casually asked about Jas and Chi-Chi. I'd never run into her in public, so I wasn't familiar with the protocol.

"Since I've been off the road, lil' Miss Chi-Chi likes to visit my closet. She can't stay out of my heels and away from my purses. I came home last night from a comedy show, and she answered the door with Ines, wearing my Louis bag with the Asè Garb shoes your friend just bought. And had the nerve to have her little hand propped up on her hip!" We teetered, amused by the precocious actions of a toddler. *"I'm wondering what diva her dad has her around because she matched the bag and shoes up better than I ever would have!"*

Again, we all laughed, and her mocha-complected girlfriend started out of the boutique. My therapist's

movements slowed as she grazed my arm with her hand.

Her voice was significantly lower when she shared, “Since I was a child, my father always gave nuggets of wisdom for human dynamics—relationships, too. When I was in my early twenties, he planted the concept of ‘pussy power.’ His language may not have been as vulgar, but his message was that raw. He said a woman is capable of seducing her way out of a lot of trouble with her man with what’s between her legs. She has the ability to finesse her way into his graces with it, too. But when a woman loses her pussy power with her man, she might as well pack it up and go. She’s just as effective to him as a man to another man whose sexual pleasure and attraction isn’t derived from men.” Then she burst out in the ditsiest and most superficial laughter I’d seen of her.

Did that mean she found the sage advice in her story amusing? Was my therapist warning of a critical juncture she’d been aware of between Jas and me? Or was her blotto state responsible for what could have been simple gibberish?

Having him this close...in his bed, and with the t-shirt pushed up my torso, allowing my skin to brush against his bedding, charged my curiosity. His delicious scent serenaded my need to investigate my therapist’s riddle.

With a pounding clitoris, I leaned into his personal space while locking gazes with Jas. I licked the side of his stomach then caught the immediate flexing of his abs. Air pushing from his heavy lungs rained down on my head and face. I went in again, this time licking closer to his belly button, the bristles of his pubic hair tickling the tip of my tongue. That move spurred a soft grunt and abdominal jump.

Wanting to reacquaint with more of him to kill the theory, I reached for his hip and inched my way to Jas’ dick. The tips of my nails reached his stiffness first, but by the time I’d progressed for my fingers to join, Jas caught my wrist. He then twisted on the mattress and released me. When he left the bed, it was clear the man wasn’t interested in being touched by me.

Something shard in my chest as I sat up and watched him walk away. Defensively, while lifting the comforter to my

belly, I hissed, “You’ve fucked her.” That stopped him in his tracks, and Jas tossed me the coldest glare. “I heard you two last night by the punch bowl. She said she was happy you didn’t drink like her. Then she kissed you, tongue and all. I heard her when she whispered she doesn’t need alcohol when she’s riding you.”

The shit fucked with me so badly yesterday. It stunned me into confusion. I wanted to distance myself from them, but didn’t want to leave the party at the same time. The best thing I could think of was to find Jonathan and locate the *Mauve*. Jas had been with another woman. I couldn’t process that.

When he didn’t deny it, I became incensed, a cry burgeoning in my throat. “I wonder who’d you kill if it were *me* sleeping with a man in a bed where Chi-Chi sleeps from time to time.” I spat, “Fucking psychopath hypocrite.”

With a faint shaking of his head, Jas proceeded toward the bathroom, murmuring, “She hasn’t spent more than four minutes in my bedroom, Ashira. I’m more talented than four fuckin’ minutes.”

Then he disappeared into the bathroom. Seconds later, I heard the shower running. Utterly shattered, I sat motionless against the headboard, trying to keep my shit together. All the feelings of betrayal from his party yesterday began populating again in spades. Little Josie. Did I allow her petite frame and corny style to jade my views of her sex appeal to Jas? I mean... He liked dry women.

Like church cat Cynthia...

And Ava. Was I naive to believe her when she said she’d never slept with Jas? That bitch was a different story. She wasn’t as corny and dull as the others. Ava actually had a little swag to her style—lots of it if I were being honest. And if I could gain the interest of his particular ass, she could, too. I remembered his ex, Samona, had a sense of fashion, too. I’d been fooled, thinking too highly of Jas. The pedestal I had him on was built from believing he was special. Different. I’d actually fallen for a born-again, gun-selling, reformed parolee of a thug.

What had I gotten myself into with this man? I wasn't happy. I had no one. And I didn't confuse my loneliness for the neediness of a man. I grew up an only child; I could get along by myself just fine. But as a thirty-five-year-old single mother and accomplished woman, I didn't want to. I wanted it all. Independent woman, my ass: I could love a man. I could support a man—hell, I'd been supported by a good man for the past four years.

And now, that good man was telling me the run was over.

I needed to go. I scanned the room to see where they'd put my clothes from last night. It took a few seconds, but I located the pile in his sitting room near the purple prayer mat. As I shoved my legs into my shorts, I noticed how flattened the pillow had become over the years. Obviously, he'd gotten my money's worth of it, but how? How can a man of God with a dedicated prayer life engage in thuggery and meaningless sex with dry bitches? It all annoyed me. The heaviness in my chest grew painful. The bruising from his betrayal had begun to settle in.

Rejection stung like a motherfucker. My legs felt weighted as I trekked my way to the bathroom. I told him once, and felt the need to tell Jas again; he would not rule my life. What was good for the goose was even better for the motherfucking gander.

Pushing into the steamy room, my hand gripped the handle preventing a stumble from my legs buckling at the most loutish and private sight. His long, thick, and hairy legs were spread apart as he rested on the bench of the shower, and his left hand gripped the long shaft of his hard dick. His big palm stroked upwards, faintly twisting beneath the swollen lip of the mushroom. His balls engorged beneath the hairy root of his cock.

My pulse raced and my mouth watered. His big body curled slightly, those same abs that reacted to my touch minutes ago contracted at his stroke. Those big fingers and thumb worked in tandem at an unhurried stride against his bulging muscle. Tears pooled in my eyes, making Jas' agonizingly enthralling body a blur until the first tear fell. I'd

seen it. This was a flash of what his ten-year prison term was like—how Jas survived celibacy once released until my horny ass came around lusting over him. His artful touch to his most private member was paced slowly and apparently enjoyable based on his heavy breathing. Masturbation had never been more beautiful before I met the sight of Jas self-pleasuring with the confidence of an animal. His actions were primal and without permission.

Wait...

His right hand was wrapped in gauze, and I saw crimson staining through the cloth. Then I heard my name being called from behind me, outside the bedroom, but I couldn't move. I was ridiculously aroused and bewitched by this personal love scene...with a warrior. That's how feral the man looked, beautifully stroking himself. The sound grew louder as I ogled Jas' wrist work, jealous to be on the outside of this erotica. My groin churned, and breasts felt heavy in my bra. Why was I turned on after the reckless way he treated me—

Jas' half-mast eyes rolled up to me. His big hand didn't stop or slow, nor did his abs. I squealed, tortured. My knees rubbed together, and I suppressed a cry shooting up my chest.

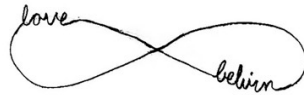
“Shi...” That call was in close proximity and had me gasping.

Quickly and breathlessly, I backed out of the bathroom, shutting the door tightly behind me. I met Shizu at the door of the bedroom.

“Girl, we need to talk,” she whispered hard. “Did you hear any ruckus last night? Apparently, there was a fight. They said Jas sent his cousin to the hospital; it was so fucking bad, bro. Consuela had to come in early this morning to scrub the kitchen and hall floors. His cousins tried to get it all up last night, but I guess they failed. Let's fuckin' go. I'm like a little skeeved.”

“*Wha—*” Corinne, then Peach appearing in the doorway, halted my question.

They were ready to go.



“Shit, Jas!” Becky whispered, sitting perched on the step of my tub, peering into my cell phone. “This is...” She was speechless, and I was, too, curled up in the tub, soaking in bubble water. “...brutal.” A fresh sheet of tears warmed my face as I held myself by the legs, rocking back and forth.

Yesterday, the girls and I carpooled from my place to go to Jas’ birthday party, so this morning, after leaving his house, we returned here.

Outside his home, at the car, an emotional Chelsea gave us a rundown of the fight. But it wasn’t until we’d pulled off and were well out of *Lake Sha’Ron* that Tanya texted Corinne and me pictures of Tyreek’s bludgeoned body from the emergency room, which was what Becky was now looking at from my phone. I wished Tanya hadn’t sent them. For her, it was just information-sharing, but to my friends and me, it was terrifying violence. Before we made it back to my apartment, Chelsea called, apologizing for her sister’s actions. Being her big cousin’s protector, Chelsea wanted to keep what happened contained, especially from me, considering Jas had virtually done the same to my ex-boyfriend three months ago.

Given my emotional state from yesterday’s revelations, this morning’s heartbreak, and last night’s drama—all involving Jas—the girls didn’t want to leave me alone, but all had to go. Peach decided at the last minute to take Chi-Chi with her to church, Corinne had to get into work, and Shizu had a brunch date with David. So before leaving, Shizu called Becky to have her sit with me for support. I didn’t think it was necessary because Ines was home but I was too preoccupied with stress to protest the girls’ decision.

A tyrant.

My daughter’s father was a fucking tyrant. How did I not know? I sniffled, rocking back and forth.

“To be honest,” Cecil interjected. He happened to stop by today to pick up a *Nutribullet* I’d been ignoring for years. He

swore he'd finally start a diet this week and wanted to include smoothies. "...this is just thug nigga activity." He shrugged his burly shoulders, demonstrating simplicity. Cecil was playing hood girl today, and the shit annoyed me. The man wasn't raised in the hood! "Like..." He smacked his teeth, fingers wagging in the air. "Them motherfuckers don't play about they baby mommas. You know Jas was locked the fuck up. Ain't his street name Sin?"

"That's no excuse. He's a grown ass man now," Becky argued. "He's a father with several businesses he runs. He's a fucking millionaire. That hood block shit should have been left back in Harlem."

Cecil popped his lips, rolling his head. "I'm just *saying*—"

"Cecil, he plundered a man on his *Lake Sha'Ron* property!" Becky's tone sharpened. "Do you know how crazy that sounds? That neighborhood isn't Thugs 'R Us."

Cecil's head fell to the side when he asked, "What the fuck is wrong with a thug nigga, Becky? You discriminating?"

Her body lurched. "When it comes to my best friend, I am! He's my niece's father. What type of example is Jas setting here? If this is the shit he's on, what will he pass on to Chi-Chi? He spends more time with her than my in-house dad spent with me growing up. It's not cool."

"But Becky, didn't *yo'* daddy used to dress up in ya mammy's clothes? Last I checked, your brother, Kevin, was married with kids. You mean to tell me he cross-dressing, too?"

Becky's head swung back, silently accusing me of telling her family's secret.

"Don't you dare, sweetie," Cecil admonished her. "You tell that shit every time you smoke weed."

She did. Becky drank hard and got wild. When she smoked, she'd get low and vomit up stories from her childhood.

"Fuck you, Cecil," she enunciated each syllable. Then Becky turned toward me. "All I'm saying is maybe it's time

for you to talk to him about his behavior and how you're no longer supporting him, which means you won't be friends any longer." I couldn't even look at her. "Shi-Shi?"

"That bitch ain't saying what you want her to say because she ain't going nowhere." Cecil popped his lips. "Shi-Shi gone, girl. Gone!" His deep tenor made the message gravely dark.

"No, she's not!" Becky was angry. "Shi-Shi!"

I finally turned to her, eyes heavy and swollen. "He's Chi-Chi's father," I whispered weakly because that's exactly what I was in this with Jas.

"Shi-Shi, he's with another girl," Becky warned.

Cecil sucked his teeth then slapped his thighs. "That lil' chile? Jas using that bitch, Becky! If he really into that chile, why he fawking niggas up behind Shi?" His head fell to the side again, goading Becky. "Think, girl. Think!"

"That's some way to show a woman love!" Becky was just arguing at this point.

"And that's what you don't get about them thug niggas. They 'on't think and behave according to your logic." Cecil's wistful smile was all in his voice as he swung his big body side to side. "Them niggas built differently. They'll grab you by your weave out the damn club, then go home and fuck you for mad hours!" His shoulders lifted in remembered delight, then Cecil tittered sillily.

A knock at the door out in my bedroom sounded. "Shi," Ines called. "Borys is here."

Shit...

I'd forgotten about our meeting today. We'd been off the road for months, and while I had been enjoying time off, my troupe still had to eat. We needed to discuss our next move. I stood from the water too quickly, causing my body to sway from lightheadedness.

"Oh my god," Becky cried. "Have you eaten?"

“Fuck no, bitch!” Cecil’s thick tenor barked. “Put some fuckin’ clothes on. I know we related, blood and all, but Jas ain’t finna beat my big ass because I seen’t your breast curves and hair box bed!”

Becky handed me a towel. “Oh, shut up, Cecil!”

Fifteen minutes later, my face was washed, teeth brushed, and hair combed into a high bun. I was wrapped in a fluffy robe when I entered the living room, where Borys was gazing at the pictures on the mantel above my electric fireplace. He turned as I entered the room, brilliant gray irises peering into me. *Damn*. Borys was a fine ass man. Tall, fit, blond, and with classical European features, including a strong jawline. If I were into white, bi-sexual men, maybe I wouldn’t be nursing a broken heart courtesy of a goddamn ferocious thug.

“Hey, babe,” he greeted in the middle of the room, reaching down and gathering me in a tight embrace.

“Hey,” my voice so soft, mirroring my compromised resolve. I was so damn tender; the tonka bean and woody spices of his favorite *Dolce & Gabbana* cologne warmed my chilled body.

“You good?” He took me affectionately by the hand.

I shook my head. “Better now that you’re here, though.”

Borys smirked, razor-sharp arched brows lifting. “Not when I start annoying your ass about the tour.”

Ah, yes. The Pixie tour.

I pulled in a deep breath as my eyes fell.

“That’s you, Borys, witcha fine white ass?” Cecil’s husky ass strutted into the living room, laughing goofily.

“Cecil...” He went in for a hug. “...my brother.”

The two were a sight. Both men were over six feet; only Cecil was a pudgy grizzly bear, whereas Borys was born to grace the cover of *Vogue* and *Men’s Fitness*.

“Oh! Hey, honey!” Becky reached up to hug Borys.

“Becky, don’t you wish Borys was ya hubby instead of Connor? Girl, you’d be pregnant now with little blond-headed babies. *Sheeeeit*. At least, I would. Ha!” Cecil stuck his tongue out and emitted a hearty laugh that could shake the damn floor.

Borys, familiar with Cecil’s colorful personality, chuckled. “Who’s to say I want blond babies? I may want Asian babies with dark hair. Where the hell is that Shizu?” He grabbed the waist of his jeans, tipping off his motives for asking.

I rolled my eyes as Cecil cracked the hell up.

“I’m hungry.” Becky started out of the living room. “Whatever Ines has cooking up in there smells amazing. Can I get anyone a drink or something?”

I shook my head. “I’m good.”

Cecil moved to follow her. “You going to get something to eat, but offer us something to drink? The hell, Becky.” He laughed at himself. “Borys, I’ll bring you back some gin, then we can explore the Asian persuasion thing. They alright, but we Black women and punks are life, honey!” He snapped his fingers for dramatic emphasis, then laughed his way out into the hall.

“Don’t forget you’re about to start a diet!” I called out after Cecil.

“Oh, bitch! That’s tomorrow. Today, she lives!”

Fighting his mirth, Borys shook his head while rolling his eyes.

“Ready?”

I managed a smile, so happy for a distraction today. “Shoot.”

“Ryan from Pixie’s camp called yesterday wanting to know if we’d made a decision. Management wants to reach out to Flii Stylz, but Pixie wants to keep it all female.” He rolled his eyes and sighed, “Which I think is bullshit. Pixie just wants us. Anyway, tell me something. *Something*. Give me a date you’ll make the call by. You can even tell me what’s next for us,” he began to groan. “I’m going fucking crazy, staying

at my apartment, playing the local clubs, babe. My mom wants me to come home, and you know a trip back to Ślesin will be about two weeks. I can't spend two weeks with my parents. I need to work, babe."

I nodded, internally pumping myself up for the confidence needed for the decision. "We're going to do it."

"Really?"

Pulling in a deep breath, I felt confidence dispersing into my spine. "Yeah," I breathed out. "We can do it. I have a family vacation coming up next month I need to get past. But once that's over, we can start meeting about selecting the troupe and scheduling rehearsals."

"Well, first, we'd need to meet with Pixie's team for the concept and music."

I nodded. "Of course."

"Yes!" He performed a fist pump with closed eyes. "You're the best. You know that, babe?"

Still nodding, I giggled. "I do. It'll be nice if others can catch on."

love  believe

jas

"What has Ashira had to say about this?"

"I 'on't see what she's got to do with it."

My therapist removed her tablet from her lap, placing it on the table near her chair. Then she cleared her throat. "Both altercations were because of her. Austin Seers and your cousin,

Tyreek. You acted in violence in both incidences because of Ashira.”

I wanted to look down at my bruised knuckles. They ached bad as hell, but I needed to get through this session as smoothly as possible. So, instead, I nodded and shrugged, blocking out the pain. “Nah. They both disrespected me. Like I said, I told her ex like four years ago never to speak to her again. That relationship was deaded back when he played her. Life moved on, and so should he. And my cousin...” Frustrated, I took a deep breath and brushed my face with the palms of my hands, feeling the bandages. “...that was some ol’ power-testing shit. G chin-checking.”

“Come again?”

I shook my head, disappointment swelling in my damn chest. “My lil’ cousin, Tyreek. He used to look up to me as a kid. Always wanted to put in some work with me when I was on the ground, but I wasn’t with it. I didn’t let young impressionable kids work with or for me; you had to be built for that life. Then...as the story goes, I caught a case. I got home in nineteen, but a few months before I was let out, Ty went in.”

“For what?”

“Assault with a FD. Which *in*—”

“FD?”

“First degree. *My bad*. Which in New York is an elevated charge because of a deadly weapon. He had a few simple assaults on his record. He gotta rep for fighting.” I shrugged. “He thought he was official. Ty nigga finally caught a case and did a bid like his big cousins. So when he came home, the nigga had a chip on his shoulder, which isn’t uncommon. But add to that a vendetta against me for not putting him on all those years ago—knowing I went down because of my shit—then having what they like to call a ‘celebrity’ in the family.”

“Ashira.”

I nodded, eyes zoned out to the plant on the coffee table in front of me. “I mean.” I took a deep breath and rolled my head

back. “I get it. Ashira’s a good-looking girl...dope body, and her energy stays *up*—”

She interrupted me again. “Is that what attracted you to her?”

“She’s fine as hell...” I was stuck. “I ‘on’t know how to answer that.”

“Try.”

Here the fuck we go...

I thought for a minute. “For me, it’s different. It’s more than what a woman’s shell looks like. Ashira can easily check that box. She’s beyond fuckin’ gorgeous. But I...” I nodded. “I guess it was her high vibration that got me. She’s funny and fun. At first, I resisted it or missed those qualities, not wanting her to judge me...my past. But when I got over it, I can’t lie; her package was premium.”

“And that’s what Tyreek saw,” she either asked or summarized. With this chick, sometimes, I couldn’t tell.

My palms flexed on their own, reminding me of my decisions. I could have killed him.

I wanted to...

“Maybe.”

“Or maybe it wasn’t about Ashira at all.”

My head bounced. “Maybe it was about having something attainable...accessible.”

“How is Ashira accessible?” I was confused again.

“She’s the mother of your child.”

“And?”

“And if you were able to engage with her intimately, maybe Tyreek felt he’d have an opportunity, too.”

My head swung, softly shaking as I stared her dead in the eyes. “Nah. Ty family, but that nigga ain’t me. I got qualifications that apparently appeal to Ashira. I’m a self-made millionaire, been before my bid. That nigga ain’t me.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “Ashira has great energy. That could be where lines got crossed.”

“She’s also single. My family knows that. I even had my new friend around my family, making it clear it’s over between us.”

“But she’s still your former lover...as far as Tyreek is concerned.”

“Now, that’s true. He’s been testing me since he got home last year. I’m sure his verbal excuse would be she’s single. Grimy niggas do shit like that. Ain’t no rules.”

“Again, making your attack of him about Ashira,” she challenged, bringing her point home.

I didn’t necessarily agree, but wouldn’t argue with her.

“For me, that was about checking him and sending a message to my family who witnessed his shit over the past few months, and those who’ll hear about it.” I shrugged. “I ain’t soft. Don’t let this Jesus pursuit fool you. I’m still that Sin nigga from building one-two-five. That part of me is still as present as my desire to give my daughter the best life.”

Closely watching me, the therapist nodded her head. “Yes. I agree. Your propensity to violence is very much an active facet of your composition. We can begin methods of managing it as soon as you’d like, but I believe there’s a bigger issue here.” She reached for her tablet again and began tapping into it as she shared, “Your relationship with your daughter’s mother needs to be settled. It’s my theory that your recent bouts with violence are on par with your previous assessment by the group out of *BSU* provided by the *Federal Bureau of Prisons*.” She tapped, then paused to read. “*Ahh*. Yes. Cluster B, antisocial personality disorder. You’ve been displaying a typical trait of violating the physical rights of others by demonstrating violence. Question: Do you regret the kerfuffle with your cousin?”

“Hell no,” I calmly and definitively answered, having no idea what that word meant but could guess based on the few before and after it.

“That with Austin?”

I shook my head, daring her to defend his punk ass. A sharp pain plucked my knuckles again. The left one this time.

She shifted closer by laying her elbows on her crossed leg. “I mean, I’m not re-diagnosing you or judging your behavior so much as I’m trying to lead you to your processes. That way, you can make those judgment calls and behavioral adjustments.” The smirk opening on her face made her seem shy...embarrassed. “My preference is human connection rather than stratification. You’re going on a family vacation soon. Right?”

“How you know?”

This smirk was definitely an embarrassed one. “You caught me...crossing client intel.” I snorted. It was all good. “You’ll be away for a while. Correct?”

I adjusted my sweats, feeling the throb from the back of my hand while doing it. “Something like two weeks. A little more than that, actually.” Then I cleared my throat, struggling with how hard it still was for me to get open in these sessions.

Especially with two fucking busted hands...

“That’s a long time to be on shaky grounds. Why don’t we try for specific efforts and outcomes?”

“Like what?”

“Like peace...acceptance. You can’t control what Ashira brings or gives, but you can attempt to create an environment of peace and acceptance—of all things. Like her flaws, quirks, and judgment you’ve mentioned in the past.”

“What does peace and acceptance have to do with anything?”

“Because it’s what you want.”

“I ain’t never say that.”

She nodded. “You having never gotten what you’ve wanted from Ashira is why your relationship with her has been unstable—from your perspective. Look at your first

impression of her when you initially crossed paths as children. Even then, you didn't feel you were someone she'd have a relationship with, platonic or otherwise." Her face tightened. "Also, earlier, you said you've let her go, but you can't be over her when one considers these violent outbursts. Just as pointed out in your *F.O.B.* assessment, they've been calculated against your opponents and have connections to one thing: her."

"What does this have to do with the personality disorder?"

"Cluster B characteristics," she answered simply. "Your attacks have been violent, calculating, manipulative, and unrepentant." She shook her head, apologetically almost. "Jas, I don't believe you fit the bill for an antisocial personality disorder. What you displayed at the time of the analysis is one thing, but the man I've been engaging with all these years hasn't exactly presented with psychopathic or sociopathic features. You're just a man needing tools to carry out healthy relationships. You and Ashira... You two finding stable footing in your mandatory *relationship*—"

"I said Ashira can go do her. Who says it's mandatory?"

"Chivon. As long as she's alive, your relationship with her mother is mandatory. To which degree is up to you and Ashira. But finding stable ground is conceivable if you can receive those two elements."

My chin dropped to my chest, and I mumbled, "Peace and acceptance?"

"Yeah. Often with men, it's difficult to admit to such simple needs. It makes some of them feel soft or childish." She shook her head. "Providing emotional support can go a long way for men and women...the person giving it and receiving. It makes for a balanced and healthy space." She nodded again, eyes bouncing around as she thought. "I think a man of your confident nature can not only achieve this, but you can set the ground for it to be as well. *You* set the atmosphere by giving Ashira those two elements—even when it's difficult to—and watch her, perhaps, subconsciously fall in line."

She gave me a moment for my reaction. This was a lot. It was therapy, too: fucking work.

Letting out a breath of contention, I admitted, “I mean, it sounds good, but...”

What the hell else could I say?

She winked. “Let’s go over some scenarios? Huhn?”

I took another deep breath and shrugged.

Chapter Fifteen

Part III

June | Three Years Later



“Mr. Sinclair,” my administrative assistant called from the door of my office. I sat back from my desk, dropping the design plans I’d been working on. “Mrs. Witherspoon.”

After a nod, she pushed the door open farther, and in came the ever-beautiful Celestine Witherspoon. She looked regal and smelled like wealth, as usual, I learned when I stood to greet her.

“Hey, Celestine,” I offered during our hug.

“My, my, my,” she breathed, eyes sweeping my office. “Noel didn’t have this fancy or operational-level of digs so soon into his building career.”

Although I may not have shown it, I took pride in my office building. It was finally complete, and my staff and I were moved in and settled. It was a forty-three thousand square feet, three-story property on three-point-seven acres of land. A facility where I could be fully operational, primarily

for my building firm, but also for real estate I now invested in, *Por el Amor del Amor*, and *Château Blevin*. All of my companies had been performing exceedingly well and had to be given a dedicated space where I could tend to them professionally. This property had been my biggest investment yet.

“And the parking lot, my dear,” Celestine cooed. “You have actual attendants out there. I didn’t know if I were at *DiFillippo’s* or your place of business.”

I offered her a seat on the sofa in the sitting area. Celestine followed, ensuring not to lose a single detail of the décor.

“I’m glad you get to see the place. Chivon wants to have a sleepover in the lounge downstairs,” I joked.

“I can see why. This place is state-of-the-art, Jas. I couldn’t be more proud.”

That comment was striking, causing my face to tighten with a smirk. “That means a lot coming from you.”

Celestine nodded, a little too much for too long, without looking me dead in the eye. I could tell something was up.

“So, you and Noel...” I didn’t know how to phrase it and really didn’t give a damn about their personal lives, but had been hella curious about Celestine being in Jersey since April, which I had been aware of.

She made a shoo’ing gesture, rolling her eyes, and still was unable to look me in the face. “We have a long road ahead.”

“But...”

Celestine shrugged and pretended to pluck lent from her blouse. “There’s no but.” Her chin lifted, and she squared her shoulders. “*I—we—*have a family. Chivon. She’s been here, and I’ve been down in Brazil, sulking in all my disappointments of a failed marriage.”

“So, you’re back? For good?” I clarified.

“I’m trying for Chivon. She’s my sweet lamb, that little angel.”

“And what about her moms?”

“Whatever about her?” That narrow chin lifted again.

“Where does she fit in, in all of this? Have you hollered at her?”

She hesitated. “If by holler you mean reached out, the answer is no.”

Distractingly, I laughed, rubbing my chin as I sat up in the chair. “You’re gonna have to forgive me, but how does that part of the game work?”

“What do you mean?” her tone was pretentious, defensive.

I knew no other way than to be frank. “You know, Celestine, I ‘on’t know much about family dynamics. My moms and I have always been cool, but I don’t speak to my pops much outside of Chivon’s birthdays and Christmases.” Lamont stopped fucking with me when I’d given Nicholas a job here at the firm after he decided college wasn’t for him and hated flipping burgers to earn a living. My pops wanted to punish Nicholas, using that “either school or work full-time at minimum wage” mentality. I hooked him up with an entry-level gig that paid him. Nicholas decided to move out three months later. And there went my pops’ effort to have a real relationship with me. “But I do know Ashira still needs a mother. She’ll always need her moms.”

“*Ohhh!*” she shooed me again while groaning. “Shi-Shi’s an adult now. She’s smart, independent, and wealthy. She’s fine.”

I wondered if she was. A few days after my birthday party, Ashira hit me up, saying she was going back on tour this fall. A part of me wondered if she was running from something. I’d always, on the low, felt Ashira left for months at a time because she had nothing keeping her here.

Since fucking up Tyreek the way I did, I’d been in a peculiar space, detoxing a lot of my anger and pinpointing what had gotten me on the “Samson” road. If I’d been off emotionally, I’d also been off spiritually. So, I’d been praying a lot more in-depth. I’d also increased my sessions with the

therapist. From the stringent regimen, I realized my focus had been off, and so had my faith. I had a lot of work to do on reconstructing the man I'd envisioned myself to be back when I was planning my future, sitting in *FPC Montgomery*.

"But anyway," Celestine exhaled. "The reason for my visit you so gracefully agreed to is to ask for your assistance."

"Anything."

"My daughter."

"What about her?"

"Since her overreaction to Noel and me spending time with my little lamb back in April, I don't have the access to her I'd prefer. I only see her when she's with you, which is hardly ever now that her mother's not touring."

Something about this didn't smell right. "Okay..."

Her slender shoulders lifted as she suggested, "Okay, so you talk to your child's mother. Explain to her the need for Chivon to have a relationship with her grandparents. I would like to see her freely, and so would Noel."

"I can try to talk to Ashira. But to be real, I don't have much influence with her at all right now."

Ashira had been a little ghost with me since my birthday party. Chelsea told me how she found out about Tyreek. That fucking Tanya sending her the pictures of him in the E.R. was not a good look. Ashira and her girls weren't built for that. I was sure Ashira didn't know I covered his hospital and pharmaceutical bills.

"But you're vacationing in a few days. You'll have plenty of time to put in a good word for Noel and me. I'd love to have Chivon for a week before she begins preschool in the fall." Celestine stood, superficially satisfied with her agenda.

I swear, I like this lady...

Even though she made me question why, I really liked her. Celestine was a bitch, which helped me to realize where Ashira had gotten her inner bitch from. But both women had redeeming qualities, allowing me to overlook the flaws.

Celestine had never judged me. She'd been in contact with me regularly since learning her daughter was pregnant with my child. Yes. In a way, she used me to get to Chivon, but Celestine managed not to make it feel that way. She'd even been cool with my moms. She may have been pretentious, but the woman wasn't standoffish.

I also stood from my seat, watching Chivon's grandmother take off for the door. Her exit was just as theatrical as her entrance. But then Celestine leaned backward from the doorway, a big smile painting her beautiful face.

"Where's that darling little Ava? I bet her office is well-endowed, too."

"Uhhh..." I scratched my chin, not expecting that question. "Ava is no longer with *Prism Built*. She separated from us a few months ago."

All the happiness in Celestine's expression melted instantly. "This place is on the rise! Why ever would she do a thing like that?"

I hesitated but felt the need to be transparent. "Her business here had become an issue with Chivon's mother. I may have blurred the lines between her work for *Prism Built* and my need for a personal assistant." Celestine's mouth fell into an "O." I shrugged and assured her, "It's all good, though." Ava landed well with a firm down in Atlanta.

"What an insecure woman that Shi-Shi is. But I can see why. Ava was beautiful, intelligent, charming, and stayed close to you." Celestine winked.

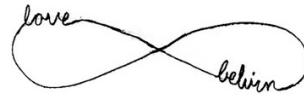
I shook my head. "Nah. I think Ashira's insecurities come from a specific source." I knew this since the first day I met the regal Celestine Witherspoon. "But that's all good, too. As crazy as shit's been between us, I got her. I'll always do what's best for her." *Unlike you and her pops.*

"You're truly a good man. She doesn't deserve you, Jas."

"She deserves better. I think if she had better, she'd be better. I just want to be better to her."

She winked. “Too-da-loo!” And then Celestine was off to do God only knew what the woman did with her life other than teaching people to dance.

Why, after each visit or call with her, did it feel like I’d cheated on Ashira?



ashira

“Okay, baby,” I unbuckled Chi-Chi’s car seat once we pulled up to the restaurant. It was nearly seven pm local time on the Amalfi Coast. “We’re here.”

My baby was exhausted, and I’d been just steps behind her. The flight from Teterboro to Naples was almost ten hours, but I wouldn’t have broken it down. I just wanted to get to Europe without delaying the travel time. Chi-Chi did great on the flight, and I was sure it was because we used her father’s jet instead of flying commercial, where she wouldn’t have been able to run from the cockpit area to the bedroom at the rear. She took a nap once at the top of the trip and played and watched movies to her heart’s delight for the remainder.

“Mommy, I sleepy,” she whined.

“I know, but it’s dinner time.”

“Yeah,” her father’s subterranean deep tenor produced with authority. “Let’s go fill your belly. Then you can go night-night.”

My door was opened for me while Jas carried Chi-Chi from the car on to the sidewalk. The sun was still up, affording me a gorgeous view of what was also called Divina. It was breathtaking, with an unbelievable view of the cobalt-blue

water. *Shit...* It was a good thing I was too exhausted to react to the beauty around me because I may otherwise embarrass Jas, something virtually hard to do.

Jas, Chi-Chi, and I were not traveling alone. We'd split with most of our companions, including Amy, her best friend, Rainey, one of Jas' security detail, Eric, and one of my security men, Bob. Once landed, we joined with an Italian "tour guide" of sorts, Francesco Ricci, and a companion of his. There were lots of people on this venture with us. Most of them, including Amy and her friend, left for the hotel we'd be staying at tonight before we boarded the luxury yacht to kickstart our vacation tomorrow. They went ahead of us with our luggage to check in while Jas, Chi-Chi, and I had dinner.

As I followed him and Chi-Chi inside the restaurant, we were greeted by the host, who made it clear he'd been expecting us by his fair English speaking skills. We strode through the beautiful restaurant, and I admired its stony veneer interior lining, the fresh floral arrangements boasted from wall to wall, and the delicious notes from the food all around. This was great living—luxury living. I couldn't imagine the fortune Jas paid to make this happen.



“Grazie,” the waiter bowed before taking off with my payment for the dinner.

“Gradzee!” Chivon mocked, then yawned.

Ashira, across the table from us, giggled. “You’re learning Italian, missy?”

With no appreciation of what was being asked, Chivon nodded with heavy eyes. Then she leaned over on the bench, laying her head on my arm. I opened up, allowing her to snuggle into my side.

“Somebody’s not going to make it to the hotel,” I teased, though Chivon straight ignored me, preferring to doze.

“And you’ll be carrying her.” Ashira looked tired, too, running her tongue against her teeth with a closed mouth. “Dinner was amazing.” Her attention swept the small room.

So soon, the shit felt awkward. On the plane ride to Europe, Ashira and I didn’t talk much. I shared the itinerary, and she had Chivon show me a new dance she’d taught her. Outside of that, we slept, ate, she read and watched movies, and I worked.

“It was.” I struggled to stretch the conversation. “That fish was a’ight.”

“The amberfish—or the yellowtail amberjack,” she corrected. “Shizu swears by it. I’ve never tried.”

“Yeah,” I tried finding *more*. “The burrata sauce wasn’t too bad either.”

She hesitated for a second before asking, “Was that your first time having it?”

I shook my head. “Ezra’s bourgeois ass put me on to it at a restaurant in the city a couple of years ago. Had it with bowtie pasta and lemon. Shit looked crazy, but hit the spot.”

“Have you had it since?”

I nodded.

When she didn’t speak so quickly again, I asked, “That fondue any good?” It was her first dish.

Ashira sucked in a breath, stretching her spine while trying not to yawn. “This one had more ingredients than when I had it before in Paris. Remember that—”

“Restaurant you ate at twice a day?” I didn’t want to, but I did.

Slowly, she nodded while studying my face. “Anyway...” Then Ashira shook her head, eyes going toward the table. “This place has the black truffle with it. It worked, though.” I nodded, feeling proud of my attempt at conversation. But after a few seconds, Ashira spoke again. “So, two hundred and twenty feet, this yacht. Huhn?”

Again, I nodded. Glancing down at my sleepy angel, I rubbed the side of her hair, loving her curly sideburns.

“And nine crew members?” I nodded again. “Damn,” she whispered. “Ten bedrooms, a cinema room, jacuzzi on deck for ten people, a spa suite?”

“Yeah. The boat’s supposed to be dope.”

“I see.” She giggled. “What bank did you rob to pay for all of this?”

Okay...

I was done talking to Ashira for the night.



ashira

A Pixie playlist boomed from the speakers as I lay stretched out on the ledge of the pool.

“And next!” Rainey, Amy’s best friend, directed from inside the pool as she clicked away on the camera.

I tossed my arm over my head as I lay on my side facing her. We took a few shots from that angle before I turned into a new one. The sun liked me, constantly kissing me and bronzing my skin almost immediately. And although the

temperature was nearing ninety degrees, the horsepower we charted the water in provided the perfect breeze.

The Tyrrhenian Sea was amazingly gorgeous, and the yacht exceeded my expectations. We boarded the boat on the Amalfi Coast a day ago and had been cruising ever since. The first thing I did after settling into the bedroom I shared with Chi-Chi was check out the entire yacht. We were given a tour by one of the hospitality crew members. Immediately, I felt like a celebrity's wife—or girlfriend...or side-chick? Or perhaps a baby's mother. But more specifically, like a "Diddy" baby's mother, not "Future's." Diddy took care of his children's mothers—at least the ones he could still fuck, had always been my guess.

There were three decks on this boat, including alfresco dining, that Chi-Chi and I took advantage of for breakfast this morning. Afterward, we came down to the poolside deck to explore the toys awaiting her when Jas joined us. It took me just a minute or two to be oriented on operating the deck's stereo system then I played with her in the chilled, crystalline pool.

"You're such a natural with the camera." Rainey flattered my ego, clicking away. She turned back to Amy, who floated in the water with Chi-Chi. "Your boss is like so fly, Aim!"

"Operative word being 'your' and it will remain that way." Amy replied expressionless, rocking sunglasses as she relaxed on the floaty with Chi-Chi. "Told you."

I laughed, thinking their banter was cute. It made me think of my best friends. Oh, how I wished they were here, turning up on this luxury boat with me.

I sat up to sink my legs into the pool as I pushed my thighs apart wide. Pulling up the string of my bikini bottoms by the sides, I shared, "I've been so lax with posting on social media. They're about to get all this Nubian glow from the Tyrrhenian." I puckered my lips for the next series of photos as Rainey tossed her head back, cracking the hell up.

One of the serving crew members approached me, "Another martini, Ms. Witherspoon?"

I glanced down at my near-empty glass. After gulping back what was left, I reminded him, “Sure. I’m going to drink enough to forget I told you to call me Shi-Shi.”

Humbly, he grabbed his chest and bowed. “Perdonami. Per favore.”

I tipped my head. “Certamente. Grazie.”

He took my empty glass away, and I caught view of Eric coming out on the upper deck where Jas and his Italian companion had been chatting for some time. It was good to see the security. They’d made themselves scarce since we boarded yesterday. I guessed it was to be respectful, as they were paid staff. Earlier, I passed by the billiard room and saw Eric and Bob playing pool with one of the crew members. I figured it was different for Amy, who was also an employee. She was able to bring a friend to avoid being bored when Chi-Chi was off spending time with her parents, which was the sole purpose of this “holiday.” I didn’t mind hanging with the girls at all. No, they weren’t my besties, but I could bring out the fun in the stiffest of personalities if I chose to, which meant I could certainly pass the time with these two.

Eric and Jas exchanged a few words before Eric disappeared farther into the deck, likely going back inside. That left Jas and his “mafia” companion, Francesco, back to their dedicated conversation. The guy gave every bit of mafia vibes, even communicating with his hands as his head bounced on his shoulders. It would seem odd to me if I didn’t know Jas had a nefarious past himself. I imagined the two men spoke the same language, yet with two different accents. It was actually comical.

What was the least bit humorous was how fucking delicious Chi-Chi’s father looked in floral swim trunks and nothing else. And it wasn’t because he’d been standing next to Francesco in a matching two-piece short set. His short-sleeved button-up shirt was offensively open, exposing his third-trimester pot belly littered with salt and pepper hair.

That’s enough, girl...

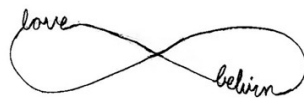
I chided myself. Francesco and his friends had been nothing but nice to Chi-Chi and me. This trip had been good vibes already so far. Well, maybe not necessarily with Jas. He'd been a bit distant, and that was okay.

"Here you go, Shi-Shi," the server pronounced as *CHEE-CHEE*.

I fought a laugh as I received my new martini garnished with fresh cilantro and lime. He motioned for me to taste it. Quickly, I obliged, elated by his patience and attempt to please me.

"*Mmmm!*" I hummed, licking the froth from my glossed lips. "Delizioso! Grazie mille!" I got a kick out of using the very limited amount of Italian I knew. "*Ahhhh...*" I exhaled, getting on my knees to get into a new pose.

I was definitely a well-kept baby's mother. A "Diddy" baby's mother because, sadly, I'd fuck Jas in a heartbeat... anytime, anyplace.

A handwritten signature in black ink. The word "love" is written in a cursive script on the left, and "belkin" is written in a similar cursive script on the right. The two words are connected by a large, elegant loop that forms an infinity symbol shape.A handwritten signature in blue ink. The name "jas" is written in a bold, cursive script. The letter 'j' has a long, sweeping tail that loops back under the 'a'.

"I wish I were there," Josie shared through the speaker of my cell phone.

I paused from spraying cologne on my neck and wrists, looking at myself in the mirror. "You sound sad, shortie."

"I'm over it."

Pulling my arms through a button-up short-sleeved shirt, I asked, "Over what?"

“All of this,” she almost whispered, and I knew why. Josie’s baby’s father was in town. He’d come down from Connecticut with his Korean wife to visit their four-year-old daughter. She was in a different room, talking to me, giving them their time. “I know my prayers for over two years was for him to, at least, see about her, but...”

“But what?”

“It feels so awkward with his wife.” She laughed louder than she spoke. “And he still gives me that flirty eye, like I’m supposed to be affected by it. Like...bro, your whole wife’s eight feet away from you.”

“But you good otherwise? Is he making you feel uncomfortable?”

“No. I’m over him.”

“A’ight. If you want, I can get Man over there.”

“That’s not necessary,” her vibration low again. “I just wish we were in a place where Mindy could spend time with him on her own. Like...maybe invite her up there with him in Connecticut so I could live my life with my boyfriend on a boat in... Where are you now?”

Boyfriend?

I liked Josie and all, but we hadn’t gone there.

I chuckled, thinking about where we were at this point. It was day five on the boat and today, we left the Isle of Capri, where we explored the *Blue Grotto*. A dope ass row boat ride into a cave made from a big ass rock. We had to get to the bottom of the boat to fit inside as the rider expertly guided us into a dangerously narrowed canal and a fucking amazingly blue “cathedral,” is how they call it. The water was a shade of blue I’d never seen. Ashira mentioned the color reminded her of the water in *Saint Justin*. Something about the difference was the water there sparkling at night.

We took another boat ride, this one motored to visit the *Faraglioni di Mezzo*. All this shit was new to me but heavily encouraged by Francesco, my native muscle on this European vacation. And apparently, Ashira was down, saying she’d

heard of some of the tourist hot spots. The stone archway of one of the Faraglioni rocks was crazy. We were told of its romantic legend. If a couple kissed under the arch, they'd stay together forever. So, Ashira managed Chivon between us, and instructed me to kiss one side of her cheek while she took the other. Then she requested Chivon, and I take one alone as she snapped away. Weird, rich, cultured people shit, but I rolled with it.

“Just left Capri,” I finally answered. “Headed up to Rome.” I continued to check myself out in the mirror, noticing a deep ass tan.

The gym here on the boat was dope, but I'd missed mine at home. All this yachting shit was new to me. You don't know what you don't know. They asked me lots of questions to make sure to meet all of our needs, but I didn't think about the different weights and machines I preferred. Ashira and Amy's friend used the gym, too, so it had definitely been getting its fair share of play.

“Rome!” Josie breathed into the phone. “I wonder what their pasta is like.”

“Me, too.”

“So, Italian is your favorite food?”

I thought for a minute as I left my cabin. “Nah. I don't think so.” After being locked up for so many years, your palette's pretty shitty. But God was good to me. I had good friends who ate at the best restaurants, and I'd been able to try out the shit they ate and learned from there. “I'm pretty much open to anything good.”

“Yeah. I've noticed.” I could hear the smile I'd been used to in her voice. “You always let me pick when we go out.”

“Yup. I'm a simple man.”

Things got quiet as I plopped down the stairs.

“You good?”

“Yeah.” Another pause. “How's Shi-Shi?”

“Chivon’s good. Having the time of her three-year-old life that she won’t remember. They’ve been shooting lots of videos of her and taking flicks. Some way, somehow, her little ass will know her childhood was from Daddy’s heart.”

“So, sweet, babe,” she encouraged as I took another set of stairs down to the main level. “I was actually asking about her mom.” My stride slowed mid-step. “Is she the one taking the pictures and videos? She having a good time?”

“What makes you ask that?”

“Which question?”

“About Chivon’s moms?”

Josie’s answer came in slowly. “Because it is your family’s vacation. Your dynamic is...” She let out a breath. “Way different from mine, as you can see.” The sadness returned.

“Don’t sweat it. Everybody’s good out here. And if you want me to send somebody over there, just say the word.” I stared at the nightline of the water on my way to the dining room. This was some shit you could get used to; it was so picturesque. God’s talent for beauty blew my mind on the water. “Josie, I’m about to grub. I’ll hit you when I’m done to check on you.”

Her giggle was faint. “Okay. Enjoy. Tell me what you had.”

Silly...

“Will do,” I agreed before we disconnected.

“Señor Jas!” the chef, Bella, with her usual excitable spirit, called out to me while carrying a hot dish to the table. “Where’s that Shi-Shi? I had Captain Lagar page her twice. Time to eat!” She zipped past me with two of her staff right behind, carrying food, too.

I glanced around the dining room, seeing most of the seats filled.

“Daddy!” Chivon shouted me out from next to Amy.

“Hey, Blueberry, baby!” I approached her for a kiss.
“Where’s Mommy?”

Chivon looked around the room then shouted, “Mommy! Mommeeee!” She shrugged. “I dun know, Daddy.” Chivon looked at Amy. “Where Mommy?”

Amy and her friend laughed. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen her since she dropped Chi-Chi off to me after her bath and pedicure touch-up.”

“Touch-up?”

“My feet, Daddy,” Chivon tried to explain but was unable to reach her foot while pointing in her chair.

“Remember, Chi-Chi complained about her toenail chipping in the sand when we first got to Capri.”

It sounded vaguely familiar. When Chivon’s mother was around, I tended to be less attentive to such needs.

“Has anyone seen her since then?”

The girls shrugged, with Amy breaking off a piece of bread to dip into flavored olive oil before eating. I was starving my damn self. The last thing I ate was a slice of Chivon’s pizza before returning to the boat.

I decided to look for her. The first place I checked was the cabin she shared with Chivon. It was empty, door cracked open. The bathroom was empty, as was the closet. I left and checked the pool area and the spa parlor where the girls could get massages and their nails done. Both were empty. Walking down a corridor, I crossed paths with a crew member I had been paying to call Ashira Ms. Witherspoon instead of Shi-Shi against Ashira’s wishes.

“Hey, man. Have you seen Witherspoon?”

The young guy snickered as professionally as he could and, with his thick accent, explained, “She wanted a cigar and drink on the sundeck.”

Oh...

Then I thought and pulled a few bills from my pocket and paid him for the day. Dude laughed again before taking off. I headed in the opposite direction of him until I remembered where the sundeck was. I'd still been getting to know the boat. It was big as hell.

Stepping down at the front of the boat on the top level, in the dark of the night, I could see a slender body curled up on one of the loungers. She lay on her side with both hands near her small waist. Her face was relaxed, peaceful, and done with makeup. I sat on the lounge next to her, taking a deep breath. The dress she wore blanketed her long legs. Next to her, on a patio table, were a cognac glass, an unlit cigar, a torch, an ashtray, and her cell phone. I picked up the glass and noticed she hadn't even taken a sip based on her glossed lips.

Ashira tapped out before dinner. I couldn't blame her. Capri had been adventurous. She drank a lot last night, having a good time and entertaining strangers, including our traveling crew, along the way. She'd been her typical self when on vacation: the life of the party, dancing, hyping people up, and just giving big energy. I tried to hang with them but crashed at around one in the morning. But Ashira remained back with Bob. I'd heard her whispering about a hangover at breakfast. Having too much the night before couldn't compete with parenthood the following day. Young kids like Chivon couldn't understand the compassion needed for such an occasion. And closing on the day a few hours ago was no different. Seeing her surrender to sleep reminded me of how emotional the day had turned for her, too.

We docked in the middle of the sea, and Ashira requested the inflatables be placed off the boat. Seeing a giant ass slide swell off the side of the yacht and into the water reminded me of my first experience with one in St. Vincent with Ashira and her girls. Ashira, Amy, and Rainey, along with a few crew members, had a blast sliding and sometimes jumping into the water off the boat. After a while, Chivon wanted in on the fun, and that's where I'd just come onto the deck, fresh out of a business conference call.

Chivon was at the top of the slide, looking down at her mother in the water. With her life jacket and floaties on, my baby chewed on her index finger, hesitating.

“Please, baby,” Ashira begged. “Mommy’s right here! I won’t let anything bad happen!”

Amy, down in the water with Ashira, tried to encourage Chivon, too.

Still, my daughter wasn’t so sure about the long ride down.

“You trust, Mommy, right, Chi-Chi?” Ashira kept with the begging. “You know Mommy will never fib to you. Right?” Chivon nodded, clearly understanding her mother. Maybe. “Then come on! Mommy wants you out here, swimming with me!”

I stood out there for what seemed like forever, watching and debating if I should get involved. If Chivon didn’t want to do it, she shouldn’t have felt pressured. But I also knew she’d been asking to do it for a few days now. How long would it be before I put an end to it? The second I decided I was ready to go and comfort my child, Chivon dropped her hand from her mouth, screamed, and plopped down onto the opening of the slide.

“Coming, Mommy!” She announced before pushing herself down, not waiting on the crew member, a lifeguard, helping out at the top.

Curious to see if she had sudden regrets, I skipped to the railings. I was just in time to see her last few feet of sliding before she dropped into the ocean. Chivon came up almost in no time, and her mother didn’t give her a moment to clear her eyes before pinning her to her chest.

And Ashira cried, “Told you!” she reminded her from the top of her lungs. “Told you Mommy would be right here!”

“Awwww!” Amy doggy paddled next to them, taken by how emotional Ashira was.

And she was. Ashira clutched Chivon so close to her chest as she cried.

I tapped her. “Hey...” Then I shoved her softly. “Sleepy head.”

Ashira’s eyes opened and flashed wide. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. I ain’t mean to scare you. *You* gave us the scare.”

She pushed up from the lounge chair to straighten. “What did I do?”

“It’s dinner time.”

Ashira grabbed her phone and checked it for the time. “Shit!” she whispered, then swiped at the corner of her eyes. “I didn’t want to stay in my room, thinking I’d crash. So I came up here for a drink and smoke to keep me awake.”

“And I guess the joke’s on you, kid.” I lifted the glass of what I knew was *Mauve*. “You never made it to the first drop.”

Her eyes narrowed then she dropped her head to the side. “Take it for me.”

“Huhn?”

Ashira tossed her chin my way. “Take a sip of it. Go ‘head. No one’s around, and I won’t tell a soul.”

I couldn’t ignore the slight seduction in her dare. “Why would I do that?”

“Because no matter how you feel about me, I still have enough influence to push you to your limits.”

My brows shot up. “Oh, word? You think you do. Huhn?” I scoffed.

Ashira giggled, ego suddenly nowhere in sight. I liked it so, without a lot of thought, I swallowed back some of the smooth liquid, burning my damn throat, chest, and stomach.

“Damn...” she breathed. “You did it.” Ashira observed me like some damn animal in a cage. She tossed her chin again and softly ordered, “Drink the rest.”

“The rest?”

“Yeah. You already throated half of it—more than half. There’s a little left.”

I put the tumbler back on the table and stood to my feet. “I’m good.” And I was. That shit burned.

“I’m not.” Her tone testy. “Don’t be a prude.”

“Ashira, we both know I’m not. I took a damn sip. That shit’s gross.”

She picked the glass up, inclining toward me, which caused a strap from her dress to slip over her shoulder. Her skin glowed in the night of the ocean under the skylight and bulbs lining the deck. She then left the lounge and stepped closer to me. “More.” Her smile...so fucking cute, even if I wasn’t beat for it.

I took the glass and turned back the rest of the brandy. *Shit!* The second one was worse than the first. I choked from the fumes. My eyes were closed when I felt the small of her hand pat me on the back.

“Just let it flow down, Jas. Damn.” My arm accidentally hit her soft tits.

That got me to calm down, and I stood straight, trying to get the hell off this deck. “You good?” I cleared my burning throat again. “Coming down to grub, or what?”

Staring deep into me, Ashira nodded. Then a gentle smirk stretched her face. “I think you just gave me the second wind I needed.”

“Silly ass,” I grumbled. “Whatever that means. Get your phone.”

I turned to leave, feeling Ashira not too far behind.

Chapter Sixteen

Part III

June | Three Years Later

ashira

As hot espresso was placed in front of me, I marveled aloud, “You have to miss this.”

Bella, the head chef on the yacht we’d been living on since leaving the Amalfi Coast, took a deep breath, dark-arched brows lifting. “Oh, I do. Roma is where my heart rests.”

“But do you get lonely on the road when you’ve been away for long stretches?” I glanced around again to the aged concrete buildings, colorful graffiti and roping vines on some of them, small dinner tables, and mopeds parked all around. The view was just as captivating as the *Colosseum*, *Forum*, and *Saint Peter’s Square*. “I’d miss all this history and culture.”

“Yeah.” Bella, who I’d recently learned the yacht we’d been using was named after, paid a cursory glance around our small table outside a small restaurant, too. “But home for me is Italy.” Her eyes crinkled as she smirked, peering at Francesco.”

“Grazie,” I murmured to the owner of the delicious restaurant Francesco and Bella brought Jas and I to for dinner tonight. We were docked and exploring again. “I still can’t get over how I missed you two were a couple.” I was slightly embarrassed, actually. They were older. I’d give Francesco late sixties, and Bella, though spare in frame, quick and light in motion, and femininely gracious out of uniform, couldn’t have been much older. “How long have you been married?”

“Oh!” Bella palmed her salt and mostly peppered hair pulled back into a ponytail. “No. Francesco and I aren’t married. His wife and family live about forty minutes north of here.” Her accent, thankfully, wasn’t as rich as his.

It was my time to parrot, “Oh.” Confused, I turned to Jas subconsciously in search of answers.

The day after we debarked from the Isle of Capri, I’d just left the gym from working out and ran into Bella and Francesco. They were in close proximity, leaning into the boat railing, necking each other with closed mouths over a cup of coffee. I was quite embarrassed then, too. It was clearly an intimate private time between lovers, something unpolluted and without lechery. Their chemistry screamed pure and seasoned in just those brief seconds I’d witnessed. The two didn’t seem to be hiding it as they both greeted me good morning before going back to their nuzzling. It was cute.

And I was...jealous...

Francesco, a robust, intimidating, brute-looking figure with a balding crown, scoffed and whispered something to Bella in Italian I couldn’t understand.

“Yes,” Bella giggled, too. “He said I must explain to the American princess who likely romanticizes a love like ours.”

“Me?” Dismissively, I pushed air from my lips while going for my espresso. “I’m not a romantic.”

Francesco laughed at me, a sign of warmth from the thuggish man. “Cazzate!”

Even Jas laughed at that. I wasn’t sure of the word, but confident in the sentiment. Bella reached across the small table

and caressed my hand encouragingly. “I hope you do. Love is the best gift God has given us.”

A fuzzy sensation rocketed through me. “I believe that,” my voice lacked confidence, but I did believe it.

“Good.” She sat back. “With Francesco’s permission, I’ll share our story with you.” Bella looked at Francesco as though he was the king of her universe, and he granted her permission in the same fashion. “I adored him when we were kids. He was a knucklehead, and I was the fool in love with him. I packed extra lunch food for him, and he beat up boys who liked to tease me for the gap I used to have in my teeth and the boobs I developed prematurely.”

I snickered at that, suddenly entranced by the story time.

“So,” Bella continued. “We go through the rest of our schooling that way until it was time to make adult decisions. I wanted to go away to America for my formal education. Francesco wanted to stay here at home to help his father with the family business. I hated the family business and wanted him all to myself.” Francesco snorted and spoke again in his native tongue. Bella echoed his sentiment. “Yes. I *was* a stubborn girl. As the Americans say, I want my cake and have it, too.”

I tried not to laugh at that.

“So, anyway, after mi mamma and papà begged me not to go,” Bella explained. “his mamma and sisters then begged me not to go. And all the while, I begged Fran to come with me. We didn’t need much money. I only needed him and him, me, but...” Her thin lips turned up. “Let’s just say he chose his destiny, and so did I. But...”

“But...” Gripping my coffee mug, I needed her to fast-forward this tale. Coincidentally, I now understood her ability to speak English better than Francesco.

“I soon learned opportunity and money aren’t everything. I went to America and completed my schooling. I traveled all over, good at what I do.” Bella’s head bounced with emphasis.

“Ashira,” Jas sat up in his seat, addressing me. “When they had big, fancy ass parties back in the day, Bella used to cook for people like Whitney Houston, Michael Jackson, Sammy Davis Jr., Sugar Ray Leonard...Quincy Jones and elite Blacks like that. She cooked for whites, too, but you know... Just to give you an idea of the Black palettes she’s satisfied.”

“Whoa...” I breathed out loud.

With pride, Bella smiled. Francesco’s big arm squeezed her thin frame to his side. “I had lots of success in America. Canada, too. I love cooking. Mi mamma taught me the love of food, and schooling gave me the knowledge to express it. But I was lonely. Francesco came to visit me twice, but it wasn’t enough. I wrote him hundreds of letters.” She shook her head. “He may have written back once, and the letter said, ‘come home now,’ and I wouldn’t do that. I loved my career.” She paused for a sip of her espresso.

“Then I got word Francesco had married and was expecting his first baby. I’d been gone for over five years. He was a man with his own ambitions for a family. He sacrificed the love component, and so did I.” She shrugged.

“Did you marry?” I wanted to know. “Have children?”

Bella shook her head. “My heart was shattered. My body and soul belonged to just one man. Sure, I had lovers here and there, but nothing captured what was broken inside.” Bella once again peered over to Francesco. He didn’t return her attention with his eyes, but he pulled her into him even more, if that were possible. The burly man was affected, just not as expressive.

“Anyway,” Bella pulled in a wet snuffle. “We never forgot each other. I’d come home eventually to check in on my sick papà every few months. And I’d be at his bedside for the first two days, then on the third night, I’d literally be snatched from my bed in my parents’ home and abducted for days...on a boat.” Her eyes sparkled in Francesco’s direction.

I sucked in a breath. “*The Bella?*”

Again Bella shook her head. “He’s had several before the luxury yacht you two are renting right now. *The Bella* is by far the largest of his fleet. We designed her together years later. But back then, when he abducted me for days at a time, in just my pajamas, we’d sail all over. Just the two of us.”

I thought of Jas’ boat at home and the many times we’d been on it. The first time we’d made love on the galley in the open air. Orgasms took on a different meaning outside and over the water for me. Those were the days when I didn’t realize shit was simple between us. It seemed the more the years had gone by, the more complicated maintaining a friendship had become...for me. Anger and resentment had swelled in my heart, but my respect for the man had not wavered—even since his recent violent bouts.

“And his wife?” I had to ask.

Francesco mumbled a string of words I didn’t understand, reminding me of my initial thoughts of him.

“No.” She lay a calming hand on his round belly. “That’s where the romance needs to be explained.” Then Bella turned back to me. “Francesco married a local girl, and that hurt me deeply. It was our cultural obligation I fled from. Yes, I would have married him and given him all the babies his heart could fit, but I wanted my own timeline. When I left Roma, I hurt him first. When I accomplished my schooling, certificate after certificate, I compromised our love and romance. So, when he decided to salvage what he could to create a family, he went for it. We both sacrificed love as we accomplished what we felt was most important to us.”

“And his wife?” I repeated.

“Ashira, chill,” Jas chided quietly.

Bella took another sip of her espresso. “Oh. I was getting to that. She...Maria shared with me, on one of my trips home, a conversation Francesco had with her when he expressed wanting to marry her. He told her he’d only have one love. He promised to always care for her and their children and to support them by any means, but his heart...his commitment...”

“Will always be with you,” I whispered my revelation, feeling a cry stuck in my throat.

Oh, how fucking hopeless love could be...

A beam of understanding spread over her olive face, and Bella nodded. “When I was done with my career...old, graying, and barren, I decided to return to my love. I was selfish and self-centered, but I’d been incomplete for over thirty years, running stubbornly. Upon returning, my love and I made a number of difficult, selfish, and *us*-centered decisions together. I respect Francesco’s commitment to his family. I’ve never asked him to leave his wife. And he’s supported my love of cooking...incorporating it into his vessel rental business. So...” Her head bounced again with resoluteness. “I want my cake and have it, too.”

Like me...

Bella’s mistake on the idiom wasn’t funny to me this time. It caused me to deliberate quietly.

I didn’t have to come here to Europe with Jas for Chi-Chi. There were countless ways we could express our familial unit without a joint vacation. I’d subconsciously decided to make myself available to him in this way. *Why?* When my parents split, they made no sacrifices to spend time together for me. Why had I accepted Jas’ imposing presence in my world? Why did I agree to carry out my pregnancy with Chivon after learning of his acquisition of my father’s company?

Have I been lowkey wanting my cake and having it, too?

I chewed on that for the remainder of our espresso, then a serving of amaro, supposedly to help digestion. Francesco was the first to announce their need to leave. We’d be separated from them until we set sail tomorrow evening. He had to check in with his wife and family, and Bella had to shop for more perishables and spices for our upcoming meals.

Jas and I stood for the goodbyes. As I embraced Bella, I thanked her for sharing their story with me and assured them there was no judgment on my part. Quite honestly, I didn’t think Bella cared. I understood it was their love to have and

protect. Security escorted them off while mine and Jas' stayed behind with us.

"You've been quiet for the past twenty minutes," Jas noted.

I nodded while rubbing my chilled arms. "Buried in my thoughts."

"Care to share?"

"I thought he was the mafia."

Jas' head leaped back as though dazed then he nodded. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

I shrugged. "I'm just being honest." My gaze got lost in the porcelain vase serving as the centerpiece on the small white-cloth, square table. "I'm not too prideful to admit when I'm wrong. I didn't know he owned *The Bella* yacht."

"There's lots of shit you don't know, Ashira." His volume mild...delivery fair, but undertone nippy. "The world is vast and full of unfamiliar wonders. I think the more you stick with what you don't know, the more you learn and grow."

A flame ignited in my belly, and I hissed, "You don't think in all of my thirty-five years I've tried things I didn't know about or wasn't familiar with?"

Jas' eyes widened, and slowly, he lowered his chin. "I'm not sure what that means. My bad if I said something to offend you. I didn't *mean*—"

"You never 'mean' to offend me, but somehow you always do!"

He peered around the table, appearing the total opposite of the aggressor I'd known him to be. "What did I *say*—"

"It's not always just what you say," I returned. "It's what you do as well. Just like earlier when I asked Bella to clarify the situation with his wife: you called my name like I was a child or an immature 'American' as they all but accused me of being."

“Are you saying they were judging you? Because you just copped to believing he was a mob boss.”

“*I didn’t know!*” I accidentally shouted, more like squalled; I was so irritated.

In a calmer tone, Jas explained, “They don’t know you *either*— You know what?” He took a deep breath, reclining in his chair, then swiped over the bristles of his cheeks. “I ain’t about to do this. It’s all good. Say less. You got it.”

“Got what?”

“Whatever you want it to be, Ashira,” his tone defeated. “We’ve been getting along, and I’m not about to start arguing with you now. It’s been a whole week, and I’m not about to do this shit.”

“We’ve been getting along? Is co-existing what you call getting along?” I couldn’t deny the pain from the emotional wall Jas had erected between us long ago. “And start what shit?”

“This. This energy.” He stood from the table, still able to control his voice. “I told the therapist I was gonna make this as painless as possible. So that’s what I’mma do.” He walked off, catching the eye of the security guys waiting on us.

Painless? So sharing a space with me was problematic? This was the shit I’d been talking about!

Quickly, I stood to follow. “We’re on a European tour, always being followed by armed men. That ain’t regular. And you expect me not to make judgment calls? Again, how was I supposed to know he owns the boat?”

Jas stopped and turned to me. “Ashira, I rented the boat from Francesco on recommendation. You know how I feel about being smart when traveling. Francesco not only owns the boat, but he’s known and well respected on this cruise line we’ve been on. I can let my guard down just a little, knowing I’ve got somebody with us who knows the ‘streets’ we’re vacationing on.”

“And who told you that? Ava?” *Hell yeah*, I was being petty.

Painless my ass...

And I couldn't help it. Something had triggered my emotions, and Jas had this coming to him for years now.

I click-clacked in my heels away from the crowd, all the way to the car next to him, demanding an answer.

But Jas stopped. He glowered at me with squinted eyes, then scoffed. "Un-fuckin' believable."

"That I would know this was all her after I told you to keep her out of my life?"

"That you would assume I'd have her in your life after I had to fire her to make you happy."

Shit...

I gulped in air. "I never asked you to fire her!"

"You never asked me to fire her," he mocked. "But you damn sure made it clear you didn't want her involved in your world."

"Yeah! *My* life!"

"Or Chivon's life."

"Right! Neither my child's!" Buddy was damn right!

"Then that meant she couldn't be in my life, Ashira. Don't forget; I'm Chivon's father. I provide for her and spend time with her. I'm not a hood nigga, going around droppin' off my cum and making babies. Even though, let you tell it, I'm even less than that."

That shit stung.

Oh, no, he didn't!

Sucking in more air, my neck rolled hard. "You're the one who thinks I'm a shitty mother!"

"I ain't never say that shit, *Ashir*—"

"And let me tell you, I won't allow you or anyone else to judge me. I may not be *your* ideal mother to her...taking her to church, reading bedtime stories to her every night—dedicating my every waking hour to her. But I love my daughter, and it's

fucked up how everybody thinks I'm a loser of a mom and every other capacity I serve in people's lives!" My fists clenched, remembering the accusations. "You heard my sister. She chose Ava over me!"

Jas' neck collapsed. "Don't even go there, man. Ol' girl's gone!"

"Oh, yeah. Right!" My arms shot into the air. "Blame that on me. Just like my mother. Blame everything on me. She thinks I'm a shitty mother, too. I don't have anything to prove to either one of you. Chi-Chi came from *me*. She came from love! I didn't have a baby by a random ass nigga, even though the pregnancy wasn't planned and having a baby wasn't ideal. But I've given my all to my daughter. So fuck you, and everyone else who thinks I don't do enough."

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "jas". The letters are cursive and fluid, with a small dot above the 'j'.

Fucking stunned...

I was fucking stunned!

"*Me?* Fuck *me?* I don't think you're good to Chivon? I defended your ass when your moms tried to come for you. I'm always defending you!"

Being melodramatic, Ashira's hand went to her chest. "So, now, you're doing me a favor? Great!" She gripped her waist, shifting away while nodding.

Yo, I had no idea how we'd even gotten here. I would blame it on her being drunk, but Ashira had one glass of wine at dinner tonight, and I knew her tolerance was too high to act out of character from that alone. The ocean ride was good for me this week. My prayers had been regular, and meditation was amazing. I'd been in my worship bag, which had helped with getting along with her.

“Ashira,” I tried for a cooler head.

She yanked her body to face me, still busting off, “I know what all of your coldness toward me has been about. It’s about Paris.” A million needles stabbed my chest at one damn time, and I blinked hard, trying to clear my vision. “You’ll never get over me not wanting to go through with another pregnancy. That’s your issue with me, no matter how ‘cool guy’ you try to act. You still hold it against me. I’m sorry, Jas. Okay?”

“Don’t fuckin’ apologize—”

She spoke over me, “I struggled to recoup professionally what I almost lost when carrying Chi-Chi. I followed my dreams, and will never apologize for that! I *can* have it all. I’m doing the best I can as a mother. And you know what? I’m going back on the road! I’m doing Pixie’s tour. That’s the only time I seem to have peace. And maybe I’m not tending to my child day in and day out the way you and others want me to, but I provide for my child! I’m not dependent on you!”

Her arm swung in the air randomly toward the street. “You may have gotten this fancy yacht...paid almost a million dollars for this vacation”—*Try two*...—“but damn it, I could have paid for this, too! It would have been a little more of a sacrifice for me, digging into my savings, but I could have. Either way, I’m *here* with my daughter. I’m investing my time with her. I want the best for her as you do. And I’m not going to allow anyone to judge me about how I carry it out! You got what you wanted from me. You have a child! I’ve taken you one step closer to the wholesome lifestyle you’ve been wanting. Then *I’m* judged for making a call that wouldn’t further derail the dreams I’ve had. *Tuh!*”

Self-righteous ass...

I lost it. “You’re the one who turned *me* into a fucking baby daddy! I wasn’t made for this shit. I built myself up to be a husband first, and then a father. Who the fuck are you to play God and determine *my* future? You rejected the idea of marriage. Of course, you wouldn’t have a baby with a nigga with my history. Then *you* killed my child! *YOU!* You decided having another baby wouldn’t suit *your* life and ignored my

pleas to have the baby. *You* got the fuckin' abortion. *You*. It was all about fuckin' Ashira. It always is!"

"I didn't make the babies alone, Jas. You determine your own future. *You* wanted me. *You* decided to forego condoms back before Chi-Chi. *You* want to act like a goddamn hoodlum, fighting my ex-boyfriend, who I wouldn't give a second chance if he paid me for it. I didn't sleep with him *since* sleeping with you. I haven't fucked a soul because sex toys are lifeless! But *you* did. *You* fucked Josie! *You're* trying to find a soulmate. *You're* abandoning this life we've created, albeit accidentally. Yes, it may be untraditional—hell, did you listen to the story Bella just shared? No, I wouldn't mind another baby *now*—"

"Another fuckin' *bab*—" Anger burned in my fucking stomach like acid at the mention of that. She did this shit to me, making me feel more like an animal than a man. "You think I'm a fuckin' toy? Like you can just fuck my life upside down and come back for more when you feel? You think so fuckin' little of me?"

"Okay. So, maybe I'm open to having another baby, and you're not, but fuck you! You're not better than me, Jas! *I'm human!*"

I couldn't process much more, still stuck on her arrogance.

She killed my baby.

I asked her not to, but she did. It was a time I'd never forget. Ashira had been working with *Asè Garb* when Chivon was just nine months old. Me being the fucking pussy I allowed her to turn me into flew Chivon and my staff out to Paris to be a support to Ashira. She and I had never returned to being a couple like we were when Chivon was conceived, but I fought hard to be sure to maintain a connection with her. It wasn't just for the baby's sake: I lowkey still wanted her. I was still in love with the girl.

There had been something compelling me to her for days before Ava was able to make the arrangements for me to see her. I used the excuse of Chivon getting ready to walk and didn't want her to miss out on it. It made sense in my head, so

we flew out, and like a fucking kid, I couldn't wait to get to her.

Paris was cool. It was my first time, and to have it with my daughter and Ashira meant a lot to me. Between her shoots, we'd go to different restaurants she wanted me to try. I'd had gelato for the first time with Chivon. Ashira and I made love all over the small apartment they rented for her out there. It was a good time, until the morning we had to leave her out there and go back to the States.

Ashira didn't look good when she told me she had something to tell me and wanted to ride to the airport with us. That shit sent my anxiety through the fucking roof. I was leaving her sad. I couldn't take that and separate my family. So, to extend our time together, I asked the driver to pull up to the park that so happened to be Parc des Buttes Chaumont. While there, a miracle happened. Chivon actually walked. I questioned if I'd ever felt more pride than I had at that moment. Becoming a father weakened niggas like me. The little girl made me vulnerable, which could get me killed if I were in another line of work.

But nothing had destroyed me more than the news Ashira broke in front of the airport after she'd kissed our baby goodbye and sent Amy and the staff inside to give us privacy.

"Jas," she whispered as I leaned down, my forehead pressed into hers.

"Yeah, baby." I rarely called her baby since our breakup, but I felt it at that moment. Time needed to stand fucking still. I hated leaving her, but would never deny Ashira her dreams. I'd move heaven and hell to ensure her happiness. I'd even 'backseat' my own dreams of making her my wife just to see hers come to life. And this was the price I had to pay, leaving her again.

"I'm pregnant," her voice was pained, scared...small.

It wasn't what I expected or wanted to hear. Being a father again and not married? It went against the list.

Still, I didn't open my eyes when I assured her, "We'll get through it. I got you."

"I know. But I don't need you for this."

That's when I did open my eyes. Her face was soaked when she explained, "I've already scheduled to terminate it."

My head spun fast as hell, and I lost my lungs. "When? Where?"

"A clinic back home. This Friday. I'm going from the airport."

With a pounding chest, I collected her hands, holding them in mine. "Please don't. Don't do this. We haven't talked about it."

"We don't need to. We're good in this space. Adding another unexpected stumbling block may destroy me, Jas."

"Please—"

"Jas!" She whispered hard, dropping her forehead into my chest. "No. I can't. I'm still not adjusted to Chi-Chi. It's just too much. I'm struggling to hold it together...physically and mentally."

Her words were like blows to the gut, and I was powerless to defend myself against them.

"Baby—"

"Say..." she croaked out a deep cry. "...less. Go, Jas." She pushed away from me. "You have a plane to catch, and the car is sitting idle."

I was fucking winded, letting her go and slip inside the car. Something inside of me broke, watching her pull off.

My hope in Ashira left with her in that car. That was where it had begun, and slowly, the emotional detachment began. Then came the physical withdrawal a year ago. The shit bankrupted me of all the patience I'd had for her. For us.

ashira

“I fell in love with you without even knowing your name. Your name,” I croaked, the first tear staining my face. “I visited what I thought was your home in the projects and wanted to make love to you there—would have if you’d tried.” Swiping the errant flow on my cheeks, I chuckled at my ignorance, embarrassed by it all. “Ava knew your full name before I did. Did Josie have the benefit of knowing your name before making love to you, falling in love with you, learning your name is on the deed on *Lake Sha’Ron*?” When Jas didn’t answer me, didn’t even react to my pain, I took a step closer, demanding, “Or was that evil reserved for silly, cosmopolitan, ingénue girls from Millburn?”

Jas looked away into the distance.

I stepped closer, face dripping. “Bet you don’t intimidate Josie like you try to do me. Do you? You could have killed Tyreek. Austin needed surgery on his face, Jas.” Another thought zapped through my mind. “How did you even know I was out having dinner with him? The fashion of our communication?”

His nose contracted; demeanor aplomb. “I knew because it was easy to piece together. Your story ain’t no different from any other ditzy broad who choose niggas that don’t give a fuck about them but ignore the ones who sacrifice day in and day out, even if it means making them look like a sucka. All y’all broads are the same. You were gonna let him back in to fuck up *all*—”

My limbs trembled. “I swear to god I wasn’t going to let Austin back into my life.”

Jas shrugged, both hands coolly in the pocket of his pants. “You go out to dinner to tell him that, Witherspoon?”

I flinched at that name, withered emotionally. “I’ve been so fucking lonely. You’ve basically dismissed me...discarded me like we never had anything real. You made me public enemy number one since last year,” I cried. “And if I could be honest, I felt your withdrawal way before the last time I felt you inside of me. I’ve felt less than a woman...less than a mother after I decided not to take on another child.” I shook my head, emotions reeling after holding it all in for so long. “I don’t care,” I cried. “Okay, so I’m ready now. Maybe I feel the time is right for me now. I’m older now. I have more clarity on who I am, and it’s my choice. Motherhood is my choice. Why should I feel sorry about this?”

I was depleted, out of breath. Jas was silent, immobile for a long while. Then he moved for the car, holding the door for me to enter. An icy chill coated my body as I passed him to duck inside.

Not another word was expressed on the entire ride back to *The Bella*.



My body was shifted, and I tensed all over. Dazed, I forced my heavy eyes open and realized I was moving in the shadows of the cabin. Then my brain kicked in, and I squirmed in the arms of a muscular frame.

Chi-Chi!

Mafia!

The 'Ndrangheta!

“No!” my throat decided to work. “No!”

Then sharp bristles of hair splintered my nose, mouth, and chin. My heart was beating outside of my damn chest, armpits misting. Inside the smuggling hairy neck, I recognized the scent.

“*Shhhhh...*” he hushed.

A door opened, and I was being lowered. When my feet reached the floor, I knew the identity of my captor, but my body was still in fight-or-flight mode. I was shaking like a leaf, and didn't know what to do.

“Are you crazy—what's going on?” I whispered hard, not wanting to awake Chi-Chi.

“Hold,” Jas' hard, topless frame caged me into the wall. “I need for you to see my face for this.” Within seconds, a light flashed. It was from his phone. I hid my face, the radiance too much. “What happened to your face—were you crying?” his tone alarmed.

That reminded me. I cried myself to sleep. It was a trial of strong will putting Chi-Chi down after Jas, and I had returned to the boat. We played and sang together. I bathed her, then lay with her until she fell out. The moment I caught the pattern of her heavy breathing, my body jerked, and the levy broke. My tears were so ferocious I left her bed for mine. My body trembled so badly I would have surely disturb her sleep. Then to cry in silence was another task. But what could I do? I didn't want to alarm Amy, and didn't have the energy to leave the cabin anyway.

I couldn't look Jas in the face, neither would I lie to him. I was too spent, emotionally wrecked.

“Fuck!” he swore in a throaty whisper. “My spirit ain't right. I couldn't sleep.”

I'd finally fallen asleep myself; I now knew. I didn't even know the time. My head was foggy, and body still coming down from believing I was being abducted.

“I just needed...” Jas hesitated. “Wanted to come kick it with... The shit you said keeps playing in my head.” He took a deep breath, the wind hitting my nipples in the thin camisole. I wondered if Jas had any self-awareness. Our torsos were still touching. Yeah, he may have moved on with another woman, but I was still very much affected by him. “Look. Out of the shit I threw at you out there—all the shit that had been building, and I'm still struggling with—nothing that left my mouth was in the spirit of Christ. That was all me. All flesh

talking, and I'm so ashamed. Embarrassed. You might think I'm a hypocrite. The way I walk, the fuckin' profanity, and the way you said I've done shit to make you feel like less of a woman and mother."

Jas finally detached from me, stepping back until he was against the opposite wall. He dropped his head. The flashlight from his phone was still bright as hell, but my eyes were adjusting.

"You remember Apostle Paul, Ashira?" I immediately recalled all the times when we'd meet up at *Brown Barista*, and he'd asked me about my biblical knowledge. My 'no's' eventually became embarrassing for someone with a Christian primary education. But quickly and truthfully, I nodded. "Along the way...even before the abortion, I've been so damn angry with you. I struggled with my feelings because I loved you for sure, but I've been angry, too. And maybe I did—I have—done things to cause you to feel that resentment. I can't stand here and say I'm sorry, and it'll never happen again, but I can promise you I know it's wrong, and I'm working on improving it. You're the mother of my child, and I shouldn't be the cause of you feeling anything but respect, and holding you in high esteem."

Jas seemed to struggle again, and so was I, still reeling from an emotional night and how I'd been awakened. "Now, I can put a name to it...the reason I've been so angry, I'm going to work on my heart concerning it. In second Corinthians, chapter twelve, verse eight, the Apostle Paul mentioned having a thorn in his side. Like my thorn is our past. He said he'd prayed to God three times concerning it. He wanted the thorn to depart from him. That's going to be my prayer moving forward. I can't promise perfection with my actions, but can guarantee my efforts to stop."

That's when I recognized a sliver of the Bible-bumping thug I'd fallen in love with four years ago.

Because of the shadows around us, I couldn't see clearly into Jas' face, so I didn't even try. With a racing heart, I simply nodded.

Chapter Seventeen

Part III

July | Three Years Later



“I’ve gotten her up to eighteen knots!” Lagar, the captain, giggled like a big ass kid. His cheeks turned rosy aside his straggly imperial beard as he tried to cover his mouth without touching his face.

All eyes shot over to Francesco, who was unsmiling.

“Ah, bullocks!” Dancel, the co-captain, challenged. “More like seventeen and a quarter.”

We laughed, standing in the cockpit of *The Bella*.

“Well, we won’t be going that fast tonight,” I assured playfully, holding my cup of mint tea. “I’m going to cruise to maybe fifteen-five on my shift.”

Dancel found that funny. “We’ll see, mate. Once you feel the power beneath your fingers, you’ll be tempted like the rest!”

They cracked up again as I took a sip of my drink. I shook my head. “Man, listen, Francesco won’t be kickin’ me and my

family off this bitch in the middle of the Tyrrhenian!” They cracked the hell up. “Word is bond!” I laughed my damn self. “I’mma play it safe.”

“Okay, mate,” Dansel turned to leave the room. “I’m going to hit the washroom, then the galley.” He slapped my shoulder. “Don’t ‘Titanic’ us.”

Lagar followed after him, laughing his ass off.

Tonight was our ninth night on *The Bella*, and I’d be taking over for the captains. I’d been looking forward to this since I learned about the boat, its size, engines, and other features. I’d also get a quiet moment alone to think and pray in silence. As the official captain, Francesco would be in and out of here just in case I needed a break, but this evening, I challenged myself to a six-hour shift. That would give the captains a break.

“Daddy!” Chivon shrieked, running straight to my legs.

I scooped her up right away, loving the sight of her wild, wooly hair. “What’re you doing in here, little girl?”

She giggled. “Mommy.”

Then I saw Ashira at the door of the cockpit. Her wrists wrapped around each other at her waist. She didn’t step inside.

“You ride boat, Daddy?” Chivon looked around the room.

I was sure it was a lot different for her than my boat at home. My baby at home was nothing to sneeze at, but this yacht was mega-sized and luxurious.

Francesco chuckled at my daughter’s wonderment. “I’m going to check in with Bella and will be right back.” He patted me on the back. “Okay?”

“I got you.” With Chivon in my arm, I moved closer to the control board. “You see all the buttons?”

She nodded then her eyes turned wild as she sucked in a breath. “And no touchie!” Chivon shook her head and wagged her finger. “No. No. No!”

While placing my tea in a cup holder, I smiled at her. My baby knew what time it was. She'd been growing up on my boat and understood the basic rules.

"You got it, Blueberry, baby!" I went to adjust a switch on the board.

"Come on, Chi-Chi," her mother called, still outside the double sliding doors. "I need to finish your hair before dinner."

My hand automatically went to her little head, fingers reaching through her wild, beautiful hair and I rubbed her scalp. I walked her over to the door. "Your hair smells good, Blueberry." I kissed her cheek.

"Thank you!" she returned while shifting the gold chain around my neck. On it was a pendant I kept tucked beneath my shirt. Inside was a picture of Chivon. It was a Christmas gift from Ashira. Speaking of her, now, just a few feet away, I smelled her, too. Flowery, which was her thing. My eyes got stuck on her long box braids when Chivon shared, "Mommy vashed it!"

"Oh, she washed it?" I asked, reaching into my pocket for my vibrating phone.

Josie...

I quickly decided to ignore the call. I planned to hit her up tonight anyway. I just needed a few minutes to get settled in here. When I looked up from the phone, I caught Ashira's eyes on the face of it. Her eyes then swung up to my face as I slid it back into my right pocket. Moving past the moment, I put Chivon down on her feet.

"I bet your hair's gonna look pretty, Blueberry."

The other phone, in the pocket of my shirt, rang as Chivon asked, "Daddy, I sleep with you tonight?"

I pulled it out, and in clear view for Ashira to see, the I.D. read "Josie."

Not even thinking, I looked over to Ashira again and... *Damn.* She was eye-hustling my phone.

“Daddy!”

My head shot down to Chivon. “Huhn?”

“I sleep in your bed tonight.”

Shaking off the weird feeling from a simple call, I rubbed my nose, trying to catch up to the moment.

“Ummm...” Ashira’s eyes fell as she rubbed her glossed lips together. That snapped me back in action. “Nah, Blueberry, girl. You have your own bed. Daddy has his bed. Like Mommy has her bed, Chivon has her bed.”

She pouted. “Daddy!”

“I’ll tell you what. Daddy’ll come by in the morning and take you out to breakfast. Just us two. Okay?”

“Okay.” Chivon dropped her shoulders and walked over to her mother.

“Ready?” Ashira perked up while asking.

“Yeah!” And almost like another person entirely, my baby shot off down the hall.

Chivon was not hurt by not sleeping with me tonight. Only for a split second was she disappointed about being told no.

“See ya,” Ashira sang softly while waving. Then she turned to catch up with Chivon. I’d be a lying ass if I denied watching her ass wobble in the long dress she rocked.

But I kept it respectful and didn’t stare too long. I had to turn away. Then I went right to work, checking all the signals on the dashboard then. Next, I read the logs. All was good, and the speed of *The Bella* was reasonable.

The energy between Ashira and me shifted a lot in the two days since our blow-up—or whatever the hell you’d call it. I’d been keeping my word on being cognizant of the energy I exuded when she was around. I spoke and even attempted longer conversations. Relaxing my guard around her allowed me to experience something about Ashira’s personality I forgot I enjoyed. Ol’ girl was funny as hell. She stayed lit on

vacation, and was her usual life of the party self. The only element missing was her girls hyping her up and joining in.

The crew got a kick out of her humor and, some, her talent. For the past two mornings, Ashira would work out, then go out on the pool deck at around ten, set up a camera, and dance to the same two tracks for about an hour. I didn't watch for long stretches, but was able to see her make missteps, stop abruptly, or rewind the track and start over again. This morning it hit me: the two tracks she danced to were Pixie's songs. Ashira had begun choreographing for the tour.

I still didn't know how I felt about that. Chivon and I were used to not seeing her for long stretches, but I also remembered the shit Ashira said two nights ago about the accusation of being a bad mother—and sister. It was something I'd have to leave to Ashira to figure out. No matter what, I'd support her and would always stay down for Chivon.

I reached for my tea and one of the books I brought in here to read. As soon as I sat down, my phone rang again.

"Yurp, J-O," I answered casually, flipping through the book for my mark.

"You'll never believe what happened to me today," Josie sounded flustered.

"What's that?"

"My car broke down. Ugh!"



"This place is breathtaking," Rainey whispered, tenting her hand to block the sun.

Amy snapped pictures of the water right next to her. I laid a couple of over-sized towels on the sand while the crew from *The Bella* and our security carried our bags and drinks. Ashira, with Chivon in her arms, sat down on one of the towels.

"Wait," Amy turned back to us. "What's the name of this place again?"

Rainey laughed then snorted, “Plage du Petit Sperone. Keep up.”

“But that’s not what the captain told us at the port.”

I understood her confusion, but before I could answer, Ashira explained, “Port of Bonifacio.”

That was our current stop. I thought I’d easily get tired of seeing beaches. My ignorant ass thought they were pretty much all the same. Damn. Was I wrong? Almost each one had its own vibe—except the lack of melanin. I ain’t like that shit, but I had been told in advance this would be the case. When you have a skin and language barrier, shit could get hairy. That was my reason for having Francesco host this tour for us. He was around, and his men even closer.

“Look at those guys over there, Aim,” Rainey whispered hard. She tapped her arm. “Let’s go test their English.”

The girls dropped their bags and skipped down the beach. Rainey, Amy’s best friend, was mixed. She actually looked Puerto Rican, having a white father and Black mom, from what she shared with us a couple of days ago poolside on *The Bella*. Well, she told Ashira and Bella. I was in and out of one of the books I’d been reading. Maybe Rainey felt she’d been blending in this whole vacation.

“I remember being that carefree,” Ashira mumbled, rocking Chivon in her arms.

“Funny. I do, too.”

“Remember being carefree?” She blew out a harsh breath like she wasn’t buying it. “You ain’t got to lie, Craig.” That made me snicker. “Pretty sure you were born with a “stop fun” button.” Ashira’s goofy expression right after that had me outright laughing. She then rolled her eyes. “You couldn’t wait to get off parole so you could travel with me and bring a whole damn army.”

I wanted to crack the fuck up, but that wasn’t true. Still, I couldn’t front on her jokes. “You act like I was obsessed with you.”

“With me? No. With bossing me? Hell, yeah!” She caught her language and slapped her mouth. “My bad.” She rocked Chivon even faster.

My little girl got off her schedule out here. It was bound to happen with us being so many hours ahead on this side. When Chivon was sleepy, she got cranky. So, there had been a bit of that since she woke up before the sun today. When an over-the-counter sleep-inducing tea Bella made her didn’t work, Ashira decided to give her a melatonin gummy. That had slowed Chivon while we traveled from the boat here to the beach. Now her mother had been rocking her to hopefully the final destination of rest. Ashira said this wouldn’t put her on a schedule but would allow her body to catch up with sleep.

“I’mma Harlem nigga, Ashira.”

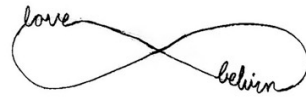
Ashira glanced up at Eric and two other dudes from *The Bella’s* crew as they finished bringing our things from the van we rode in. Bob was setting up an umbrella over Ashira and Chivon. “You say this about a million-dollar European yachting vacation you brought your child, her mother, her nanny, and the nanny’s BFF on.” She winked deeply. “Don’t worry: your *Harlem Pride* card is safe with me.” She tried to throw up the sign with her hand, which had me almost falling back on the hot sand, laughing. She was mocking my niggas and me.

This was what I meant. Ashira was funny as hell—silly and could even laugh at herself. I shook my head and reminded her as I sat on the towel next to them, “I have a warrior spirit. In my former life—in ancient times, back in Africa—I protected the village. I was and still am a hunter, a gatherer, a reinforcer, a—”

“Protector.” The muscles in her face relaxed, and Ashira nodded. “I know.” Her eyes fell. “It took me years to realize it. And when I did, I had to understand whether I liked it or not; it is my destiny. I signed on the dotted line the moment I carried your child.”

“Nah. Actually, it was before—” I stopped myself, feeling I’d been too damn talkative around her. Plus, Ashira’s memory

wasn't all that great. She was mine to protect the second I smelled her pussy in my old bedroom at my moms' place in Harlem. That was some shit I'd definitely keep to myself. "Never mind. I'm 'bout to hit this water."



ashira

A random plane flying in the distance caught my attention beneath the beach umbrella.

"Oh! I see more Black people!" Rainey excitedly announced.

"I see them, too. The one with the red sunhat?" Amy asked a few feet away while holding a drink and flipping through a magazine."

"Yup." Rainey nodded. "That makes eight out of what?"

"Too many to count," I added, brushing down a sleeping Chi-Chi's soft eyebrows.

She'd been out for the count for over thirty minutes. The gummy was effective, but she had to do her part of giving in to it. It was hot out, even hidden from the bright sun. Ten minutes ago, I carried her limp little frame down to the water and got the both of us wet, cooling our bodies. I figured I'd do it every fifteen minutes or so.

Taking a deep breath, I gazed out into the water.

Plage du Petit Sperone...

The place was unbelievably beautiful, one of the best beaches I'd been to. My heart was pleased my baby got to experience this type of exploration.

“Hey. Can I ask you a personal question?”

“Rainey,” Amy groaned.

“I know...” Rainey sat up to face me, almost whispering. “...but she’s cool. Right, Shi-Shi? You don’t mind.”

Grabbing my glass of *Pinot Grigio*, I snickered. “I don’t think so.”

Rainey was cute. She was young, well-spoken, respectful, and liked to have a good time.

“Okay, so—”

“Rainey, if I get fired, so help me god!” Amy warned again, face toward the magazine on her lap.

“Would you just relax!” Rainey begged. “She’s already agreed to my curiosity.”

“Perversion is more like it!”

“It’s not. I’m inquisitive.”

I snorted, “About what?”

Rainey pointed down to the beach. “You have a baby with that, and you two are not together?”

My attention followed the direction she pointed, and I found Jas in the ocean, splashing water over his globular shoulders, sending cascades down his chiseled chest. The view was tempting, but I didn’t linger.

“*Unt-unt*,” pushed from my chest before taking another sip.

“Damn,” Rainey whispered, turning over onto her stomach. “I guess I’m too young to get it.” I was startled when her head whipped my way. “But you’re Shi-Shi! *The Shi-Shi!* The dancer...model...social media influencer!” She somewhat shouted, pointing toward the water. “And *he’s*—”

“Mr. Sinclair, my boss!” Amy reminded her. “I mean...” she scoffed. “You don’t even like Black guys, Rain!”

“Not true!”

“Very. True. Your dream is to marry Brad Pitt’s long-lost twenty-five-year-old brother.”

“Yeah, but...”

Amy lifted her sunglasses, eyes wide. “Leave my boss alone. Yes, he’s rich, but he’s Black.”

I laughed so hard I had to cover my mouth. “Wait! What’s wrong with Black guys, Rainey?”

Rainey shrugged, going back to her stomach. “I just haven’t found the right one. I don’t have a problem with them.”

“I’ve known her since we were six,” Amy explained. “She’s never crushed on a Black guy.”

“You said your father’s white?” I asked Rainey, recalling her mentioning her mixed race. She nodded. “Oh,” I chirped, taking a deep breath and then setting my glass of wine down. “One of the sage pieces of advice my mother gave my friends and me when we were much younger than you ladies was it’s okay to like what you like: you just can’t not like the men you come from. Like dad, granddad, and uncles. And for me, I’ve found white guys attractive—I went to school with a lot of them up until my *BSU* years. But I wanted to make babies with my own. Nothing wrong with populating the world with more Black babies with advantages.”

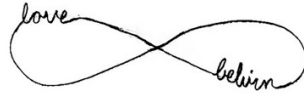
“What do you mean?” Amy asked.

My eyes, protected behind sunglasses, went into the distant sky. “I knew I wouldn’t have kids until I was financially able to care for them. My parents set me up for a springboard to wealth. If I were smart with it and added more to the pot, I would be okay. With that being said, I could take care of a child independently if I had to when I got pregnant with this little treasure.” I reached down and kissed Chi-Chi, who was stretched out next to me.

“Good thing for you, you don’t have to.” While lying on her stomach, Rainey pointed to the water again, causing me to chuckle.

“I swear, Rainey, if I get fired, I’ll ruin you!” Amy threatened.

“It’s okay,” I assured both girls.



jas

When I came up from the water and cleared my eyes, I saw Ashira walking Chivon down. I’d seen her dip them both in the water and leave before. I figured she was trying to keep her cool. This time, I approached them.

“Let me have her. You can go for a swim if you want.”

She handed her over. “I don’t need a swim, but I can wet my whole body now. Thanks.” She disappeared behind me while I dipped my sleeping beauty a few times, sure not to let the water catch her face. Then I thought to cool her face with my wet hands. When I was done, I walked her back up the beach, seeing Amy reading a magazine.

“Amy, I ‘on’t think Miss Momma’s gonna enjoy the beach today. You mind taking her back to the boat and letting her finish her nap in the A.C.?”

“Sure. Lay her on the towel over there.” She began grabbing her things. “Let me pack up.”

I lay her down, then caught the attention of Bob and signaled to him the girls. He nodded and stood right away.

“A’ight. I’ll see y’all later.” I waved before jogging back down to the ocean.

Ashira must have changed her mind because when I made it back into the water, I caught her coming up for air. She was

wiping the water from her eyes by the time I reached her. I didn't give her time before scooping her into the air and tossing her long ass body farther into the water. She squealed midair. I felt the stares and shock from the people around me. Ignoring them, I waded to Ashira and fished her flailing body from the water, then slammed her again.

This time when I pulled her up, she squeezed my biceps angrily. The shit swelled my dick instantly. That's when I decided to stop. I pulled her to my chest to straighten her body, then planted Ashira on her feet.

"The hell, Jas!" she shouted, trying to catch her breath. I squatted in the water, hiding my shit, now feeling like a kid with a secret. "Is that what you're like?" She sounded more irritated than angry.

Those braids leaking water, her brown skin glistening under the sun. Shit. This wasn't good for me. I wasn't trying to flirt with the girl; just loosen her up to have a good time.

"What you mean?"

"When you assault people," she tried to whisper. "Is that how you approach them? That how you overpower them?" I wasn't offended by the topic; just not comfortable with it. When I didn't answer, Ashira came closer to me, voice low. "You're a warrior, for sure. A hunter, like you said earlier. The way you snuck into Chi-Chi and my cabin the other night, and then just now. The shit is scary."

"You think I'd hurt you?" That shit did offend me.

Swallowing with a closed mouth and eyes, but with heavy breaths through her nostrils, Ashira shook her head. "I'm one of very few people who cannot fight but will beat your ass if you tried me, Sin."

I believed every word she said. It was truer than the girl knew.

"I've been thinking over the past few days how I wish you'd been more open with me when we met—well, at the therapist's—well, actually, at *Brown Barista*. You were

forthcoming only about your felon status. It's like you... Did you want to turn me off?"

Were we doing this shit?

I just wanted to have a good time out here.

"You made me wanna be petty."

Her brows shot up. "Out of all the qualities I could elevate you to, I made you go low." She rolled her eyes.

"Nah." I rubbed my itchy nose. "I ain't say all that. If I keep it a bean, being with you grew me the hell up."

"How?"

"Look where we at, Ashira." My arms stretched wide.

"I ain't never been around so many white people in my life. Even in the pen, we were segregated by race to survive." I snorted.

"But you've had money since...before prison. You could have afforded destinations like this before meeting me."

"Yeah, but..." I glanced around. "...money doesn't mean inspired. I can't remember being broke, but me and my money stayed local. I never wanted to see the world until your reckless ass and—" *Why the fuck did am I reaching for her?* "—these braids had me stressing like a muthafucka over your safety."

Ashira's face wrinkled. "Is that when your controlling ways of my safety began?"

I dropped her braid. "Nah. Let's not go there."

"Anyway." She rolled her eyes again, hopping in the chest-level water. "You were sharing the good qualities I brought out in you. It reminds me of Tori McNabb and her husband. What's his name?" She pushed out her lips and tightened her forehead to think. "*B-Way Burger* guy..."

I snorted. "[Spencer. Ashton Spencer.](#)" Ashton was known just about everywhere now. Before, it was because he was a nigga in Jersey with the burger bag. Now, it was because of having that bag and being married to *The Banger*.

“Right! They were featured in this season’s *Black Love*, the documentary. She said when they met at my alma mater, she was dirt poor, and he was rich. Ashton took her to top restaurants and taught her how to dress and appreciate the arts. According to her, he taught her culture.”

I nodded, having seen the episode myself. “That’s what’s up.”

“But to hear you say that about me sounds crazy because you had money; she didn’t.”

“As we can see, Ashira: money ain’t culture. It’s just a tool. Sometimes that tool can get you to the resource that’ll teach you culture.”

“Your money didn’t win me over.” She rolled her eyes. *Again*. “Remember, I didn’t know about that for a while. Did Josie?”

And there it was. We’d been having peaceful conversations, and then something went left. The shit reminded me of the old Tamar Braxton song about relationships being “*Love and War*.”

“You know what?” I splashed water on my face when I felt it began burning from the sun. “Let’s talk about that.”

“About what? Josie?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Because I’ve been dying to know what makes her more special than me to get your name and home address upfront. How long did it take her to hit? Did she have to do a dry run in the Harlem projects first like I did?”

“No, and it’s because *you* grew me up!” When she blinked, stunned or confused, I tried to explain. “I ain’t mind telling you about being locked down. I’ve never been ashamed of it. I ain’t tell you about the money, car, boat, and crib just fuckin’ with you because you swore you labeled me just right. But my name was different. I fucked around and got so caught up with you that by that time, I was scared.”

“Scared of what?”

“Of you leaving me. If you looked up my record, you’d see not just my charges, but now with the internet, you could see why the cops performed the illegal search in the first place. The murder trial was a big deal back then because of the...” I wasn’t going there. That was my past. God tossed that shit in the sea of forgetfulness; the deepest ocean there is. “I ‘on’t wanna rehash that, but what I want you to know is that the name thing was because I was in way deep with you then. I ain’t wanna lose you. So, like a coward...”

“You wait until the baby shower?”

I shrugged with my chin. “It, to me, represented a fresh start. You being willing to have the baby told me you were showing me grace. You could have aborted her and moved on. I was all in when you carried my baby and stayed.”

“And how does this relate to Josie?”

“Before you, I had this list of things I never accomplished. The deeper you and I went, the more the list changed. I used to recite to myself subconsciously when in sticky situations. I think I’ve told you about it. The last time I had it happen was when you got snatched on *Red’s Island*. I was scared as a muthafucka, and that same list of what I hadn’t accomplished populated in my mind.”

“What were they?”

“I’ve never had a home. I’ve never lived with a woman other than my mother and grandma. I’ve never proposed to Ashira. I’ve never worn a ring. I’ve never been called Daddy. I’ve never made a family. I’ve never fucked a woman or laid in bed with one without clothes. I’ve never been loved. I’ve never made love. Something like that, and as you can see, much of that has changed. Only two of them are still true. Because of you, my life changed in so many ways. It made me realize no woman is worth me being embarrassed over. Not even Josie. If fuckin’...Shi-Shi from the ‘Gram and TikTok had my baby, I’m good as gold, my nigga!” I bragged, pumping my shoulders.

That forced a big ass smile on Ashira’s face. She couldn’t even look at me before busting out, laughing hard.

“Fuck you, Jas!” I knew she didn’t mean it in a nasty way. Ashira was having a rare display of shyness. “And thank you at the same time.”

That made me laugh. If being honest with her could make the girl feel good, I’d done my job. I owed that to Ashira.

Prayer works...

That was how we were able to have this moment.

“Speaking of which...” She looked toward the beach. “... where’s my baby?”

“Oh. I sent them back to the boat. She’s been sleeping basically since we got here. No need to keep her in the heat when she can be more comfortable in air condition.”

“Yeah, but what if she’d woken up eventually out here? I could have had her burn lots of energy in this water to tire her out, possibly for the night.”

I shook my head. “Chivon ain’t waking up no time soon. You can try it at the pool on *The Bella*. Let’s go get a bite. I’m hungry as hell.”

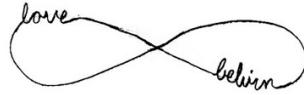
“*Ut!*” Her head bounced back. “Must be nice not to care about this since she’s not sleeping with you. I’m going to be up all night again.”

I reached for her hand. “If she wakes up like that later, bring her to my room, and I’ll take her for the night. Chivon’s ass’ll either sleep or stay up in one place next to me, talking to the angels until she knocks out.”

Ashira accepted my hand. “Is that what you do to my child when I’m away at work?”

“Listen, Chivon and her pops got an understanding. Our vibe is different.”

Hearing her feminine laughter behind me felt good. It made me realize how I never got to talk my fatherhood shit to women. It was something I just didn’t do. Chivon was still new to me and so had been dating. Kicking it with her moms felt natural as hell, though.



“Let Mommy do it!” Chivon demanded.

My head shot up, and it seemed at the same time as Ashira’s. We were on our knees with elbows pushed into the mattress. To reach the bed, I propped a round ottoman under Chivon.

Ashira was right. Chivon was lit tonight. We had lunch at a restaurant on the beach, then stayed behind and swam for hours. By the time we made it back to the boat, Chivon was coming out of her post-nap haze. After we showered the sand off and met up at the pool, my girl was her lively self. And her energy kept inclining. She swam for a couple of hours, ran hard in the kids’ playroom, and even watched a movie after dinner with her moms and Rainey. She and Ashira came into the billiard room to say goodnight, and Chivon requested we pray together. That was strange, but I agreed.

“What if Daddy wanna do it?” I posed to her, seeing Ashira’s shocked expression.

This was a Daddy thing. I taught my baby how to pray. Ashira would do it when Chivon was with her, but we’d never done it together.

“No. No.” Chivon’s braids flung in the air, left to right. “Nooooo! Mommy say nighttime pray.”

“Prayer,” I corrected her.

“Pwayer,” she repeated.

Looking Ashira’s way, I took a deep breath, thinking of another way to give her a save.

Then Ashira licked her lips and rubbed them together, then nodded. “It’s okay. I’ll do it.”

“You sure?”

She nodded again, then turned her head and closed her eyes. “God, we thank You for this day You’ve given us. Our hearts rejoice and we are glad in it. In fact, we give thanks for

all things because we know it is Your will in Christ. But specifically, we thank You for family. We bow our knees before You because every family in heaven and on earth is named after You, including Jas, Chi-Chi, and Ashira.”

My eyes burst open.

Ephesians, chapter three: *For this reason, I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named.*

Ashira was spitting the Word!

“We believe You honor families. And I know our strength comes from our family. So please remind us that we are to give mercy when someone in our family does something that hurts us. And to give grace when they don’t do something they should—like Chi-Chi going straight to sleep *tonight*—”

“Mommy!” Chivon pouted at her mother. “Pway.”

“Okay.” Ashira nodded while trying not to laugh. “God, please bless us all tonight as we sleep. Bless Amy and Rainey. Bless all the people on this boat who make sure we’re safe and happy. Bless Daddy, who gives us these blessings to make us happy. He works hard and we are grateful for him.” My dick got hard again. *God, this is sickening!* “Bless Chi-Chi to continue to grow nicely. She’s the most beautiful and smartest girl in the world with the biggest heart. Please help her to obey her daddy and mommy even when she doesn’t want to. *Ame —*”

“You forgot about mommy,” Chivon whispered with closed eyes and clenched fists pressing against one another.

Ashira seemed confused, looking to me.

“You ain’t pray for yourself.” I helped her out.

“Oh!” She then frowned. “Okay.” Ashira went back into prayer posture. “God, bless Mommy, too. Help her to always see the good in people, and...” She hesitated. “...continue to help her see that for...happiness and...” Why was this hard for her? “...fulfillment, she...doesn’t need to grow plants, join clubs, volunteer, or...” She took a deep breath. “... be sad. Continue to show Mommy she lacks nothing. *‘But let patience*

have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.’ Amen.”

James...

I knew the book, but couldn't remember the chapter. I believed it was the first one. Ashira knew the Word!

“Daddy!” I looked up to find Chivon already in bed. Her mother was pulling the blanket up. Ashira wouldn't look at me. “You still prway?”

Shit...

I was still on my knees when I tried to correct her. “Praying.”

Chivon ignored me and kissed her mother goodnight. Then she looked over to me. “Daddy, go to your room. This Mommy room. This my room.” She pointed to the door.

She had no idea; my issue wasn't leaving. My problem was getting the hell out of the cabin without them seeing my damn erection.

Chapter Eighteen

Part III

July | Three Years Later



She squirmed as my tongue ran up her belly. I licked up the underside of her boob, then flickered the nipple with the tip of my tongue.

“Daddy...”

As she moaned, I fisted myself just before putting my cock right where I needed it at the opening of her wet pussy. The feel of my shit pulsing in my hand confirmed how ready I was for her. Heat suffused the head of me, the smell of her driving me wild. She grabbed the back of my head then pushed her palms into my cheeks. Fuck! I missed this. Her tongue pushed from her mouth and into mine, making my fucking shoulders jerk.

“Daddy...”

My heartbeat was fast as hell as I swung my hips up and pushed into the bullseye smoothly. She groaned in my mouth from the pain, feeling my girth, uncomfortable with it. I wasn't about to let that stop my flow. I remember when she had me

feeling like my dick game was wack. “You can’t fuck, buddy,” were her exact words. The shit had me in a chokehold for a while. So, now, when I’m working my way into her hot, spongey walls, I can’t help but pay attention to the stiffness in her hips as she adjusts to me. The heavy breaths pushing from her nostrils, her lips going soft around my mouth as her tongue struggled to keep up.

Can’t fuck my ass—

“Daddy! Wake up!”

My body swung into the air, pulse racing faster than a motherfucker. Chivon was on the side of the bed, holding a straw cup. She scratched her little ass, staring at me like I was in trouble.

“How you get in here?”

“Mommy said I no sleep.”

I let out a deep breath, senses kicking in. My hands went to my face, rubbing my eyes.

What the fuck!

Was I just dreaming about...

My eyes opened to Chivon still standing in the same place. “Where’s Mommy?”

Chivon’s face wrinkled a bit before she walked to the foot of the bed. I watched as her eyes blew the hell up, and she pointed. “Mommy over dere! Her in your bed. No. No. No. No, Mommy!” She marched angrily to the other side. I shifted to the right and... Damn. Ashira was curled almost into a ball at the far side of the mattress. She wore a silk tank with matching shorts. And the shorts were fucking short on those long, thick ass thighs. Her ass cheeks peeked from the hem. *Fuck.* “Mommy, dis my daddy bed. You no sleep here!”

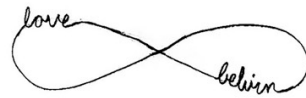
No, Chivon!

That bite of rejection for her mother snapped me into the moment. People making Ashira feel like an outsider never sat right with me, and I wouldn’t have our daughter do it—at

least, I'd try to regulate it as much as I could with her. Chivon was possessive of me, and I had to accept that.

"Hold!" I tried whispering but still giving her a bite of that fatherly authority. I hopped from the bed, catching the time before locating the shorts I took off before getting into bed. *It's three in the damn morning, Chivon!* With the shorts in one hand, I scooped her up with the other arm. "Let's get you some warm milk, Blueberry." Even though I knew that shit didn't work.

"No. Mommy go back to her bed! You no sleep in Daddy bed!" Chivon protested all the way out of the cabin.



I held a mug of coffee in one hand with my legs stretched out and crossed over the ottoman. I'd been streaming American news for about a half an hour when a cool, rectangular object slid over my shoulder. It was one of my phones. Without flinching, I looked up and saw Ashira bringing my other one into view. Her clean morning face was expressionless and still a little puffy.

"Thanks," I murmured, accepting both devices.

She glided away wordlessly. The time on both phones was two minutes after seven. Before unlocking the screens, I saw missed calls from Jug. *Damn.* Fucking around with Chivon for hours, trying to get her little ass to sleep, the last thing I thought of was my phones. After thumbing through text notifications, I called him back first. I found my eyes roaming around the bridge deck for her. Ashira was in an oversized, long-sleeved linen shirt. It took me a minute to realize it was mine. I could make out her silk pajama set beneath the white material as she poured herself coffee.

"Yo," he answered, coughing.

"Yo."

"I dropped off the car to her crib. It was late, and her moms answered the door. I put the keys inside a little ass box."

He let go of another nasty cough, and I could hear voices in the background, making me aware of him not being home. And I knew Jug hated coughing in public, which was one of the reasons why he stayed home a lot now. “She’ll get it when she wake up.”

“A’ight,” My eyes were on the wide screen ahead. “Say less.”

“On another—” *Another cough.*

“Sir,” I could hear a woman clearly. “You really should be off the phone.”

“Hang on a second,” Jug snapped. My face turned hard. “Yo, Sin...”

“Yeah. I’m here.”

“On another note: that Elba nigga.”

“Yeah.”

“You was right. The nigga ain’t nowhere in the real estate market. Jaquana hit me up last night. That bitch took forever to get back to me, but she said she can’t find no properties he own in Jersey. It’s like you said.” *An uglier cough.* “That nigga ain’t legit.”

Haris Elba...

I hadn’t thought of him in a while, but knew he was an “op” I couldn’t ignore. Dude had been an aggressive “investor” with no legit business I could find. Nobody knew the nigga. Divine didn’t know him, neither did O.G. Double E or Sadik. None of the major players in my circle knew of the man. After my conversation with him in February, I ran into Haris at a restaurant in Greenwich Village in April. He asked me if I’d decided on the property in Central Jersey in passing. I told him I hadn’t but would hit him when I did. It was odd, but brief. He didn’t press me much and kept it moving.

Then a week before we left for this vacation, he popped up at a casino in Vegas Divine owned. I attended a dinner party there celebrating one of Divine’s executives at *Global Fusions*. The actual event was at a restaurant inside the casino. Haris

and his crew were trying to get into the club of the casino and asked for me. Security called me to verify him. Out of curiosity, I went down to see him. Within seconds of the conversation, I could tell he had no clue about the actual event. He likely thought it was the party taking place in the club. I stared the man down, feeling something was totally off with his vibe, even more than our two previous encounters.

The man's pursuit of me was personal. Haris had me as a target and tried to use his British charm under the guise of naivety to disarm me. As a *Harlem Pride* nigga, I saw straight through the bullshit; now I'd been trying to find his angle. After a long stare-down, I told security I didn't know him and resumed the dinner. But shit didn't sit right with me. That's when I knew I had to pay real attention to him.

"I asked around like you told me," Jug wheezed. "And remember them niggas who tried to rob *Club Sin* a few years ago when we was there?"

"Yeah."

"The old head one locked up in *Rikers* on a robbery charge. Lukka from the Bronx hit me up earlier, saying his dun in there with him. He talkin' mentioned a nigga from London who hired him to do the hit ain't pay him for the work." Jug's hacking this time made my stomach turn. "The nigga said the funny talkin' nigga hit him up recently for another job in Montclair. A dance club."

My head shot up to Ashira, yawning while pouring cream into her coffee mug. A familiar emotion incongruent with what I'd been feeling over the past few days crept in. It was something I could quickly identify as my flesh, as a million possibilities ran through my head.

Ashira toed over to me with morning snuffles and puffy eyes. She sat on the sofa across from me, sexily yet beautifully blowing into her steamy mug and thumbing through her phone. And per her usual self, the mother of my child—my first adult crush—was aloof, naïve...unaware of dangers lurking around her. Just living her life of luxury carefree without guards. I suddenly had a revelation of what God must

feel like each milli-second of the day, constantly watching over us, dispatching angels to war on our behalf against demonic spirits we have no idea are out to destroy us.

“Say less,” pushed gruffly from my lungs. I heard more grumbling from Jug’s end of the line. “Yo, where are you?”

“Shit,” he panted. “This shit got me spittin’ up blood.”

ashira

Yawning, I opened a text from my cousin, Betty, in *Della*.

Betty: *Shi-Shi its ya cuzzin betty we know you on your vacation rose said she got the joint oils ready for when you cum to della see you soon*

First of all, I hated that Betty never used punctuation. Let alone feeling she had to announce who she was in text messages as though she wasn’t saved as a contact in my phone. Texting was still a foreign method of communication for her, so I never complained. But this cryptic message about my joint oil and seeing them soon was odd. Aunt Rose regularly provided me with an oil mixture to bathe in and moisturize my skin with to combat inflammation.

As a dancer, it was a must for me. She’d been making it since I was a child for my mother, and when I got of age, Aunt Rose insisted I began right away. The times I’d been inconsistent with it was when I was reminded of her rare wisdom. I couldn’t recall how much of it I had back home, but I knew I hadn’t requested another bottle recently. Even more, I paid for her to ship the concoction to me. Since when had it been necessary for me to go all the way down to *Della* for a pickup?

“Spittin’ blood?” Jas’ alarming tone arrested my attention.

My body tensed because I knew it had to be Juggy he was speaking to. The constant vibrating of both Jas' phones was what had awakened me this morning in his bed. When I reached for them, I saw several names populated on the screen. The two catching my attention the most were Juggy and Josie's.

"Yo, you good? *Wait*—hol' up!" Jas didn't exactly yell but was spirited when inclining in his seat. "Who with you?" Jas exhaled, dropping his head and rubbing his neck at the same time. Then he nodded. "A'ight. A'ight, man. Say less." But this *say less* was in the spirit of defeat.

The moment I registered Jas ended the call, I asked, "What's going on?"

Leaning his torso over between his thick, muscular legs while shaking his head, Jas groaned, "That's the problem; nobody fuckin' knows. The nigga go back and forth to the emergency rooms, urgent care facilities, and even a specialist a month ago. Everybody wanna run expensive ass tests, but no fuckin' body got no answers."

My heart rented. I'd been including Juggy in my list of prayers. I knew God had to have been sick of my voice by now. Praying had been new in my recent pursuit of contentment. But I'd been earnest and persistent with them.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to the deep groves of his broad back. "I wish there was something I could do." That sounded as helpless as it was useless. We all wished there was something we could do.

Then Jas' tight, lustrous coils roved up and back, his heavy eyes on me.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "jas". The letters are cursive and fluid, with a small blue dot above the 'j'.

"When'd you meet Haris Elba?"

I waited for her to lie.

Please don't lie...

Ashira's face opened wide, and she blinked. "Oh, wow! That's a change of topic. *Ummmm...*" She pouted. "Do you know him?"

"I asked you a question, Ashira."

I watched closely as her forehead wrinkled, and she shook her head. "Last summer."

I quickly did the mental math. "You were on tour with Ragee."

"Yeah," she delivered in a "duh" manner.

"How?"

Ashira frowned. Between my sudden questions and having to think, I got this wasn't fun for her. "At a club."

"Where?"

"Wales... Cardiff."

"Is that it?"

Her eyes rolled into the air, lips twisted. "Then again, on the next stop in England."

I nodded, recalling that leg of the tour, too. London.

This muthafucka!

I took a deep breath, trying to calm down. My damn heart was fucking racing. This shit grew more delicate by the detail.

"And what happened? Did y'all..." I cleared my throat.

Ashira's neck snapped, eyes turned seductive. "Did we what, Jas?"

"Go out?"

"Once or twice, yes?"

"When and where?"

She pulled in a breath. "Here and there. The last time I saw him was in Costa Rica."

“At *IDC*?” That nigga was there, too?

Ashira shook her head, eyes suspiciously low. “No. He wasn’t able to make it. He flew in about a week before.”

“And?”

“And...” She shrugged, then took a sip of her coffee. “He was a dub. Very pompous. Haris is one of those non-American Blacks who believe they’re better than me. Nothing turns me off more than an arrogant man who ain’t even cute.” She shook her head, attention suddenly taken by her phone vibrating. As she checked it, Ashira continued to explain. “I made him believe I didn’t peep his condescension, always dangling his mother wanting a Black American daughter-in-law in my face as if that would impress me. It had me wondering if non-American Blacks believe we Black Americans are all bastardized people, desperate for a connection to culture.”

Ashira left the sofa and toed away. Then she turned back to look my way. “And if you’re curious about whether or not I gave him the cookie, remember who gave you your last orgasm. The last one I’ve given one to is gaping at me now in judgment.”

“Nah,” I tried to argue. “I ain’t *judge*—”

“Yeah.” She kept walking. “Whatever.”

Shit...



“Thanks for today, Bella!” Ashira sang happily; I knew because she’d had a few drinks. I didn’t know how I felt about that, knowing I may have been the cause.

Either way, the night air was good, and energy on point with the music streaming from a live band. Francesco and Bella performed a two-step as Ashira swirled, swinging her long dress in the air. Only the security and I were lost on the festivities as we walked down the pier, turning onto the ramp

for the boat. It was close to eleven at night, and damn, had it been a long day. I carried a sleeping Chivon on my shoulder.

“You’re very welcome, dear,” Bella returned. “I love Saint-Tropez. It’s a dream every time I visit here. Never gets boring.”

She was right. After our awkward moment this morning, Ashira and I went our separate ways. She took care of Chivon while I got dressed. We had breakfast on the boat while arriving at Saint-Tropez. We found a small petting zoo for Chivon. She loved animals and didn’t want to leave. Then there was a botanical park we visited, taking a gazillion goddamn pictures. It might have been bearable if Ashira had talked to me. I mean, she smiled and ordered me around for poses. She even sat next to me during lunch and dinner. But her energy was off for me; it could damn sure be felt.

I sensed it when we hit up *Rue François Sibilli*, a shopping avenue. Amy and Rainey’s eyes lit up brighter and brighter each time we passed a familiar designer store. Ashira focused and went inside a few of them. I offered to pick up the tab, hoping she’d recognize my white flag. Her insistence on paying for it on her own pricked at me. I did it anyway, on the low, slipping my card to the shopping assistants. They were smart, catching on fast. I’d get my card back, and so would Ashira. But she’d get the receipt for the damage my card took. Even doing that didn’t make me feel better about what went down earlier.

I’d fucked up. Ashira and I had a few good days, and I fucked it up with the Haris thing. That upset me and set the tone for the day. I had no one to be upset with but myself.

“You didn’t want to get down with the girls?” Francesco asked Ashira, shimmying his damn shoulders.

He was referring to Amy and Rainey opting to hit the clubs tonight. Ashira and Bella laughed at that. I was too preoccupied in thought. The shit with Haris was still on my mind, too. And I wouldn’t lie and say hearing from Jug the way I did this morning sat well with me, either. It was the worst I’d heard him.

“Nah. This is my family vacation. I left my girls behind,” Ashira explained. “But best believe once I get home, I’ll make up for it.” That caused them to laugh, too.

Ashira did that to people. She brought out the best in personalities. It was a gift I lowkey hoped she’d passed down to our daughter.

“Alright, guys,” Ashira waved when we separated from Francesco and Bella.

“Good night!”

“Buona Notte!”

Ashira singing, “*Buona Notte!*” while twirling again had them cracking up.

Quietly, I continued to the stairs off the main deck and hiked up to the second level with Chivon rocking on my shoulder. When we arrived, I stopped to give Ashira a moment to catch up. Then I followed her down the carpeted hall to the room, listening to her steps in the hard bottom wedges she wore.

She opened the door, allowing me to cut around her. The first thing I saw were the shopping bags from earlier lined against the wall. I passed by them, taking Chivon straight to her bed. I unhooked and pulled off her sandals from her little feet. As soon as I did, she rolled onto her side toward the window. I knew her ass would fall out after the day we’d had.

When I turned to go, Ashira stood in the path of the doorway. She didn’t block it, but she clearly wanted to be seen. At first, she didn’t speak. Then she took a few steps toward me, leaned up, and kissed me. The first was just her warm, pillowy lips. Then, soon came her tongue, and it felt like my whole fucking body lit on fire. Right away, I was reminded of those sensations I experienced the first time we kissed in the hallway at *Di’Fillippo’s*. I didn’t move—didn’t lean into it more than lowering my chin. Yeah, I kissed her back—*hell yeah!* It was fucking Ashira Witherspoon. On my best day, I couldn’t deny her when she came this aggressive. I

missed the silkiness of her tongue, the speed she took when in my mouth.

But it didn't last long. Ashira pulled back, lowering herself to the base of her feet. She walked backward and turned to the side, giving me a full view of the door to the cabin.

I cleared my throat, feeling sonned, aroused, and torn as fuck. "Ashira, my bad about this morning. It's just that..." I shook my head, licking my lips. "Shit with us is..."

"It's unusual." She nodded. "I get it. I don't think I like it, but I get it. I'm trying for better, even if I don't know what that is."

"Kissing me is trying for better?"

She scoffed. "That was for my revelation of you caring about who I give my body to. It's a bit hypocritical that you deny me yours and give it to some random, but again: I'm trying for better. And better is knowing you care about my well-being, Jas. You don't go about expressing it healthily, but I know too many fuckboys who wouldn't do past child support for a woman in my situation. You're a good man." She nodded again with twisted lips. "An unchanging man. A prism."

Damn...

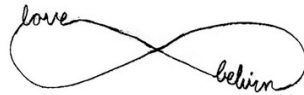
I hadn't heard that phrase in years outside of my company. I adopted it from the words of people closest to me, including her aunt, Rose, but hadn't been labeled it since having my daughter. That shit stunned the hell out of me. A prism. From Ashira? And she meant it. I knew she did. I knew her.

I took a deep breath, eyes falling as I patted my chest with my fist. Then I walked to the door.

"Jas." I turned to Ashira. Her eyes squinted when she softly shared, "Don't think I don't know you paid for my Tropezién shopping today."

I chuckled, not expecting that. "Say less, Witherspoon."

I was sure to close the door on the way out.



ashira

“Get it, Vonnie!” Noelle laughed through the screen of my laptop. “Uhn, uhn, uhn!” She chanted rhythmically.

Chi-Chi stood in front of the computer and entertained her aunt with the “latest dance she’d made up” out near the pool of the boat.

When she stopped, Noelle asked, “That’s all you got for me?” Chi-Chi giggled, suddenly appearing shy.

“Do the poses,” Noelle pushed.

Chivon looked at me, confused.

“What poses?” I asked my sister.

“The first, second, and third thing.”

“Oh! Ballet!” I addressed Chi-Chi, “First position.”

Chi-Chi’s eyes blinked as they always did when thinking about this challenge. She stood straight, bringing her heels together and cupping her hands at her pelvis.

“Second!” I challenged dramatically with my chin in the air.

Her little feet widened in distance as she stretched her arms out wide, chin pushed into the air like mine.

Better...

“Go, Vonnie!” Noelle cheered her on, knowing nothing about dance, but enjoying her niece’s bravery.

“Third position!”

Baby girl leaped into the air and brought her heels back together, pushing her fingers downward. Not perfect, but much better.

“Yaaay!” Noelle shouted from the screen, clapping her hands. “Good job, Vonnie girl! Can’t wait to see you. Then you can teach it to me.”

“I teach you!” Chi-Chi assured.

Off camera, her father appeared on the other side of the deck, peering over the railing at the water. Jas was dressed in white trousers, a short-sleeved floral shirt revealing the grooves of his thick arms, and *Asè Garb* sandals. I could tell he shaped his facial hair today. The parameters were cut with precision. He was fine as hell in island gear, a far cry from his *Harlem World* roots.

“Okay. I gotta go,” Noelle announced. “Brandy’s gonna be here soon, and I need to shower.”

“Okay,” I sighed deeply, feeling so much emotion I was unable to speak. “Have fun.”

“There’s not much else to do but head to the beach. I swear; this summer’s the worst. Boring as hell.”

“Listen,” I cleared my throat. “When we get back, we’ll hang out.”

Noelle shrugged with her brows. My sister was unimpressed with that offering. When had she turned so hopeless? It had to be because of losing her mother. Right? That’s what I wanted to tell myself. However, I knew it was a lie. This dead energy my sister had with me was for me. I’d disappointed her. I’d dropped the ball with her year after year since becoming a mom myself.

“I mean it,” I pledged, fighting down my emotions.

“Okay, Shi-Shi,” she exhaled. “Talk to you guys later.”

“Bye.”

My chest sank after closing the laptop.

“What’s that for?” His thick throat croaked.

Glancing up, I saw Chi-Chi hiked up his chest. So lost in my emotions with Noelle, I didn't realize he'd traveled over here. I shook my head, taking a deep breath. "Just sitting in my ugly."

"Chi-Chi!" Amy called over from the bridge deck. "You want to hang out with Rainey and me? We're going back to the zoo!"

"Zoo?" Chi-Chi's eyes blossomed wide. "Daddy, I go to zoo." She wiggled against his chest to be let down.

We watched her run in her strappy sundress and white sandals to the girls. Call me a psycho, but seeing my baby girl dump her dad and me, and happily go with people younger than us made me feel a little abandoned.

"Damn," Jas echoed my sentiment, scoffing.

I stood to put the laptop on the back of the bar. "I'd like to buy something special for Noelle. I'm sure I can find whatever that is at *Rue François Sibilli*. I can use a drink, too. Have one with me." I placed my hands on my hips, wanting to say I'd actually prefer to have him fuck me on the bar top for everyone in the marina to see, but I knew that would be an impossible request for Mr. Sinclair.

Jas pushed his hands into his pockets and snorted. "I 'on't know about the drink, but I'm game for chillin' with you."



"Living with you?" he asked, almost aghast. Jas stopped our little stroll on the beach as the sun set.

I nodded, biting my lip. "Am I neurotic?" I continued our post-dinner walk.

The fresh grouper was amazing, and having it al fresco in France was the icing on the cake. Jas and I had spent the entire afternoon and evening together without a single awkward moment. So...I drank and drank with liberty. The wine was superb and company refreshing. He recommended a walk on

the beach to slow my buzz a little before resuming the care of Chi-Chi for the night. So, here we were, being shadowed by men over six feet, five inches while we padded on warm, gravelly sand.

“I mean...” He rubbed his hairy jaw. “Noelle’s your sister, and she lost her moms, so I can see why it wouldn’t be the strangest arrangement. But Brenda’s been keeping her.”

“Yeah, but Noelle’s always wanted to live with me. It just never made sense. Lattice was a good mom.”

“But why now?”

I shrugged. “Because...some of the shit my mother said about me was right.”

“Like what?”

“I’ve been selfish.”

“Yo, *Ashi*—”

I shook my head. “I have been. And what’s even worse is it’s been my response to not feeling I’ve been in control of my life.”

“If you ain’t have control, who did?”

I stopped and faced him. Was I really sharing my shit? With Jas? “You did. At least, that’s what I believed.”

“Ashira, I ain’t never wanna control you. I was just trying to fit in.”

Chewing on my lips, I turned toward the setting sun then nodded. “It’s never felt that way. When I decided to have Chi-Chi, I felt like I was in a fight *for* my life. I’d just taken the reigns back from my father and felt like I handed them right over to you and an unnamed, unborn baby, so I worked. I’ve been working hard, trying to assert some control.”

“Control of what? I’ve been here as a support system. I ain’t never trip when you said you had to go to work.”

“But you did when I fell in love with you.” My heart pounded.

“Me? How?”

“Jas, we’ve never dealt with how you withheld so much about yourself from me while slowly stealing my heart. Our foundation was built on passion and distrust. I’ve never gotten over that. And then...” I shook my head. “I’m watching you in real-time with another woman you’re giving your full name and address to. Does she know about the murders—” I slapped my glossed lips, eyes wildly in search of anyone who may have heard me.

Jas shook his head, taking a deep breath. “If I haven’t apologized for that, please know I’m sorry for the way I handled shit back then. You gotta understand, Ashira, I was falling hard, too—for the first time in my life. Yeah, Josie knows about my charges, but I’ve never told her about my work in the streets. It was easy to tell you about me being locked up when we first met. You scared the shit outta me. You were otherworldly, and to be real, I ain’t want no parts of your kind.”

“See! I’ve always felt this arm’s length rejection from you. Always. Why?”

Jas turned away, rocking from his knees. “Because you’ve been my weakness.” He couldn’t look at me. “Even when I first saw you at sixteen. Man, my dick ain’t have no play in the excitement. That shit was all in my heart and mind that day. Ashira, I got into building because you were connected to it as a child. Before coming to your crib in Milburn that day in the summer, I ain’t have no legal ambition. Your whole family set the visual for my future.

“I wanted a legit life with financial security. That was the first thing on my original list; an upper-crust family. I wanted a badass, fuckable wife. That was another bullet. I wanted a perfectly pretty family—hell, a little girl even, who looked like her beautiful mother. That was another one on the list. I ran for a few years after that, but it was always stowed in the back of my mind. Prison only slowed my ass down to really pursue the list. So when I saw you in *Brown Barista*, fuck no, I wanted no parts of you. I was already on my way to pursuing my list. I felt your snobbish vibes out the gate.”

I scoffed, shifting away. “Snobbish.”

“Take no offense.” Jas took a step closer to me. “It’s just who you are. I’m a Harlem nigga, Ashira. Our vibe is different, and I wouldn’t change that about you. I guess what I mean is my confidence was so high at the time...my focus so strong, I blocked you before giving you a fair shot.”

“But you made love to me. You could have had me in the pissy projects; that’s how open I was to you. You didn’t take that opportunity. And then, when you finally did, you made love to me on the first try. Why would you make love to a snobby girl you didn’t trust?”

“I gave you what my body and heart had for you. I was in deep at that point.”

“To not tell me your name?”

“Because I didn’t want you looking me up. Inmate records are available on the damn internet, Ashira. Remember that? I’ve told you a million times! I ain’t want you seeing that and further Googling me to find out about the case I actually beat. I told you all of this.”

“Yeah. But you didn’t tell me about working with Danny Lewinski to buy up the local competition.” Yes, I had worked through it with my therapist, but not with Jas.

“Because I separated the two. I’d been working on that before my feelings for you caught up to my ass. I offered the company back to Witherspoon.”

My mouth fell open. “What?”

“He ain’t tell you? Before Chivon was born, I met with him and offered to dead the agreement.”

“What did he say?”

“I gave him a whole month to decide. He hit me up via email, declining my offer.”

My eyes got lost in the roiling water. “I didn’t know that,” I whispered, mostly to myself. It reminded me of how my father never wanted to run *Witherspoon Homes*. He’d just wanted me to.

“Yeah, and I kept a few people on his staff on the strength of you. But, in all honesty, I get how you could feel betrayed by that when we remove the business. I’m sure if I had those feelings for you back when the opportunity presented itself, I would’ve moved differently.”

“You’re apologizing?” I swallowed back a rush of tears.

“I am. I respect you, Ashira. Always have. I’ve only wanted the best for you. You’re a star, a bright one that can’t be held back. That’s why I’ve only tried to support your career. You said you’re signing on with Pixie...” He clapped his hands together. “Chivon will be at, at least, one of the shows, cheering you on.”

My face twitched into a smile. “You’ve always come out with my baby to support me.”

Humbly, Jas nodded.

I turned my head away, seeing the crocodile eye flip. It was filled with so much passion it startled me.

“Jas...” My gaze remained on the water.

“Yup,” he answered softly.

“Do you want me?” I turned to him. “Like... I know you’re with someone now, but in all this time, we’ve been in this awkward place since Chi-Chi’s been born, have you wanted me?”

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "jas". The letters are cursive and fluid, with a small dot above the 'j'.

There’s never been a time I didn’t want you, which is why sometimes I wish I’d never met you...

“Why you ask me that?”

She lifted her hand to her face, flickering her index finger. “There’s this thing that happens in your eyes when you look at

me sometimes.”

My eyes shot wide open. “A flip in my eyes?”

Damn...

I’d hoped I wasn’t one of those suckas who wore their heart on their sleeves, allowing women to take advantage of them. I didn’t *think* that was me. But with Ashira, there was no telling. Now, I felt as insecure as a motherfucker.

“What does that even mean, man?” I grunted, rolling my shoulder.

Ashira was still facing the water, her right shoulder to me. “Tonight...right now, it’s telling me that if I’d just say the word, you’d fuck me right here on the beach.”

My head snapped back, and I was speechless. She giggled, but in a way that made me feel she meant what she’d said.

“Ashira, I—”

“Yeah, yeah. I know you have a little girlfriend. I’m no homewrecker.” Then her face tightened, and I squinted as she tapped her chin. “Though in this case, it’s different. You’re my home, Jas. Prism built.” She shook her head. “Maybe we blew our chance at romance. Hell, maybe we allowed our sexual chemistry to drive us down an avenue not meant for us, which is why things between us have been so off. Either way, it wasn’t until this year that I realized how much of a staple in my life you are.” She sucked in a breath like she’d been hit with a newer revelation. “I’ve been my own damn homewrecker!”

I have no idea why, but that had me cracking up. Ashira did, too. She slapped my arm and fell into me, laughing. Yup. Shortie was tipsy. But the prism reference never got old. It did shit to me when she’d acknowledge me in that way.

“You’re a nut, man!” I laughed.

“Yeah,” Ashira sighed. “Well, I’m already responsible for one of the significant women leaving your life; I think I need to give Ms. Josie space to thrive. We don’t need the prism to shade and tilt from you losing your lover, too. I know how

much Ava meant to your business. Have you even found a replacement? I'm sure it's going to take years to resume the confidence you had in her." She sucked her teeth. "Damn. You know I feel bad for that."

"Don't." I pulled in a deep breath, peeping the sun go down. "I kept Ava on to make you jealous."

"Excuse me?" Ashira looked like she didn't know if she should go off or laugh. Her face, and even her body, struggled between the two. "Jealous?" I nodded. "Motherfucker!" she swore in a harsh whisper. "It worked!"

"I know."

She shoved me. "Jas!"

And that's when I chuckled. It was a huge inconvenience to lose Ava. She was a soldier. But I knew Ashira hated her from day one, and if Ashira was being honest about not feeling she had control over her own life, my truth was Ava was the only control I had over Ashira's. Keeping Ava on board well after our original apprenticeship contractual agreement was the only way I could fuck with Ashira.

"Wanna hear something funny?" She nudged me in the arm. "Same with Sergio."

Muthafucka!

My head whipped to fully see her face. Ashira laughed as she shot bullets at me with her gun-hands.

"Oh, shit," was all I could say.

I hated that motherfucker. He was why I'd never stepped foot in *Kucheza*, her dance club I helped name. The name means "dancing" in Swahili.

"You fucked with that man's life all these years, Ashira?" I wasn't laughing.

That shit rightfully knocked the goofy ass smile from her face.

Ashira walked on her toes toward me. Her tits looked bigger in the low-cut dress she wore. I'd been looking away all

night.

“You don’t need to use violence as it concerns me. I abhor that shit.”

“Then fire his ass.”

She was patient with her pace when she lifted from her toes to get into my face. “I’ll consider doing it if you could be straightforward with me for the first time in your life.”

“About what?”

“Do you still want to fuck me?”

“A’ight.” I backed away. Ashira wasn’t drunk, either. She was on her bitch shit. “Time to get back to *The Bella*, man. C’mon,”

Chapter Nineteen

Part III

July | Three Years Later



“I ’m so glad you’re coming home soon,” Josie yawned into the phone. “I’ve been missing you. You were right about talking every day, but I miss seeing your gorgeous face.”

I snorted, rubbing my eyes. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yup. I’m looking for a sitter now. I hope I don’t have to work on Thursday night. I’ll call out if I do. I can’t believe it’s been over two weeks,” Josie went on and on.

First, it was thanking me again for the car. Then, it was about work. Then, she talked about a disagreement she got into with a coworker. I’d been in and out of the conversation mentally. Shit was looking bad for me, and I knew it.

“You there, Ojasvi?”

I looked up from the carpet in my cabin. “Huhn?”

“I asked had the vacation been fun.”

“Oh.” I scratched my head, leaning back into the single oval sofa. “It’s been cool. Great food, beautiful beaches, and lots of recorded memories with Chivon. It’s served its purpose.”

“Here you go again, not mentioning Shi-Shi.” I could hear the eye roll in that comment.

“I’m sorry, Josie, but why would I mention her to you? You want me to do that every time we speak? Bring up Chivon’s mother?”

“No. It’s not that. It’s just...helps paint a visual of all that’s going on over there.”

“Sorry. I ain’t into that. I’m just with my people, enjoying Europe. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” she tried to clean it up.

At first, I didn’t say anything because the last place I needed to be was talking to Josie about Ashira. I was uncomfortable and unsettled—a dangerous place for me.

Do you still want to fuck me?

I rubbed the back of my head, still smelling fermented grapes and spices from her breath. Her tongue was stained from wine, eyes low. The perfect combination I grew right away to love about her. The only thing missing was the scent of burnt tobacco on her tongue, lips, hair, and clothes, left behind by a stogie. “Nah. You’re good. Just wanted to explain that. Probably should have the first time you asked. Ashira and I have always had this...shaky relationship. For some reason, we struggle with our balance. Being out here these two weeks’ve been stressful on us, but we’ve been fighting to make sure Chivon don’t pick up on it.”

Not to mention me having to keep a pulse on work and worrying about Jug’s ass.

“Oh, baby!” She sucked in a breath. “I’m so sorry! Here I am being nosy, and you’re out there miserable.” *I ain’t say all that.* It had actually been the opposite. And that’s what had me fucked up tonight. “I’ll be praying for peace until you get back

home. I'm proud of you. Wish you were my baby's daddy rather than the dud I got now." She laughed.

I didn't.

My lips tickled from a trace memory of her kissing me last night. What the fuck was Ashira doing to me? Was this a game to her? I had a friend—a special friend. A friend I'd taken it there with.

My chest felt tight. I stretched my arms out, trying to loosen the tension. I may have gone too hard in the gym this morning, feeling I needed a new challenge instead of knowing it was a distraction I'd been giving myself.

"It's late over here, J. I'mma shower up and get in the bed."

"Okay. Can you do me a favor? Switch this to a *FaceTime* call. I want to see your night view of the water."

"Say less." I stood from the sofa. "I got you." First, I *FaceTime'd* her, then took to the door.

"Hot tamales!" Josie whistled, lipstick faded as she sat behind a desk at work. "Can I see more of that?" I was shirtless, down to just my pants at this point. I'd already said goodnight to Chivon before heading to my room to check in with Josie.

"Easy." I smiled, not really beat to feed into the flirting.

She laughed as I walked barefoot down the hall to the sundeck. It was likely empty at this hour. We usually hung out on the pool deck or bridge. I'd forget we were actually moving sometimes if I didn't see it in motion. We left Saint-Tropez an hour ago and were headed to our final destination.

"So, now, back to Naples?"

"Rome. Maybe one more short stop to help us make the journey," I explained, walking over to the railing. "Here you go." I tapped to have the camera flip ahead.

"Oh, nice! I can see the water from the lighting of the yacht."

“Yeah.” I glanced around at the beautiful night sight.
“Beauti—shiiit...”

Ashira was a few feet away, laying on her side on a lounge, smoking a cigar in nothing but a shimmery bronzed thong bikini. Her body faced the opposite direction, but she'd been looking over her shoulder at me. From here, I could see the short brandy glass and bottle of *Mauve* on the table next to her. Slowly, she turned toward me. I couldn't see her expression but peeped her communication when she arched her long spine over the chair, pushing her tits into the air.

“I bet your view is even better than mine on camera,” Josie kept fucking talking.

I'm no homewrecker. Though in this case, it's different. You're my home, Jas. Prism built. Maybe we blew our chance at romance. Hell, maybe we allowed our sexual chemistry to drive us down an avenue not meant for us, which is why things between us have been so off. Either way, it wasn't until this year that I realized how much of a staple in my life you are.

Her words echoed in my fucking groin as I watched her blow out smoke from her stogie.

“A'ight. I think that's enough for me.”

“Okay, babe. I know you're tired. I'll call you tomorrow.”

“Good night,” I offered, still watching Ashira now act like she was ignoring me as I walked over to her.

I took my time, reading her body. When I finally arrived, Ashira's attention drew up to me, blowing smoke from her glossed lips. I placed my phone on the table next to her bottle of *Mauve*, then lowered myself onto her lounge. Her long legs folded into tents to make room for me. A purple device on the other table holding her ashtray caught my eye. As soon as I thought to pick it up to examine it, I knew what it was. I held it in the air. A *Calla Lilly*. I'd heard about the sex toy, a vibrator that stimulates more than just the clit.

Ashira's heavy breathing had my eyes rolling back over to her. So, this was her plan tonight? A drink, cigar, and to masturbate? My attention went to the mounds of her tits in the

strappy bra top, the distance between her belly button and the top of her bikini bottoms. Her eyes were low, real low and her lips parted as she breathed hard.

Do you still want to fuck me?

Reaching for the other side of the lounge, I leaned over her, trailing the tip of my nose from her chest and between her tits. When I made it down her stomach, Ashira's muscles clenched. Then I moved to the bed of her pussy. I took in a big gulp of air, pulling in her feminine scent, being reminded of her essence. It had been so long, a year to be real, and the shit still fucked with me. I didn't need alcohol to get lifted; Ashira's body alone intoxicated my mind. That was why I had to withdraw from it. I needed sobriety to detach.

I slipped my finger beneath the smooth strap of her bikini. Her lips were soft, warm, and open. Her clit was swollen, and the opening of her pussy, a puddle. I dipped my head, shifting the narrow strap to the side, and pushed my tongue straight into her opening.

"Yes, Jas," she cried, hand going to my head, encouraging my desire.

Shit.

The honey I dived into made my fucking head spin. Ashira was so fucking wet. She was always wet for me. I dipped and dipped, coating my tongue, then brought the syrup up to her beating clit. She tensed beneath me, moaning against the boat's motor in the open air. I looked up at her while running my tongue up and down her button and saw her face turn hard and eyes squeeze shut. Her hand gripped the back of my head tighter and tighter the faster my tongue moved.

"Jas!" she panted. "Shit, Jas. I'm gonna..."

Feeling her liquid excitement on my chin, I repositioned myself to cup her ass while she pumped and trembled off the lounge.

"Fuck! Jas." Ashira went between groaning and shouting, gyrating so fast as I sucked on her clit, pulling it into my mouth while licking. "Jas—*ohh!*"

You're my home, Jas.

The sounds of her sobbing as she came into my mouth, soaking my face with her declaration and claims to me, drove me wild. No matter how long it had been, I knew Ashira's body. When she was done, my body was so damn tense as I leaped up to find her mouth. I moved so fast, her legs came up with me. She moaned, gripping my head. I loved her in this pretzel position, breathing hard, letting me fuck her mouth with my tongue. The track star was stuck beneath me, trying to devour my face.

I reached for the *Calla Lilly* and put it in her hand.

"Turn it on," I spoke into her mouth.

With shaky hands, she managed it, and within seconds, I heard the strong motor. Sitting back, I took the device from her at the same time. Then I reached up to unravel the top of her bikini, pulling the strings down her chest until her tits spilled out. Those chestnut areolas peaked at the tips. Ashira heaved, the end of two of her braids aside her boobs. It took me just a few seconds to line the center of the blossomed flower with her clit. Some of the leaves on the flower device massaged her lips.

"Wait!" Ashira whispered hard; her hands shot to the arms of the chair with a death grip. "Jas, wait!" Her eyes rolled to the back of her head.

Within seconds her hips jerked, tits bounced, and spine danced as she exploded in another orgasm. Pure joy. The sight of her becoming undone had my dick hard and pulse racing. Ashira more than moaned this time. She cried from her chest as her body went crazy, exorcist style. The moment I pulled it back, she collapsed onto the lounge, breathless and eyes closed.

I stood to unbutton my pants and pull my throbbing dick out. Ashira prepared for me with heavy breathing and an open mouth. She scooted down the chair, dropping her feet on the sides, opening herself to me. I didn't take my pants off; I just pulled them down enough to lay on top of her, positioning my dick to touch her wet pussy.

“You wanna fuck me?” I asked her, flicking her nipple with my tongue.

Ashira nodded hard and fast. She even dashed down the lounge for more friction. Her soft little hand gripped me, stroking my dick to feed between her legs. So excited to be inside her, I positioned myself to push into her. Ashira was wet, hot, and so fucking tight. I lifted from my knees and pushed deeper. Her hand shot to my abs, pushing me back.

She panted with a strained face, “It’s been a long time. Slow.”

I pulled back and slowly slid back inside, going no farther than the first time. Trying to open her up, I wound my hips, not getting far at all. Then I reached up to kiss her, not moving my dick no matter how much it wanted to be buried deep. This was new to me. Ashira’s body had never rejected me. It had always been welcoming since the very first time I had her. Our tongues moved against each other, one of her hands gripping the back of my head and the other still between us turned limp. That’s when I stroked again, going deeper. I pulled back and slid back in, feeling her body strain. When I reached too far, her hand pushed at my lower abs again.

“You’re driving me crazy here,” I snorted, whispering in her ear.

Her little hand between us turned me on, too. I was fucking ready.

Ashira’s breathing was hard when she cried, “I know. I want this so bad. Want you so bad!”

She rolled her hips, pressing down on to me. So fucking ready, I moved, too, pulling out and pushing back into her. We soon found a rhythm with less than half my shit being inside of her. The flavored tobacco air rushing from her lungs pushed into my mouth. That scent mixed with nutty brandy, pussy, and vanilla had my mind going as I stroked—*and...*

“Fuck!” My ass squeezed, spine stiffened, and I was jacking off in her. My body spasmed, and goosebumps lifted as my head spun. “Shit...”

I felt goofy. Like it was my first time again. But it felt good because her arms tightened around me, stroking my back.

“Yes, Jas,” she whispered my encouragement as I landed. When I was done, I buried my face in her neck. “You hiding?” She snickered. My body trembling, this time from laughing silently at her silly ass. “Oh, buddy,” her voice was so soft. Soothing. “you still can’t fuck.”

We laughed together, Ashira into the air and me into her boobs this time. Then I hefted her to my chest and pulled up from the lounge without falling on my ass with her straddling me. It was a challenge, trying to keep my pants from falling as I walked us off the deck and to my cabin.

By the time I closed the door behind us, my dick was rock hard again.

love
belkin

ashira

He was like a missile moving inside me, stretching my walls, rubbing over awakened nerve endings. He reached deep, hiking my leg over his globular shoulder covered in mist. His throaty grunts in my ear aroused me. The bed rocked hard against the wall. Over me, Jas was a vicious animal, hard all over, muscular, and locomotive in pursuit of its feed. His drives into me were in a curled fashion powered by his tapered waist.

I pushed my pelvis up, relinquishing myself to his relentless drives. That angle gave him access to a minefield of nerves, and I could feel my groin twist and swell. Then I detonated.

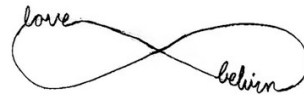
“Ohhh!”

My belly caved, mouth stretched wide as I manically threw my pussy into his tireless plummeting. I moaned and moaned, clenching the flesh of his waist until Jas’ mouth covered mine and his tongue propelled my orgasm as I fought to breathe. Sandwiched between us was my hiked leg, and he left room for nothing else. I could feel his beating heart, his laboring lungs, but most of all, the pulse of his need for me buried into my womb as I gyrated over the mattress.

He wanted me. All this time, Ojasvi Sinclair wanted me sexually but denied himself, denied us. Tonight had taught me to trust my instincts. I’d been experiencing Jas’ moods through his eyes. They spoke. In them, I’d seen danger, lust, vulnerability, and longing.

As he pounded into me, attempting to prove he was good at fucking and not just making love to me, I knew what I knew. I was stuck with this man forever. To what capacity was what I needed to decide on. But one thing I did know was what I hadn’t lost.

My pussy power.



I was curled on the sofa, wrapped in nothing but the floral print shirt he wore yesterday and the musk of sex. The crest of the dawning sun could be seen. I gazed out of the window, attention-less to the rippling water we charted through.

“What’s wrong,” he demanded gravelly, his body thick and strong as he pushed up from one arm, face contorted from sleep and exhaustion.

A sniffle preceded my smile to allay his concerns. I wiped my wet face and resumed watching the endless ocean. “I’m happy,” hardly pushed from my lungs.

“That makes you cry?”

Yeah. It sounded silly, but to me, it was an ugly truth.

I sniffled again. “My family inspired you to have a wholesome life.” Wiping my eyes, I was able to look at him again. “You made a list to pursue it, even took on a spiritual journey. Then you encounter me as an adult and...” I looked away again. He lay in his bed naked and perfect, saturated in my “ugly.”

“And what, Ashira?” his tone sharp, impatient.

I let the tears go without a fight this time. “And I take you off track. I fuck up your list time and time again.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s what you said to me the first night we kissed at *DiFillippo’s*. You warned me not to let you fuck up your list, and I’ve done just that.”

Jas brushed his hand down his tight face, whispering, “I ‘on’t know what all this mean, man.”

I scoffed, wiping my face again. “You wanted celibacy...a wife. I wanted to claim you physically. To conquer your stubborn religious pursuits...the thug from Harlem. We fell in love, and you dropped your efforts of finding a wife. I get pregnant, making you something you never wanted to be. Even now, Jas,” I turned to him. “you’re trying to move on. You’re with Josie and I...” Swallowing involuntarily, I couldn’t keep speaking my fuck ups.

“What do you want, Ashira? Huhn?” Jas was irritated. “What do you want from me?”

“To give me mercy,” I cried mutedly into my arm. “To never stop.”

“Never means forever,” he croaked, and I knew what he was referencing.

“I need time to grow up.”

“I’ve given you three years.”

“I—” I turned away again, stuck. “I got damaged with relationships when my mother left me,” I admitted. “I know how to love; I swear I do.” I shook my head, peering his way

again. “I just don’t know what commitment means marriage-wise.”

“So, you want me to be good with this?” His hand motioned around the cabin. “For this enemies-to-lovers shit? You want the crappy shit we’ve been playing since our daughter was born?” His palm hit his hilly chest as he pledged, “I deserve better than that.”

“You deserve better than me.” I swallowed. “But you’re mine.” *Forever...*

We locked gazes for what felt like forever. There was so much between us, the toxicity created by mutual resentment. Above it all, though, was rabid love. The type that didn’t make sense. The kind that ran hard and wild. The strain capable of hurting us both.

Jas swung open the sheet, revealing his vulnerability to my powers, swollen beneath the bed of dark curly hairs. “Come back to bed, Ashira.” I enjoyed the authority of his tone when he called me by my first name.

Shit...

Everything the man did turned me on. It felt like dark sunglasses with gloomy lenses had fallen from my face this year. Over the course of the months, non-negotiable obstacles I thought I had were minor issues between us—well, most, anyway.

I shook my head, sniffing again. “I can’t.” I left the sofa in search of my things. “Chi-Chi’ll be up soon. She’d throw a tantrum if she knew I’ve fucked her dad...again.”

Jas’ torso slammed onto the mattress. “Shit!”



The salted air felt amazing, awakening my fuzzed brain this morning from a lack of sleep. I watched as the kitchen crew finished loading the table with meats, potatoes, and

condiments. Dishes clanked together as Amy, Rainey, Francesco, and the guys began going for coffee and beverages.

Eric and Bob, because of their generous sizes, sat at the ends of the rectangular table as they typically did when joining us for a meal. Rainey sat across from Chi-Chi and me. Next to her was Francesco. The seat to the left of him was empty. Sometimes Bella joined us, and other times, she remained back in the kitchen with her team to cook or prepare something for a subsequent meal. Amy sat to the right of Chi-Chi. We were all a sight, different body sizes and weights, at a table packed with an array of foods.

I'd just finished cutting up Chi-Chi's sausage when I stood to get ketchup. They often forgot my penchant for it on my potatoes, which wasn't a big deal. Just as I was leaving out, a deliciously looking and temptingly scented Jas appeared. I was licking off the bit of strawberry syrup I'd managed to get on my thumb when I was trapped in his eyes. His presence was as imposing as always. I felt my breath hike, and immediately chided myself. I had to get it together. I'd lost my shit a few hours ago in his cabin, crying like a madwoman. I refused to romanticize my "ugly" until I sorted the shit.

But when Jas discreetly stroked the thumb I'd just licked, my sex clenched, and lungs seized. Still, I managed to smoothly pass him and continue to the kitchen.

"It's about damn time," I heard Francesco grumble behind me. "We can't eat until the man of the vessel eats."

When I returned from the kitchen, Jas was over Chi-Chi, cutting her pancake. I placed the ketchup on the table and took to my seat, now enduring his scent.

"No, Mommy!" Chi-Chi shouted, alarmed. "Daddy sit by me. Daddy!"

My brows met as the girls snickered. "But Mommy was sitting here first. I went to get ketchup."

"No! No! No!" She attempted to waggle her index finger. "You sit there." She pointed to the empty seat next to Francesco. "Daddy sit next to me, Mommy!"

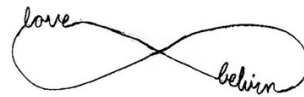
My neck rolled and forehead stretched as I blinked. Did it sting? Not as much as usual, but it did.

“Nah, Chivon,” Jas interjected. “Daddy came late. Mommy has her *seat*—”

“No! Daddy sit next to me!” She pouted.

I stood. “It’s okay. Francesco may share his food with me,” I attempted to joke.

The table found that funny as I made my way to my new chair. Jas didn’t sit right away. He shot me a glaring scowl for seconds long before taking his seat.



On our way back to Rome, we stopped at a small island in the Ligurian Sea. The town wasn’t as developed and festive as the previous ports and islands on our tour. Bella wanted to stop here, though, for perishables to help get us through the rest of the journey.

After Chivon’s meltdown at breakfast, I decided to have some alone time with her. We left *The Bella* to check out the place. There were markets but no vibrant youth around to give the place energy. It was cool, though. My target was right at my side, skipping away as I walked. We’d seen all there had been to see and were on our way back to the boat. Chivon and I hadn’t been gone an hour and already I missed her mother. I hadn’t really spoken much to Ashira since breakfast. I had calls to make and emails to return. In between them, I saw she was on the pool deck, back to recording dances. Amy and

Rainey tried to follow her. They'd been trying for days. I wanted to talk to Chivon before speaking to her moms.

"Blueberry..." I looked down at her licking her gelato cone.

"Yeah?" She glanced up at me, smiling.

"You know you're Daddy's baby. Right?"

"Yeah?"

"And that won't ever change."

She stopped then leaped from her toes. "That be fer-ever and fer-ever and ever!" Then she continued the scroll.

"Yeah. And ever. But you see these?" I lifted the flowers and sterling silver chain in a small ziplock bag I bought for Ashira.

"Uhn-huhn. Pretty flow-vures!"

"Yup. They're very pretty. They're for Mommy." I stopped and squatted in front of her when we were close to the boat ramp. "You're going to give her the flowers and the necklace. Okay?"

"Okay." She slurped the dripping cream running down the cone.

"Do you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because Mommy is my friend, too. Just like you're my baby forever and ever, Mommy's Daddy's friend forever and ever and ever."

"You friend?" She seemed confused. "She my mommy. She not your friend, Daddy!"

I nodded. "She's your mommy and Daddy's friend. Yes. I need you to be nice to Mommy all the time. She's my friend."

My baby's beautiful face wrinkled as she fought through her confusion and conviction. "No, Daddy. No. Mommy's my mommy. She not your friend." My baby shook her head, convinced.

That's when I knew I didn't have this daddy shit in the bag and gave up. I groaned and stood straight.

"You got it, Chivon." We continued to the boat, and she commenced her skipping while holding my hand as though we'd never stopped. "She's your mommy. But you have to be nice to her always."

"Okay," she groaned, attempting to roll her eyes.

But Chivon wasn't arguing about being nice to her moms. She was done with the conversation.

"And you're going to give this to her when we get to the pool. Okay?"

"Mmmhmm." She agreed. "Daddy. I no want no more." She shook her head, handing me her half-eaten, melting gelato.

Right away, I took it, then looked for trash cans along the pier and saw none in sight. We boarded *The Bella*, and I managed to find one on our way up to the pool deck.

"Here you go," I whispered to my blueberry. "Go take it to Mommy and say sorry."

"Okay." She took off, then stopped and turned around. "Why?"

I pointed ahead, lifting my forehead. "Go do what I said."

Chivon took off again, and so did I but in a different direction. I wanted to change into my swim trunks and lay out by the pool. I went up one level, and I could see down over the railing to the pool deck as Chivon was kissing her moms, who was holding the flowers and necklace. Chivon was getting loved on, so clueless and unaware of the moment.

Just like her moms and her crew when they partied...

My phone rang in my pocket.

"Yo, Lex." I laughed already.

"Yo, when y'all get back again?" She was snippy, but that could be Lex sometimes.

“Thursday. Why? Whaddup?” I felt the stickiness from that damn ice cream on my hand.

“I thought you said you were done with Shi-Shi.”

“Why you say that?”

“Because now I’m in some shit. I woke up to missed calls and texts from Josie. When I called her back, she was screaming into the phone how you’re still bangin’ Shi-Shi.”

My attention went to Ashira, now sitting with crossed legs on the lounge with Chivon, playing some hand game. “What? Where she get that from?”

“She heard you, yo? Did you *FaceTime* her last night while Shi-Shi was in the room, then *fuck—I mean—*sleep with her?”

I was ready to say hell no. That setup and sequence did sound familiar to me. Then I remembered once Ashira left my cabin this morning, I went to my phones to check in on Juggy. One was missing.

“*Shit.*” I left it on the sundeck when I carried Ashira to my room.

“Shit is right, and my ass is on the line,” Lex barked.

“How?”

“Because my husband tore my ass a new one for hookin’ y’all up in the first place.”

“Why? What did you do wrong?”

“I don’t know, man. Church politics, I guess I’m still learning. But you said—I thought you and Shi-Shi were done.”

My attention went back to Ashira and Chivon. Their palms were clasped together as they both laughed hard as hell about something. I took a deep breath. “I’ll talk to Josie.”

“Oh, you damn right you will. It’s only right. I vouched for you.”

“Because you know how I move.”

“But this *right here* is a departure from your move, my nigga.”

“Yo, Lex. Don’t let me hit up my pastor with a complaint about how my first lady speaks to me.”

“Man, fuck you! You pay tithes but ain’t a member. Try me!” When she heard me laughing, she hissed, “I’ve pulled up to work. Get back safely so I can beat your ass for this. Now, I gotta deal with the beast. Shit!” she swore in a whisper.

I chuckled. “Good luck, Lex. My bad on this one. I’ll hit you as soon as I touch down.”

“Bye.”

I disconnected the call and checked the time. It was still early in the morning in the U.S. I had a little time to collect my thoughts. I had to prepare to tell Ashira first.

Ain’t this some shit...

What had Josie actually heard?

Chapter Twenty

Part III

July | Three Years Later

ashira

“**M**mmmmm...” I moaned, rolling my pelvis upward, wanting to feel his tongue strokes at my opening.

Jas pushed his tongue inside me, sending me into bliss with the new sensations. I fingered his thick coils as my feet curled in the pool, and my nipples, caged by my bikini top, tingled with pleasure. My head rolled back, eyes opening just enough for me to catch the sparkling dots in the dark sky. It was beautiful, just like the man in the pool beneath me, eating my sex while I lay on the pool’s ledge.

He pulled my legs from the water, arranging them aside me into a frog position. His big hands cupped my ass and firm tongue stroked my clit over and over. The lewd sounds of his oral work echoing across the pool deck didn’t deter me from enjoying him tonight. Our last night on *The Bella*. I wanted him in every way. Even now, feeling the tremors from my tensing body, I couldn’t decide if I wanted to explode in his mouth or with his hardness plunging me deeply. His mouth was warm in contrast to the mild wind hitting my wet skin.

Jas' erotic ministrations heated me from my core. I rocked into him as best I could in this position, wanting to meet his passion.

How boss was the father of my child to charter a yacht for over two weeks and eat my pussy from its pool? This had been my life. The culmination of a European vacation at its best. But what was gravely concerning for me was how quickly my feelings had changed for him. I started this voyage just wanting to avoid arguing with him to end so tenderly from discovering his unwavering commitment to me. Jas was a, for real, staple in my world. Perhaps the uncultured cat from Harlem didn't know he could get any better than this ditzy—his word—broad from Milburn, NJ.

Perchance, the father of my child thought the sea of fitting women worthy of his affection began and ended with me. Jas didn't date a lot, even before prison. He had no experience. I was the first he fell for. *And how reckless I've been with him.* Yes, he withheld pertinent information from me for a year, but what else should I have suspected from a man surviving the grimy streets he'd come from? Why should I have expected him to trust me fully when I hadn't fully trusted him either? Jas made mistakes, and so did I. For the past two days, my mind and heart were wrought with just how to repair what had been broken. Would we attempt a relationship again or simply just heal the pain between us and amicably move on?

“Ooooh!” I moaned, head tossed back, relinquishing to pleasure.

My body strained, stomach muscles writhing with building need. The thought of never having his vulnerable doling of pleasure again sent me over the edge. My body jolted, legs popping out of the frog position and back into the water as my arms stretched behind me for anchor while I rocked into his deep pulling of my clit in his mouth. With an opened mouth, I cried noiselessly, conscious of being heard.

When I was able to open my eyes with a heaving chest, I saw his long dark lashes as he peered up at me so tenderly. Jas peppered my thighs with gentle kisses and caressing rubs. He was gorgeous and so open; I could see it all in his eyes. We

remained locked into each other's gazes until my lungs slowed. Then he rearranged my bikini and dipped back into the water, swimming to the other side. Even after a tantalizing orgasm, my heart was heavy as hell.

I remained in the same place on the ledge, trying to settle my mind, when Jas swam up to me.

Wiping water from his face, he throatily shared, "Josie knows."

"Knows what?" When Jas gaped at me wordlessly, I knew. My heart thundered in my chest. "How?"

Jas coolly backed up next to me against the pool wall. He wiped his face again. "That first night. I *FaceTime*'d her. Didn't disconnect the call before I came over to you."

"She saw us?" I was completely horrified for her.

I hadn't fully come down from my orgasm and was now at this psychological extreme.

"Nah." His attention was across the deck as he spoke. "The face was down—or up. I can't remember. But it was dark either way. She heard us, she said."

Me. She heard me. This was a nightmare.

"So, what did she hear exactly?"

He peered up to me. "I'm not sure the specifics matter at this point. She knows what we did. Point. Blank."

Shit...

My chest caved. "I'm sorry, Jas," was all I could say. I really was.

After a while, he mumbled, "S'all good. I heard her feelings about it yesterday and apologized. I told her we'll kick it more when I touch down."

"Does she want to?"

Jas nodded. "I owe her that."

"Again, I'm sorry."

“No need for you to be sorry. We ain’t expect this shit,” he scoffed, pushing the water with his open palms to make waves. “The fucked up part about it is I really like Josie. She’s been good for me. She’s just...” He shrugged. “Chill.”

“Is she going to break up with you? I’d feel awful, Jas, I really would.”

His gaze met me again. “Why? Because you can’t give me what I need if Josie ducks out of the picture?” I didn’t answer. Couldn’t. He turned back to the aqua water. “Josie ain’t my girl. We’ve talked about it—she wanted it. I’ve been chilling, slowing down for once with finding something special.”

“What’s special?”

Jas tossed me an annoyed expression. He shook his head again. “It ain’t about just having a wife. Shit. I got a kid, so the natural relationship progression thing for me is done. Now, it’s just...”

“About the promise.”

Jas’ head swung my way, eyes grew wild. I could tell he was stunned. But I knew.

“I remembered,” I shared shakily. “Rose. The first time you visited *Della*, she told *you*—not me—to fight for the promise. You and I had a rift right after you shared more of your past with me, but Rose is different. She sees a lot. When she said that to you, I dismissed it but knew it was a part of your spiritual journey. Had to be; Rose picked it up. What’s the promise, Jas? Was it something you pledged to God or what He said He’s holding for you?”

There was another long pause for a spell as I prayed he wouldn’t close up on me. I wanted to know. I needed to understand Jas. The shit between us was that critical.

Instead, he used his palms to lift himself from the pool reverse-style. Then he reached for my hand. “C’mere. I got something to show you.”

I took his hand and let him help me to my feet. Somewhat unsteady, I followed Jas into the shadowy area of the deck beneath the upper level. He took me by the neck, pulling me


into a savage kiss. His big body curled over me, arm clutched me to his chest where I could feel the wild galloping of his heart. Jas' tongue was communicative—loquacious, in fact, filling the ears of my heart with confirmations and truths. When he physically instructed me to the long lounge, my thighs opened for him automatically.

Swallowing back a cry shooting from my throat, I watched fixedly as he rid himself of his swim trunks. The shaft of his dick slightly curved to his belly and thick. He used a nearby towel to wipe his body down, pre-gaming me. Jas tossed the towel and crawled on top of me, yanking me down to meet his hardness, leaving my lungs along the way. I wanted him, thrilled by his need for me, and under shitty circumstances.

I reached up for Jas' mouth, finding his tongue right away. His hand was below, shifting my bikini to the side again, and in one blunt thrust, he was inside of me. My sex cried, and I gasped against his mouth. He reared his hips and lunged into me again. I was caged between the lounge and his wide pulsing crest, the beat of his raging heart, and the fury of his passion.

And I took it. Until my stubborn swollen walls relaxed to invite Jas in. I endured all the blessed nuance of delicious girth. I loved it.

And I love you...



After pulling up to the airport, we left the van. Amy and Rainey headed straight for the jet, already juiced up and waiting for us. I carried Chivon. My baby was cranky; the

travel may have been too much for her system. We were about to resume our normal time zone, and I was worried about her adjustment. She clasped my neck tightly as we approached Bella and Francesco, standing in front of a nearby car.

I held my hand out to him. “Can’t say thanks enough, man. The shit was life-changing.”

“Grazie.” He bowed with a hand on his chest. “You’re welcome back anytime, Sinclair.”

Ashira moved in for a quick hug. “Thanks, Francesco.” Her smile tight and eyes watery.

“Awww!” Bella cried. “Look at this one.” She pulled Ashira into a hug.

“I know,” Ashira giggled. “I’m a mess.” She waved herself off, rolling her eyes. “It’s been amazing. I’ve been to Brazil, St. Vincent, Paris, *Red’s Island*, Costa Rica—shoot, even *Saint Justin*! I’ve seen natural beauty and had fun excursions. But *never* have I ever had a spiritual intervention on vacation. The luxury of *The Bella* has been a safe harbor to explore the beauty of Europe. The energy and atmosphere created by you and your accommodating staff...” She shook her head, pressing those lips together.

“Mark me good on *Yelp*,” Francesco smirked.

Ashira’s face screwed. “You’re on *Yelp*?”

When Bella, Francesco, and I laughed, she caught on. Ashira rolled her eyes, fighting not to laugh, too.

“Daddy,” Chivon whined next to my ear. “*I—*” She yawned. “I gotta go potty.”

Ashira rubbed her leg, lying against my stomach.

“His vessel isn’t opened to the public, dear,” Bella sweetly explained, roping her arm around Ashira again. “Only special friends and their wonderful referrals. You and your lovely family are no longer referrals. You’re family now. We look forward to hosting you again.”

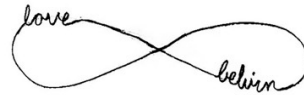
Ashira humbly nodded. “I sure hope so.”

“And I’ll be visiting the States later this year. I’d love to see you and your family while I’m there,” Bella proposed to Ashira.

Her eyes shot over to me, and I wondered if it was because of the family reference again.

“You let me know, and I’ll roll out the red carpet for you.” Ashira squeezed her hand. “It’s my promise.”

Once the final rounds of hugs were over, we boarded the plane. I carried Chivon up the stairs while reading a text from Jos-Renee.



A sudden crackling broke in the air having my eyes open in the dark. I could feel the engine beneath us, reminding me we were still on *Prism Built*. Then a growing odor hit my nose. I shifted my head up and saw my baby’s ass inches away.

Chivon...

I sat up. Looking at her feet near the headboard and her arms stretched toward the side of the bed, I shook my head. Babies farting in my face and kicking me in the bed was my life now. I shifted to the edge of the bed and rubbed my face awake. Within seconds, I thought of her. And thinking of her now made me crave her. I arranged pillows around Chivon and left the room in the back of the jet. The lights were low towards the front.

Ashira stood in the walkway, holding a glass of wine. The girls sat in their seats, watching TV. My dick was hard by the time I walked up on her.

“Come in the room.”

My shit was getting harder by the second, now smelling her braids, feeling her tight thickness against me. I ran my nose down her soft neck.

Ashira froze then from her profile, I could see a smile forming on her face. Then her lashes fluttered, “Ummm...” Her head shifted to the girls. “Jas,” she begged.

That forced my attention to them. Rainey was curled in the chair, a blanket covering her as she smirked our way. Amy sat in the same way in her chair but with a glass of wine. Her eyes were low, telling me of her tipsiness.

“Uhhh...” Amy coughed into her hand, fighting a smile. “Mr. Sinclair, should I go grab Chi-Chi?”

Rainey snickered, and that made Amy do the same. “Or maybe we should go to bed with her. We’ve got another four hours to go.”

Ashira, grinning, dropped her head into her hand. “Jas.”

“Because the amount of time you two took last night by the pool—”

“Rainey!” Amy giggled, covering her mouth.

“...or the day before, during ‘nap’ time, says we should call it a night,” Rainey continued, then made some goofy expression. She snickered to the point of tears while looking at Amy.

“Oh, shit!” Amy could hardly get out, laughing so hard. “I’m *so* going to get fired!”

“Yooo!” Rainey squealed. “I *knew* Shi-Shi was bangin’ your boss! I’m no fool!”

The girls fell into a giggling fit over that. Ashira was almost as tickled as they were.

“See what happens when you drink with the help,” I warned in Ashira’s ear.

She turned around defensively as I pulled out my vibrating phone from my pocket.

“Don’t do that. They’re fun. I made friends with them on this trip when you didn’t want to be mine!” She joked.

I knew she liked them. Amy and her girl reminded me a lot of Ashira and her crew; girls with no true care in the world,

just wanting to have fun.

“Jos, whaddup?” I answered the call with my eyes on Ashira.

“It ain’t looking good, Jas.” I knew right away the connection wasn’t great.

“Hit me.”

I called Jos-Renee, Jug’s ex, to check in on him. His friend, Sabrina, had been down in Atlantic City since Jug was admitted into the hospital four days ago. Man took his family to *Disney*; Consuela welcomed a new grandbaby and could only get to the hospital once. Frankie had been going to check in with no real news to report back the first two days. Since then, she’d been taking meetings to expand my second-chance program, *A Prism Built Chance*.

Jos-Renee was the only other trusted option for Jug. She agreed to stop at the hospital after work for some answers.

“He was in a medically-induced coma, they said.”

“Coma?” I repeated, alarming Ashira.

“Yeah. They’ve been waking him up since yesterday, saying they needed to do it to calm all his systems to figure out the problem.”

“Okay, so what’s the problem?” Ashira pulled me by the free hand, leading me toward the seats in the back. She sat across from me.

“They still don’t know, and check this. They say he has a collapsed lung, and it seems as if they don’t know if it came from the ventilator they had him on or what’s making him sick.”

My chest tightened. “What?” I sat back in the chair, resigning to my boy going out without a diagnosis.

God, please...

“And now they’re saying they’re gonna discharge him.”

“With the collapsed lung?”

Ashira's attention was on her phone, her face tight.

"Yup. Sending him home with a script for more oxygen."

There was no one home. This shit had to end.

God, help...

"Aye, Jos..." I scratched the back of my head. "I'm in the air right now, but coming straight home. Could you..."

She took a deep breath. "Jas, I swear, if my husband leaves me behind this, you're building my ass a house for free and paying for the land and taxes!"

I nodded, understanding how precarious this was for her. "I got you. You know I do. I'll be there to relieve you as soon as I land."

"Alright," she exhaled again.

I made sure the call was disconnected before I grunted my frustration.

"Della."

I opened my heavy eyes to her whisper. "We need to take Juggy to *Della*."

"For what?"

"My Aunt Rose." She must have read the confusion on my face. "Aunt Rose is a healer, too. She's cured so many people of so many different things. Cousin Charles was diagnosed with prostate cancer. They biopsied him. Aunt Rose worked on him, and he got a second opinion and biopsy." She swiped her head. "Cancer gone. Same with their childhood friend with breast cancer. My cousin, Diana...cousin Betty's daughter, developed crocodile skin as a small kid. The doctors said it was worse than eczema and psoriasis. I can't recall the name of it, but there are still pictures of it. The doctors had no cure. Within a month, all of it was gone, and her skin was soft, even-hued, and beautiful ever since, thanks to Rose's potions."

"Potion?" The shit sounded off.

Ashira nodded. "Remember, we're from the *Nivleb* tribe... Cameroon. Natural healing remedies and ancient medicine

were passed to her and other relatives. She's the most knowledgeable one now." Taking a deep breath, she sighed, "Look... Juggy has been dealing with this for such a long time. Nobody's been able to diagnose him from urgent care facilities to the specialist you had him see. I heard Jos-Renee just now. If they're sending him home in that condition, it sounds to me like they're writing him off. What could it hurt to see what Rose could do?"

Rose was a nice lady who took care of everybody. She didn't bother me much but loved Chivon. From the moment my daughter was born, the woman interacted with her as though she'd been expecting her. And I remembered her talking about my sleepwalking issue. How did she even know? Ashira said she didn't mention it to her, and I believed that. Rose told me the first time I met her that they'd go away, and they did. I hadn't had an episode in over a year. She was right.

"You're quiet." Ashira's hand was on my knee.

"How am I gonna make this happen? All the way to *Della*?"

She looked down at her phone again. "I think she's expecting him."

"What?"

"Well, like sensing she's going to see me soon." She rolled her eyes while shaking her head. "Take him to her."

"I gotta get a crew for that. My contract with this one's over when we hit Teterboro."

"This is your jet, Jas. Then we'll find another crew. We have time to arrange it all. We still need to make it to Jersey, then go get Juggy."

My eyes squinted. "We? You coming with me?" my voice cracked.

Ashira bit her lip, eyes falling as she nodded. "Chi-Chi won't be happy, but yeah. I'd love to come."

"For me? Or for..."

Then she leaped over and kissed me.

“I’m like Cinderella, waiting on the clock to strike midnight. I’ll make every moment count.”



I scoffed, “Say word.”

“Word,” Sadik gave confidently. “Corny ass British accent and all.”

“Ain’t this some shit. Haris wants in on the supply chain industry?” It was the line of work Sadik centered his empire around. “I guess it would make sense for a man who doesn’t live in America to want to control goods coming in and out of the country.”

“Yeah. I’m sure the idiot thinks it’s that simple.”

I shook my head, pacing the hardwood floors. My skull was strained, neck and chest were tight.

I took a deep breath. “Everything’s simple for a desperate man.”

“What do you want me to do with this?”

I tried massaging my scalp. “Put him on ice.” I needed more time to figure out who, exactly, Haris Elba was and what he wanted from me. “I gotta figure out some things first.”

“Got you. Always.”

“Later.”

“Yo, Sin,” Man called as I grabbed my other phone from the table. He was on his laptop. “*The Banger* coming out of retirement for that young bitch. She vexed my girl!” He laughed. I leaned over his shoulder and read the headline saying Tori McNabb’s people officially scheduled a fight with Jenn ‘the Bull’ Davies. “All this ‘cause *The Banger* said she ain’t know shortie. Now, shortie ‘bout to get her ass ran through.”

“Damn.” That’s all I had. Tori McNabb had been retired for about five years. “I guess sometimes you gotta come out of

retirement to let ‘em know.”

My phone rang, upping my irritation even more. But this had been the case for the past three days down here in *Della*.

We flew Juggy down to Ashira’s family the same day we arrived from Europe. Jug could hardly walk into the house. It was painful having to damn near carry him into the room Rose had set up already. She went to work on him right away.

“Hello?” I rubbed the tension in the back of my head.

“Hey,” Josie responded oddly.

“Hey.”

“Any updates?”

I hated to tell her. “Nah. Not yet.”

“Are you sure she knows what she’s doing down there?”

“I really don’t know.” That was my honest answer.

I had to explain to Josie why I was only in Jersey for about three hours before flying back out on Thursday. Telling my man’s business wasn’t my thing, but shit had been so haywire with Josie knowing I’d fucked Ashira. I felt like I owed her honesty from here on out. How honest and how long I’d have to explain myself was what I didn’t know. I didn’t want to stop being friends with her, but didn’t want to marry her, either.

My feelings were all over the place. I wanted Ashira more than any other woman in the world, but her circle didn’t fit in my square. And I damn sure didn’t trust her enough to dead whatever I had going on with Josie. But I knew I couldn’t have both their bodies. I couldn’t do that to the mother of my child. Shit. I didn’t want that for myself. I wanted a permanent partner, and neither woman was a prospect.

Shit...

I pinched the bridge of my nose. There was tension there, too. When I opened my eyes, Ashira was in the doorway of the room they called the library. It was across from the room Jug was in, so I set up shop in there to work and take calls. She was expressionless, clean-faced, and with not-so-fresh

vacation braids. But she was beautiful. Even with exhaustion darkening the area around her eyes, I felt determination exuding from her.

“Is he, at least, doing better?” Josie asked, forcing me to turn away from Ashira’s deep gaze.

I rubbed my forehead, exhaling, “*Ummmm... Yeah. A bit.*”

Ashira was able to email Jug’s medical records to her cousin, Diana, who was able to share them with Rose to prepare her on our way down to South Carolina. The first day we were here, shit blew my mind, and I was sure Juggy’s, too. Rose and her crew had a room sterilized, then fumy from candles and mists. The concoction didn’t smell great, either. It was strong as hell and supposedly good for clearing the lungs. It damn sure opened mine up. Within an hour, they had cleaned Jug’s body from head to toe, some shit he was too weak to protest, and I didn’t even know because I was busy bringing our luggage in then getting Chivon settled.

When I made it back to Jug, Rose and six other women surrounded the hospital-like bed he lay in and were praying. It was weird because the only hint I had of them praying was hearing the names Jehovah and Rapha. Other than that, there were strange chanting and body jerks. Between the sight of my man being down—helpless—in the bed, the chanting, the mists shooting from different areas of the room, and the scent, I was stunned into place. Ashira and Betty pulled me out of the room.

“How?” Josie asked.

I blinked away spots from my eyes. “He’s not on the oxygen tank no more. She took him off that the second day, saying his lungs could receive enough oxygen on their own. Still weak. Sleeping a lot, but that’s what she wants him to do. She said something about his body working internally to fight off some infections.”

“Is that what his diagnosis is?” She asked excitedly. “This all started from an infection?”

“I really don’t know.”

Rose hadn't said, but I didn't expect a medical review from her. She was no doctor. But this morning, his skin color had returned to normal.

"This is all so weird. I've never heard of getting medical care from a non-medical professional."

"Neither have I," I admitted, raw, vulnerable.

"And you still don't know when you're coming home?"

"I can't leave him down here. He ain't even awake, Josie."

"Okay. I got it." She exhaled. "I got it. I'll keep praying. I hate the way you sound." For a minute, neither one of us said anything. What else could I say? *My fucking man is down, fucking dying, and I got people doing fucking ancient practices of medicine on him!* "Call me the moment there's an update. I'll keep my phone on vibrate in church tomorrow."

"You got it," my delivery spiritless.

"Hey, one last thing," Josie's words were rushed.

My eyes closed, knowing what was coming. "Yeah."

"Is... Shi-Shi..." She sighed. "Are you two staying apart?"

I pivoted from the corner of the room, finding Ashira in the same place I'd seen her last. She stood against the doorway in biker shorts and a sports bra, body curved and athletic at the same damn time. Shortie had no shame in staring me dead in the face.

I rubbed my achy chest. "Under two different roofs...every night."

It was true. Ashira and Chivon stayed here in the main house while I'd been in one of the cabins. Ashira had been around the house, helping with food, trying to keep up with Chivon, and even praying at Jug's feet from time to time. It had been nothing like our time together in Europe. What was magical had been sideswiped by travesty.

Man flew in yesterday, cutting his time with his family in *Disney* short to be by Jug's side. Ashira's family gave him a cabin, too. These past three days had been a whirl. With all of

that going on, Chivon had been the only one unaffected. My baby had no clue of what was at stake in this visit to her family. For her, it was the usual trip to *Della*, where she could see her favorite cousins and run the property to her heart's desire.

“Good. Please keep it that way,” Josie requested.

“Yeah.” I rubbed my face again, too tired for this dance. “I’ll hit you later.”

“Okay. Good night.”

I made sure to disconnect the call. Fool me once. I still had no clue what Josie heard that night on the *FaceTime* call. We hadn’t had the time to discuss it. Even the thought of that had my skull tightening.

“Yo, I need to kick it with you about the label mockup for the new blend,” Man announced; off his social media break, I realized.

Château Blevin. After settling the agreement of his ownership of *Club Sin*, I was also able to get him a role at the winery estate. We were small but lucrative at this stage, and I could use the help when I’d begun expanding *Prism Built Homes*. Man quickly agreed, and now we were preparing to roll out a new white blend. Man had been working with the graphic designer on the label design. He had no actual experience; neither had I when I invested. But Man had been educating himself on the wine business to understand standards.

Before I could make it to his opened laptop, Ashira cut across to me, taking me at the arm. “Not right now, Man. Sorry, but Mr. Sinclair will be off the clock for a short reprieve.” She didn’t give me time to collect my shit. I didn’t know where we were going or how long we’d be there.

On the way to the front of the house, her cousin, Charles, stepped into the hall. “Say there, Jas. You want the brisket or the beef ribs? I’m ‘bout to go to slaughter now. You can pick the ox now if it pleases ya.”

“He’ll eat whatever you slay, Cousin Charles,” Ashira’s tone was irritated, not even stopping to answer. “Brisket or ribs, he’ll be fine.”

I tried offering him an expression of apology behind Ashira’s strong grip on my hand. Charles turned and walked off without a reply.

When we stepped outside, Chivon and the kids were playing loudly on the big ass porch. One of Ashira’s cousins was supervising them.

“Daddy, where you going?” Chivon asked.

“Gotta talk to Mommy, Blueberry.”

“Where? Mommy where you take Daddy?” Ashira didn’t slow in her stride. “Mommy, I come!”

That’s when Ashira stopped and turned toward Chivon. “Chi-Chi, you are here with your cousins. Daddy will be back soon. Go play or go take a nap. Daddy will be with Mommy. No Chi-Chi,” she made it clear in my baby’s language. “Do you understand?”

I wasn’t used to Ashira taking that tone with Chivon. She left no room for our daughter to argue. Like me, Ashira must have been tired and had no fuel to deal with Chivon’s possessive nature.

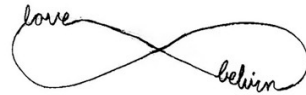
Chivon dropped her shoulders, closed her eyes dramatically, and returned to the porch. Ashira pulled me behind her, continuing our journey, and within seconds, I heard Chivon’s happy shrieks and squeals. Her disappointment had been forgotten about that quickly.

It took time to figure out we were headed to my cabin. If Ashira thought she could finesse a nap out of me the way she could Chivon, she had another thing coming. If I could sleep, I would. I had so much shit on my plate, coming off a two-and-a-half-week vacation to having Jug’s health decline the way it did. The amount of calls and meetings I had to reschedule and even do from this remote location without my tools tightened my skull again as I followed her up the steps to the door.

Shit...

It was dark inside. Pitch black except for the glow of the candles. There were like eight of them all around, and whispering between the walls were jazz tunes.

Ashira closed the door behind me, and I could hear the locks being engaged. “Time for reprieve.”



Fuck...

I grabbed the fat of her ass cheeks, loving the feel of her muscles as she squeezed and rocked over my cock. Ashira didn't leave space for anything: my thoughts or air to breathe. She clutched me to her chest, nails clasped around my back and shoulder. Her tits bounced in my face, and her scent, from her pussy to the oil from her braids, all enclosed me. I was in a web of her femininity as she rode me so fucking good.

The bed rocked hard against the wall. Her ass smacking against my engorged balls killed the music. I was out of breath and sweating all over as she massaged me to the damn root of my dick. When I felt the pads of my feet heating, I knew it would be a matter of time before I tapped out.

“I'm about to...” I fucking panted. “...to go.”

Ashira kissed my wet forehead and breathed over my head with a change in pace, “Let me get one more.”

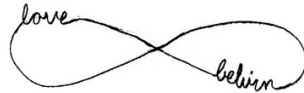
“*Ashi*—” She lifted her chest, angling her nipple into my mouth.

So fucking delirious I didn't argue. I sucked on it, licking the tip while gripping her ass. The feel of her hips rolling against my arm always got me with Ashira. I fucking loved how long and flexible she was. The way she was fit but femininely concentrated in each inch of her body. She was perfection. A class act I could never imagine having this proximity to. This girl—woman—I had been out of this world for since the first day I laid eyes on her, and here she was, covering me, literally and figuratively.

I grabbed her head, bringing her ear to my mouth. “I need you.”

Ashira’s ass rolled harder, spine wobbled. Then her head shot up, mouth stretched wide, and eyes squeezed closed. “I’m here for—*ever!*” she panted. “I promissse.”

Ashira was blasting off, and I was coming right behind her.



“I have to go home,” she whispered across my stomach.

The cabin was still dark and quiet except for the motor from the A.C. unit.

I played with the ends of her braids. “When?”

“Tomorrow. Chi-Chi and I will fly out.”

“*Wai—huhn?*” That was the last thing I was expecting.

She nodded calmly. “I need to get groomed...take these nasty braids out, get my feet and nails done...get waxed. I need to get your daughter home and back on a schedule. She’ll be starting preschool in two months.” Ashira sighed. “I need to get back to Noelle. I’ve been negligent, and my sister needs me now more than ever.”

Ashira was serious.

“You called for the jet?” She didn’t run it past me, not that she had to.

“No. We’ll fly commercial.”

“And leave me?” I sounded pathetic, but I was down, man. Real bad.

My nigga may be dying. This can’t be my life...

“You need to be here for Juggy.” Her head shifted up, chin now planted into my abs. “He’s going to go crazy when he fully comes through.”

“He’s gonna cuss my ass out if he comes through.”

“*When* he comes through,” she chastised me. “Aunt Rose knows what she’s doing. Plus, she’s been in her meditation room a lot. We think it means she’s working overtime, talking to the ancestors in their corner of her bedroom.”

“I ‘on’t even know what that mean,” I groaned, covering my face with my hand.

“It means you’ve gotta have faith. Juggy’s going to be just fine. Give it a few more days. If Aunt Rose doesn’t feel she can help, she’ll tell you.”

“You’ve seen her do that shit before?”

“Only for a racist police officer from a town over. Everybody knows about our family...about Rose. He came with an infection in his mouth that spread fast and was deadly. Rose told him at the main house’s door there was nothing she could do for him.”

“That’s the example you got?” I scoffed. “A racist cop she turned away?”

Ashira shrugged with a gorgeous and exhausted smile. “Yup. Because she’s never failed a patient yet. I think she sensed something was off. Like something would bring me down here.”

“How?”

“Because of a text she had Betty send me about picking up oils from her.”

“What oils?”

“Something I’ve never picked up unless I was in town. She had Betty deliver the message as though Rose and I had spoken previously about it—or as though I lived around the corner. She was expecting me. While we were on the jet on Thursday and you got the call about Juggy from Jos-Renee, Betty texted me again. She wanted to know if I’d gotten the first message. Rose had her text me again.” Her eyes narrowed. “And what’s funny is Rose hasn’t said much of anything to me over these past three days.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah. She may not have known anything about Juggy, but she ‘saw’ me here, which is why I have faith. Juggy’s going to be fine. And you...” She poked my belly with the tips of her coffin-shaped nails. “...need time away from me.”

“From you?” That was the last thing I needed. “Of course, you would say that right after fucking the life out of me.”

Her body trembled from a silent chuckle. “That’s exactly why you need your space from me. All I want to do is jump your bones.”

“I ain’t protesting.” My dick twitched as a I rubbed her head so close to it.

“Yeah, but we’ve caused a mess with Josie because of my bone-jumping predilection.” Her head rocked left to right. “That’s not your character. You’ve never been a two-timer. You have your vision for your lifestyle, and I don’t want to derail you any further.”

“You saying I should be with Josie?”

“No.” She lifted from my stomach, eyes falling as she scoffed, “Hell no. That’s not something I’m advocating for. What I’m saying is I’m going to give you room to decide. You and I have an unfair advantage over Josie. We’re complicated and clearly tied together forever. You deserve the time and space to decide what’s best for Ojasvi Lamont Sinclair.”

“And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“Where do you fit in while I figure it all out?”

“I’ll be here.” She stared dead into my eyes. “I’ve got a lot of baggage needing sorting through. I’ll be right here doing that. There’s my father.” She rolled her eyes. “He’s been calling for Chi-Chi and me since Thursday. I guess he was allowing us our family time. I can tell there’s something amiss with him and my mother.” She smiled sadly. “See? My cluttered baggage. I’ll be busy, but you’ll find me here *if* you need me.” She winked, patting my chest over my heart. “I promise.”

There was comfort and sadness in that assessment, but all I could do was take her at her word.

Chapter Twenty-One

Part III

July | Three Years Later

ashira

I nside my walk-in closet, I tossed another bathing suit into a pile of colored clothes.

“Oh!” Peach, sitting on the floor, leaning into the doorway, chirped. “You did buy that one from *Bloomy’s*!”

I turned to look at the metallic rust bikini. “Yup.” Then I continued cleaning out my suitcase. “Fits nice, too.”

“I bet. I ordered the eggplant one but have yet to wear it.” She rolled her eyes back down to her cell.

“Ooooooh! Chi-Chi, you’re so pretty!” Corinne cried, stretched out on my bed.

“Is it the one of her eating pasta?” Becky asked on the floor next to my bed.

“No. The one in the garden where she’s posing.”

The day after leaving *Della*, I’d finally reunited with my girls. Everyone except Shizu, who was in Belize with David,

gathered at my place to welcome Chi-Chi and I back home. I'd just texted them a link to *Shutterfly*, where all my vacation pictures were stored. They were swiping on their individual phones at their own pace while I finally unpacked, a task I had been dreading.

"Oh, that was in Saint-Tropez," I explained from the closet. "That place is heaven. Completely."

"Shizu's been. She loved it," Becky shared.

"We should all *go*—oh my god, Chi-Chi!" Corinne cried again. "This pose with you blowing a kiss. You are so cute!"

Chi-Chi, feet away from me, playing in my jewelry dresser, turned and shared, "I the prettiest gorl!" her voice projected. That little face was gravely sober when she explained, "My daddy said that. My daddy said that." Her little head swung up and down with emphasis.

Peach's eyes shifted my way, filled with wonder and pride. I snorted, going back to work. Then I nodded with my back to her. "Daddy's got that right, Chi-Chi."

"You sure are, baby!" Corinne shouted from the bed. "The prettiest!"

I chanced another glance at a knowing Peach because I knew what was coming; it was just a matter of a swipe.

"Chi-Chi," I could hear Ines from out in the bedroom but couldn't see her. "Dinner's ready. Come wash your hands and eat."

"Okay!" Chi-Chi dropped my *Tiffany* gold ball necklace into the drawer of the jewelry dresser. She placed the *Rolex* watch on the correct shelf, too, before taking off. "Coming!" She hopped her way out into the bedroom.

A sharp, "Holy shit!" cracked the air.

"Becky!" Corinne quickly admonished her.

Peach went next. "Becky!"

I closed my eyes tight, anxiety gripping me.

“Could you let the baby leave the room, Becky?” Ines’ voice faded, and I assumed she was leaving my bedroom while speaking.

“Holy moly!” Peach’s eyes grew wild, gazing at her phone with one fist in the air. “I knew it!”

“What the fuck!” Corinne had finally gotten to the collection of pictures in the electronic album.

I’d taken pictures of Jas, half-clothed, without his permission but with his knowledge as he kissed and groped me. There were some of him sleeping on my ass, one with his tongue at the line of my cheeks, and others of his head on my lap. I showed them to him later, only for Jas to shake his head adorably annoyed by my juvenile sentimentality. The one I took of him, crawling up my legs, preparing to devour me, made me wet on sight. I wondered if that was the one that had the girls in an uproar.

“See what I mean now?” Becky argued. “Damn, Jas!”

“Lucy!” Corinne screamed. I then heard creaking from my bed, then her footsteps. “You got some ‘splainin’ to do, bitch!” Her smile could be valued at a million dollars—it was so big.

At the same time, Becky almost tripped over Peach’s feet, getting into the closet. “That damn body of his, Shi-Shi!” she cried, then bit her fist.

On my knees already, I curled over embarrassed, feeling butterflies. Fucking butterflies at the memory of being with him. I missed him. Jas was still in *Della* with Juggy. We’d spoken twice yesterday and once today. Each time I wanted to crawl through the phone and straddle his lap—for simple comfort and erotica. But I’d been holding strong restraining from overwhelming him with this thing we’d unearthed in Europe.

“Oh, no!” Peach banged the carpeted floor with the side of her fist. “Let’s hear it!”

“Y’all fucked?” Corinne asked in a whisper.

I straightened, finally with the guts to face my friends. Nodding, I told them, “A lot.”

They squealed, laughed, and even Corinne did a quick bop, pushing her tongue while doing it.

“It’s been... What?” Becky thought. “A few months. Right?”

“Try a year.”

“Y’all ain’t fuck in a whole year?” Corinne asked incredulously.

“I haven’t had a bone in a whole year,” I qualified.

“Shit.” Becky’s expression turned crestfallen. “Jas is boning that Josie girl?”

“Yup.” I popped my lips, going back to the suitcase.

“And sharing that yoddy with you?” Corinne asked.

“Apparently,” I answered with my back to them, hating complicated shit.

“Are you okay with him double-dipping?”

“Nope.” I popped my lips again, clear on my answer.

“Shiiiiit. I hope lil’ Miss Josie don’t find out.” Corinne rolled her eyes. “I don’t wanna have to whoop her ass if she pops off.”

A helpless smile widened my face. “She knows.”

“What?” Peach was the loudest.

I nodded. “The first time we did it, he’d just gotten off a *FaceTime* call with her. He thought they’d disconnected when he came over to me on the deck...on the yacht.”

“Holy christ!” Becky whispered.

I nodded again, not feeling an ounce of shame, but hated it for Josie. I’d been cheated on before: it sucks ass.

“Were you loud?” Peach looked horrified. “Like, do you get loud during sex?”

“I really don’t know what she heard. He gave me the news two days later. All I can think of was how passionate we were.” Those damn butterflies took flight in my belly again at

the memory. “He hadn’t touched me in a year. I’ve always been attracted to Jas, especially sexually. I wanted him from the start of the trip—not *him*, but his dick...and mouth and hands.” I shrugged and rolled my eyes at myself as they laughed. “Bottom line is momma was prepped and ready that night. And when he touched *me*...” I shrieked, fist balled in the air, and I squeezed my eyes and mouth close.

“Damn!” Corinne yelped from the bottom of her belly.

“So, what’re you gonna do, girl?” Becky asked.

I dropped the clothes I’d just picked up. Sighing, I turned to my captivated girls. “Wait.”

“Wait on what?” Peach was confused.

“Wait on him to choose me.”

“What that mean?” Corinne attempted comedy, but I knew she was serious.

I shook my head, trying to gather my words. “I fell in love with him all over again out there. We fought a lot. Got some shit out. Not all of it is settled but those things that caused me to resent him in the first place...” My head still swung left to right. “When we confronted them and broke that shit down...” My shoulders lifted. “...they didn’t seem as potent as they once felt.”

“Like what?” Becky wanted to know.

“Like him taking my father’s firm.”

“Shit. Y’all went there?” Corinne asked painfully.

I nodded. “Yup. I couldn’t shake that shit. I understood the play as a businesswoman, but chewed on him never seeming remorseful for it so bad it numbed me. However, when we talked about it, he gave his side of the story—even told me how he offered the rights back to my father, who refused them.”

“Nooooo!” Peach was as stunned as I was.

“Yup. Just stuff like that,” I explained. “Now, I will say that shit with his name—me not knowing it all that time—still

stings, and I think it's because he told it to Josie off the rip. Like... She knew about his home...his money right away. Whereas my dumb, horny ass had to damn near fuck him in the projects, being tested or...gamed."

"Well, come on," Peach advised. "Let's not act like you were a run-of-the-mill notch on his belt. This is Jas we're talking about. The man who's always honored you, even in parenting."

"That's true, Shi," Becky inserted with a nod. "Crazy ass violent tendencies and all."

"Yeah, the road has been bumpy, but Jas has been consistent in good character," Peach declared with confidence. "I mean, it was a little awkward to see him smitten by Josie that day back in February."

"What happened in February?" Becky wanted to know.

"I didn't tell you?" Peach asked. "I was at *Redeeming Souls*, the church Jas is affiliated with. I ran into him, apparently, the day and the event when the first lady was hooking Jas up with the Josie girl."

Becky gasped. "Get the fuck outta here!"

Peach nodded, and my blood turned acidic. I'd pieced that intel together at Jas' birthday party a few months ago, but was so damn high, I was numb when I was learning about them. Remembering my state of mind that day—these past few months—instantly made me sad. I had so much emotional work to do to repair my heart fully. I had relationships to mend, too, which included my daughter and my sister.

"Well, damn when you put it that way, Peach," was Corinne's response.

"But it's all good," Peach argued, shaking her phone in the air. "This has been a much-needed and anticipated turning of the corner. The dawn of a new season."

"Whatchu see, Peach?" Corinne's face wrinkled.

Peach winked at me. "I woke up to Psalms eighty-six in my spirit last week. I see an undivided heart."

“Awwwww!” Becky cooed as I turned back to my task at hand.

Then, from my suitcase, I pulled out a stark white men’s t-shirt. Slowly, I unraveled it until I saw the X-Large mark on the tag. I pulled it to my nose for a long sniff. My eyes closed with confirmation. Jas. His t-shirt had somehow gotten into my suitcase. Fully opening the cotton material, a hard yellowish stain tarnished its perfect coloring.

“Is that?” My head jerked up to find Becky’s eyes squinting.

“Dried up cum!” Corinne yelped as those damn butterflies erupted in my belly again. *Please stop...* “Oh, my fucking god! Just how much pelvis smacking did y’all do out there?”

Peach and Becky found that hilarious. I thought it was funny, too, but slightly embarrassing as well. Achy, too. For as much as this thing with Jas felt good, it was a lot on my heart. I felt so tender...vulnerable. Jas’ desires had been expressed and well-documented. He wanted marriage, and I just wanted...him. Marriage to me felt like a grandiose concept, a steep, intimidating mountain that would always be there to climb. It wasn’t going anywhere. So why rush to it?

Convincing Jas of that would be just as impossible as trying to move the damn mountain.



“Shit. It’s hot as fuck out this bitch,” he griped, small branches breaking beneath his feet. “My damn balls drippin’ and shit!”

Walking alongside him, I pushed the wheelchair Betty begged me to take in case he grew tired. Rose, back at the main house, guaranteed he could walk at least a mile today. She wanted him out of bed and the house to “wake his muscles up again.”

“And I’m suing the fuck outta that hospital, man. Bitches,” he mumbled. “I mean... How the fuck they gon’ discharge me with a fuckin’ collapsed lung? Yeah, I get what Ms. Rose and them said about the type I had, but fuck. A collapsed lung, my nigga?” he wheezed that last line.

I stopped. “We hit half a mile. You need to sit?”

Jug’s arm swung when he answered, “Fuck naw!” I tried not to laugh. “I mean, I ain’t a hun’ned percent yet. Still feel a little aches and pains, but...” He grabbed his chest. “...my shit feel lighter. Sound weird as fuck, but on this side, it feel light again.” Jug waved his hand. “I know it ‘on’t make no sense,” he mumbled. “Just like it ‘on’t make no sense that you brought my dead ass down here. You couldn’t take me to *General Hospital*—” I cracked the hell up. “—or, or, or the one on *Grey’s Anatomy*—shit, you coulda dropped my dying ass off at *Arch&Point* up in Connecticut! Wet-Wet woulda worked on me!”

By now, I was curled over the empty wheelchair losing my shit. Jug was funny as hell.

“Shit...” He huffed then coughed a little.

“I told Ashira you was gonna have my ass about this.”

“Yeah, and ‘bout that...” He pointed toward the house. “... what the fuck is that Little House on the fuckin’ Prairie shit back there?” He looked around. “I ain’t never see no shit like this before. These little cottages...this fuckin’ village with the big ass plantation house sitting up fuckin’ tall and proud!”

I couldn’t stop laughing, which was why he kept going.

“Nah,” he eventually sighed, bringing his fists up to his small waist. The guy had lost so much weight over the past few weeks. Jug was not this small before I left for vacation. “These peoples alright with me. They do that loud ass praying

and Indian chantin' shit, but they saved a nigga's life real bad!"

"True that." I nodded. "But the *Nivleb* tribe family's tight as shit. They come through in a clutch."

Jug offered me dap. "A fuckin' clutch, ock. I 'on't know what Ms. Rose be giving me, but I be drinking, sniffing, and letting them rub whatever stinky shit she want. Plus, the food is a'ight!"

"Damn sure is. I found that out my first time here."

Crackling sounds caught our attention. It was soon clear they were from heavy footsteps. Man was jogging our way.

"Yurp!" he called on the way.

"This muthafucka..." Jug wheezed then had another light cough. "Wanna be a country nigga already, joggin' in the woods with his flip flops on."

"Fuck you," was the first thing Man delivered when he made it to us. Then he turned to me. "You were right, my G. That Haris dude connected to the Bartnickis."

"What?" Jug asked.

I knew it...

"Sin told me to look into Haris knowing the Bartnickis after we found out one of the niggas who tried to rob *Club Sin* four years ago was connected to Haris."

Jug looked to me for an explanation. "I thought hard and mad long on it over the past few days." It's what insomnia would do to you. "Ain't no way this British dude pick me out of a lineup."

"So, I went down the Bartnicki kid's *Instagram* page." He tapped me on the arm. "The family shut down his *Facebook* account, but ain't touch *IG*. That shit still up and with mad pics. Down, almost at the bottom where he started the account, is a pic of him and Haris posted up in front of a *Ferrari*. Then there was another with the two of them and some other niggas. The clown ass Bartnicki kid put in the caption some shit about, 'my family said I was wildin' out in Jerze too much, fuckin' "

too many bitches. So they sent me to London, where I got even more bitches.’ The nigga was wildin’ out there.”

“And right next to Haris’ dumb ass,” I confirmed.

Man shook his head.

“And remember, that’s why Paulie wanted his ass gone.” Jug rubbed his chest. “Remember, he like...raped his daughter or some shit?”

“His daughter and her friends, or some shit like that.” My memory began to warm up.

Eighteen-year-old me took the job for the money, but now as a grown-as man, I felt some relief knowing it was vindication for a piece of shit, rich brat.

“So, what we gon’ do with this funny talkin’ nigga?” Jug asked.

I shook my head. “Shit.”

“Nothing?” Jug’s big ass eyes almost popped out of their sockets.

Man just watched and listened.

I took a seat in the empty wheelchair. “Nah. We fucked up the niggas he used for the botched robbery and rundown of the club. That sent a message. He tried coming for Ashira, and, eventually, tried to approach me directly, albeit under the guise of business. I’ll wait on his next move.” And see if Ashira had been straight up with me about not having any dealings with ol’ boy.

“I ‘on’t know.” Jug shook his head. “I think he need one in the middle of his forehead.”

Man’s eyes bounced down to me for my take.

“Nah, man. We got way too much going on.” I glanced up at Jug. “We got you back. Now, you need to get back to one hun’ned percent. I ‘on’t even remember you not having breathing issues no more at this point.”

“Yeah, but I feel it. Whatever Ms. Rose is giving me is working.”

Man faked a jab on him. “Yeah, nigga. Let’s see if ya dying ass make it to the McNabb-Davies fight. We copped half a row of tickets. Third row.”

Those droopy eyes flashed again. “Y’all copped the tickets already?”

“Yeah.”

“Damn! How long was my ass out?”

“Almost a whole ass week,” Man answered. “Got my ass down here getting fat and shit. The food, man!” He whistled.

“I know. I can’t put much down yet, but I do what I can from them big ass butcher boards!” Jug rubbed his stomach.

“Charcuterie board, man!” I shook my head.

Man howled.

“I ‘on’t know what that is or how to pronounce that shit,” Jug explained. “I just know I be feeling like a fuckin’ kang when they come in my room carrying that shit!”

Man slapped hands with him in agreement. It was all good. The family was special. Ultra-spiritual, but not religious by no stretch. In that respect, the *Nivleb* tribe was my kind of people. They treated me like a king, never flinching at my past, and unimpressed with my money. The people just cared about me, even aside from their blood, Ashira.

“Anyway. I got some shit I need to get back to.” *A five-foot, eight inch, D-cupper.* “It’s time for us to get outta dodge, man.”

“When we leaving?” Jug asked.

“Man and I are pulling out tomorrow. Ya ass’ll be here till Rose say you can go.”

For a moment, Jug didn’t say anything. He rubbed his chest as his eyes swept low. “Damn. I guess I’ll be good. I got my crossword puzzles, but you gotta leave me some heat down here. These niggas strapped around this bitch. If they all strapped and it ain’t nothing but family on this big ass land, what you think I need in case they flip on me?”

I shook my head, knowing he was half joking. “You can have whatever you need to be comfortable. Just hang tight.”

“Yeah. I’mma be a’ight. That sexy ass, cousin, Diana, be around here with them low-hanging titties. I’mma get me some of that before I leave. Word up.” Jug smiled.

“C’mon, man.” Man wiped the sweat from his forehead. “It’s hot as shit out this muthafucka.”

I got behind the wheelchair and began pushing it toward the house.

“I ‘preciate y’all holdin’ it down for ol’ Jug, man,” Jug expressed before another soft cough. He cleared his throat. “I know ya ass ready to get back to my lil’ bossy ass Chi-Chi.”

“Which one?” I asked.

We all laughed at that one.



ashira

“Mommy, I want more bread!” Chi-Chi whined next to me at the table.

Her volume was so high, I automatically glanced around the restaurant to see if anyone was alarmed.

“Shhhhhh...” I hushed her before breaking off a piece of Italian bread. She readily dipped it into the flavored olive oil, just as she was taught to do a few weeks ago in Italy. We were dining at *DiFillippo’s* tonight with my father and Noelle. It seemed like forever since the four of us had been together alone.

Resuming our conversation, my father finally replied to my proposal. “Noelle coming to live with you.” He tried it out for size, it seemed.

“Mmmhmmm,” I hummed, chewing my food.

“Permanently.”

“Yup.”

Noelle wouldn't look up from her plate, likely afraid of the topic with our father. She and I had talked about it a few days ago after a night of bowling when I broached the idea to her. I wasn't surprised when she said yes, but was taken aback by the lackluster of her reaction. That had been my younger sister for some time with me. But what did shock me was her text to me less than twenty minutes after I'd dropped her off at home. She sent me a list of demands for the décor of her bedroom, from the paint color to the scent of the candles she “required.” I didn't flinch; it was a mark of her excitement, something I really needed.

“Why do you feel such an arrangement is necessary, dear?” He cut into a braised lamb chop.

Noelle's lashes batted as she kept her face toward her plate.

“That's easy.” I sat back, wiping my mouth. “Because she's my sister, and she needs me. Brenda's working two jobs and trying to raise her own children. Noelle needs direct attention.”

“And you think you can do that with your work schedule?”

I wanted to remind my father how he led a life of leisure with all the time in the world on his hands, howbeit she did not live with him.

But instead, I remained diplomatic. “I do. Because of my travel, my time with family is limited. Now, with Chi-Chi being here, she's been my priority when coming home. Having Noelle with me, in my home, with Chi-Chi, I can divide my time a lot easier and with equity when I'm home.”

He remained calm, moving slowly about his plate. “But you’re gone sometimes for months at a time. Wouldn’t that mean Ines being the primary caregiver?”

I cleared my throat. “I’ve spoken with Ines about this.” My nod was slow as I explained, “She thinks it’s a great idea. She’s known Noelle since she was a grasshopper. We both think we’d make a great blended family.”

He placed his utensils down and took in a deep, audible breath. Then he hiked his chin over his meaty knuckles while peering me in the eyes. “I’m not sure how your mother will feel about that, honey.”

Stunned, I struggled for a rebound. Then, eventually gathering my bearings and smiling, I reminded him, “I’m not sure what business, if any, this is of hers.”

“Mommy, more!” Chi-Chi tapped my arm, her volume lower this time.

My father beamed at her while I ripped off another piece of bread.

“Celestine may be back permanently—I hope permanently.” He chuckled to himself, and I caught a glimpse of his enduring love and desire for her. I could see how this news tickled his senses. And those damn butterflies erupted in my belly, but not for my parents. It was because I now understood the special weakness a man could have for a woman. “*Eh*—I just want to be sure she’s comfortable with the situation.”

My face hardened. “Why?”

“Because...” He gestured with his hand toward Chi-Chi. “...she’s her only grandchild. Celestine adores her company. I wouldn’t want to isolate her by creating a scenario in which she doesn’t feel comfortable visiting her granddaughter’s home.”

I was stunned. Absolutely *stunned*. Noelle’s head hadn’t come up from her plate, and it wasn’t for loving the food. She had to feel incredibly sad.

“Hey, there! I thought that was my niecey-poooh.” I turned to my right and glanced up to find Lex Carmichael beaming brightly. She looked good and worldly feminine in a sleeveless floral maxi dress with a tease of her cleavage. Her wild mane was pulled back from her face, the top portion in a ponytail.

“Hi,” Chi-Chi performed shyly, something she was known to do.

I only gave Lex a simple “Hey,” then glanced around her, past the other patrons, and saw Ezra at the other side of the room with the host, likely being escorted to a different dining room. Their beautiful girls were with him, all waving sweetly.

“I’m going to get my ‘W’ next time!” my father shouted across the room, laughing.

I knew he was referring to their chess game played at Chi-Chi’s party back in March. My dad loved the game.

“You got it!” Ezra rasped back with a stunning smile.

“Chi-Chi! Chi-Chi!” one of the girls called. “Come with us!”

When my attention rolled back up to Lex, her smile wasn’t as bright. “Is it okay if she comes to sit with us for a few minutes? Her auntie misses that cupcake face.” She smiled at a giggly Chi-Chi.

“She’s already eating with her aunt,” I informed her.

Lex stood straight, face drained of merriment. “Does that mean we’re not her family, Shi-Shi?”

The entire table froze. The glacial tension was now established.

My eyes burst wide. “Family? Oh.” I paid a glance to a clueless Chi-Chi. “Is that what we are, or just the parishioners of your church you try to hook up with a certain person in Chi-Chi’s family?” My lashes clapped with emphasis. “All families matter, Lex. Even those struggling to find their way.”

Her head whipped, eyes narrowed. “You mind if we speak in private, Shi-Shi?”

“Actually, that’s not a good idea right now. I’m in a heavy conversation with my *family*. Kiss the princesses for me, though.”

Her neck rolled, and Lex blinked deeply before twisting her lips and walking away. “Good night, everyone.”

“Goodbye.” I turned my attention away from her energy. “You want more water,” I asked Chi-Chi who shook her head.

“That was rude. Isn’t she the first lady of that mega church?” my father inquired.

I shrugged. “She’s a woman from Harlem. Humanly flawed just like me...and you,” I explained. Noelle was all wide eyes and a collapsed jaw. “But back to the subject at hand, I know you’re the only person who can make this happen as her legal guardian.”

“As a father, Shi-Shi...” he exhaled, frustrated by the conversation. “As the man of this family, I have to do what’s best for everyone.”

Swallowing the last of my pasta, my head fell to the side. “You know what I think is best for everyone?” I wiped the sides of my mouth. “I think family is best for everyone. I think starting today, I’m only putting my time and effort into people who are village-minded. People who want to unite the family and not divide us. My mother has been back in the States for months and has yet to visit me. To see about me. Now, I have no problem with her spending time with my daughter, but if that privilege has to be removed to protect the integrity of my sister, I will do whatever’s needed to preserve the sanctity of this family.” Grabbing my glass of wine from the table, I warned, “Choose ye *this* day, Noel, because I already have.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Part III

July | Three Years Later



“So, of course, this means our sexual affairs will be suspended,” Josie explained. “I’ve been in the high-risk adult world. I’m not returning at this age.”

I nodded, feeling her. Tonight was my first time seeing her face-to-face since I left for Europe. The meeting was long overdue, considering my blunder with Ashira that...I didn’t feel any regret for, even now that I was in her presence.

“I respect that.” My attention went toward the window, watching people pass by the tea shop in Harlem. I pushed the handle to the tea mug back and forth, killing awkward energy.

Josie’s body language felt guarded. Her elbows were over the table, hands clasped together, and shoulders high. Anxiety was all in her eyes and breaths, too. I believed she was trying to keep it cool because I’d been humble about the whole situation. I didn’t give her the energy of a sloppy man because I wasn’t. I’d slipped up. I decided things were done with

Ashira and me, perhaps too prematurely. Josie didn't deserve my miscalculations.

"I mean..." She licked her deep red lips. "What is she saying? Is this the type of thing you two do occasionally? Is Shi-Shi in a relationship? Is this what happens when you two go away as a family? If so, maybe you shouldn't do it alone."

I reached across the table for her hand and covered it. "Can I be real?"

She sucked her teeth. "I hope you would."

"I'm not a perfect man. Not by any stretch. Trust me, Jesus would be personal friends of ours if we lived in His day." I wouldn't emphasize how I was the murderer, but Josie understood her past as an escort. "But with relationships? That ain't my wheelhouse." I chuckled to myself. "I ain't got a lot of experience with women. Most of it comes from Ashira. Our situation is complicated—"

"You keep saying that, but from what I heard on that call, sex comes easy."

"What exactly did you hear?"

"I'm not going there." She grunted but supplied, "I heard air, sucking and moaning. I heard a vibrator. I heard her call out your name in ecstasy several times. I heard sex, Jas."

Nodding again, I twisted my lips, processing it all. "Again, I'm sorry about that. I really am."

"Are you, though?" She laughed. "I've been trying to read you...pick up on where you really are with me...with Shi-Shi."

I massaged her hand, trying to calm her. "I can be real with you and say I really like you, Josie. I really do. You're smart, funny, hella patient, and gorgeous. I like your grind and humility. I've been having a good time with you."

"Enough to sleep with your baby's mother?"

"Enough to forget about my craziness with Ashira. You've done that this year. When we kick it, I'm here with you. Like now."

I had her meet me at Frankie's tea shop for privacy. The topic was delicate, and I didn't want an audience. I owed Josie my undivided attention. In the haze of my indecision, I wanted her to feel respected and heard.

"And what am I to you? I know we've been dating and we...crossed the line a few times with sex, but I need to know your end game with me, and you've never said. Am I your girlfriend, your homie...lover...friend?" Her neck extended with that question.

"You're a cool ass friend, Josie, and that's all I need right now. I need a good friend."

"And Shi-Shi?"

She's a problem...

I shook my head. "I 'on't know. Ashira and I could never align with what we want out of life."

"So, you two aren't getting back together? That's not the goal since your family vacation?"

I shook my head again. "Nah."

"Then what?"

"I really don't know what. We're definitely committed to getting along and letting the old resentment and bitterness go. But as for us, this ain't no romance novel situation. And to be real, I ain't looking for love. At this point in my life, I'm just looking for understanding."

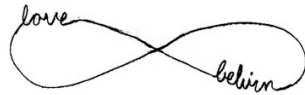
"Like that old group, Xscape?"

I laughed at that. Josie, too. "Yeah. That shit."

She rolled her eyes. "Your mouth is not befitting of a saved man on fire for the Lord."

I snorted, "Where's that understanding?"

When Josie's head rolled back and she laughed, I was grateful to have successfully lowered her guard. What I would do next to clean this shit up and make my wrongs right, I had no damn clue.



ashira

The door of the bathroom creaked open. My eyes closed, and I sank deeper into the bubbly water.

Ugh! No bad dreams tonight, Chi-Chi...

When I heard heavy treading against the stone flooring, my lids flew open wide.

Jas sauntered in, wearing a collared shirt rolled up at his sleeves with the first two buttons undone, trousers, and black dress socks. His height was extreme from my vantage point, scowl was intimidatingly handsome. I could still wax poetic about those incredibly thick brows, round, smooth lips with a slightly pronounced cupid's bow, and low, manicured beard.

"Chi-Chi's out." I swallowed involuntarily, then grabbed my wine from the lip of the bathtub for a sip.

Standing with his hands in his pockets, chin toward his chest as he seared me with a narrowed gaze, Jas scoffed, "Good, because I came to see her mother."

"Oh."

"Oh."

"What for?"

Jas pulled in a deep breath from his nostrils. His dark eyes lifted to the ceiling. "Well, I had a meeting with the head chef at the winery off-site." He unfastened his belt then pulled his shirt from the waist of his pants. "After that, I shot over to Harlem to finally speak to Josie."

My heart thundered as he began unbuttoning his shirt. “How did that go?”

His tone was casual when he noted, “Not bad. She’s confused but can join the club because I’m confused as hell, too. But we were able to establish some boundaries.”

“Which are?” I couldn’t help but notice his growing erection as he peeled out of his shirt and pulled the tank undershirt over his head.

Jas’ abs intimidated me. They were thick and reactive to each move he made.

“One is being completely real about my feelings for her... and you.”

“That’s not a boundary.” I gulped back wine.

He shrugged. “You’re right. That’s more of a parameter.”

My throat was in my chest when I agreed, “I’ll give you that.”

“But the actual boundary was no more sex.”

Why did that relieve me? Because I was selfish was why. Just looking at him now, down to his fitted boxer briefs as he stood on one leg to remove a sock, I wanted the swelling below his waist in my mouth. I ached for him.

Then I thought, “No more sex for who?”

“Me, of course.” He chuckled.

“I know you. But you and who? Because you’re stripped naked in my bathroom, it isn’t Josie’s decision to have me turn you away.”

His smile was worth a thousand kisses. “Do you want to turn me away? Should I go? Because I ain’t done.” I shook my head pitifully, praying in the inner courts of my heart he wouldn’t curse me by putting those clothes back on. “Good. Because when I left Josie and was riding back to Jersey, a commercial came on the radio about the new season of *“Taking Tips from Tynisha,”* and my first thought was how behind I was on the last season. Then...” He swung one meaty

thigh over my head, prompting me to scoot up in the tub as he got in. “I automatically wondered if you’re caught up.”

Frazzled now by his scent and heat, I turned flippant. “I don’t watch that show anymore. Stopped years ago.”

“Bullshit,” he quipped.

I didn’t argue because he was right. I was still obsessed with Tynisha’s fashion, her lifestyle...her toxic marriage.

My body tensed all over, hand clamping the stem of the wine glass. “About the no more sex...” I scraped my bottom lip against my teeth anxiously. “Who does that apply to?”

Jas adjusted himself, his legs astride mine, his dick hard against my back, then his face burrowed into the back of my neck. “I ain’t that type of guy, Ashira.”

The muscles in my face contorted with semi-relief. “I know.”

“I got my needs. Trust me, I do, but I ain’t a sloppy nigga, man,” his delivery throaty, desperate. Sincere.

Softly, I nodded. “I know.” I felt the tears threatening. “And you don’t trust me to keep your list,” I whispered. It was why Jas wasn’t prepared to let Josie go. He didn’t trust me to be his happily ever after.

His big hands pushed beneath my arms, cupping my breasts. My eyes closed at the electricity in his touch, the pinch and rolling of my nipples.

His agile, hot tongue swiped the back of my neck, and I shivered. “You can’t fuck another man, Ashira. I can’t have that,” his words soft, raspy.

That threat helped. We were back to me only being allowed to share my body with him. I’d take that demand any day.

I leaned into his heat, my back against his hard, hairy chest. I was all soft breaths and wanting when I slurred, “And neither can I.” I reached back to grab the back of Jas’ head as his arm snaked between my open thighs.

I moaned as he circled my clit with one hand and strummed my nipple with the other. Wanting to melt into this space with him, I tossed back the rest of the wine and secured the glass onto the lip of the tub. It was just in time because Jas' tongue caressed my neck in a nasty, slow swipe. The muscles of my abdomen strained from the stunning pleasure. My head rolled farther into his shoulder, giving him more access for his mouth and tongue to perform.

“Ashira...”

“*Hmmm...*” My hips lifted, rocking into his magical fingers.

“Lex is Harlem.”

Huhn?

My jaw tremored. “Whatever that means.”

“It means she a day one, and technically, so is her husband. Dude was the first person I can recall speaking life to me,” his admonishing words were firm but fell with gentleness. Jas pushed two fingers inside of me in a smooth, swift breach. He circled them deliciously, massaging my swollen walls. Then I felt his mouth beneath my ear. “You can't hold her to that.”

I licked my lips, eyes squeezing close. “She told you.”

“She hit me up last night. She's fucked up about it.”

“Good.” I moaned at the spark of pleasure lightning my core. “My family needs...to be...” My palm gripped his hairy thigh as I rode his hand. “...given grace...patience to gain...our feet.” I grabbed his bristly jaw, pushing my tongue into his mouth. Jas kissed me back, the thick shaft of his cock impatiently sandwiched between us.

“Apologize,” he whispered about Lex.

“I'll think about it.”

Between his talented mouth and rhythmic hands, pleasure began to mount in my groin. He was here, unexpected and in the shadows of the night, with me. How did we get here? I explained to the therapist I'd seen since returning from *Della* how this turn in Jas and my relationship felt different. This

emotional space was new because my heart had been working to rid itself of the resentment and anger I'd felt for him for years. I was thrilled for Chi-Chi having parents who could find a middle ground, but deathly afraid for my heart because I'd fallen in love with Jas all over again.

"I missed you," he whispered into my neck, then swiped it with his firm tongue again. "I missed you so fuckin' bad. I hated you leaving me in *Della*."

I nodded, eyes closed, mouth wide open. "I'm here. I promised you."

Within seconds, I was hit with a powerful surge of soul-shifting sensations. My orgasm rolled through my body viciously, jerking my shoulders, numbing the insecurity of Jas having yet to make clear he would no longer be sleeping with Josie. There was heating from the pads of my feet. I cried silent yelps for mercy into the air as he harnessed me to his chest in my throes of passion. It was the perfect storm, our erotica.

When I was done and could move coherently, I leaned over to release the stop of the tub. As the water drained, I positioned myself in reverse cowgirl-style over Jas and instructed him to lift and meet me above the waterline. Then I plunged down on him with gusto. For minutes long, I watched him enjoy the show of my bouncing cheeks dancing over him. The fleeing water caused our hot bodies to swerve in the tub until it was just our flesh smacking wildly, creating an amatory echo. I worked him until his head tossed back, cords in his neck bulged, and Jas released whatever energy pinned up inside he brought here to work out.



The following weeks ahead charted the same pattern of ambiguity. Jas fell into work hard. He'd missed weeks of it due to vacationing and caring for Juggy. He continued to date Josie, then popped up at my apartment in full need of me. He took me out as well, sharing meals, boat rides on his *Cantius*

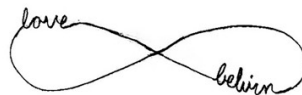
Cruisers, and we even attended the new season release party for “*Taking Tips from Tynisha*” in the City. I had a ball mingling with the cast and crew, whereas Jas played it cool, remaining in the cut the way he did at his former club.

I, myself, had to dive into work, too. I met with the creative music director for the Pixie tour. My team and I went to work on choreography and auditions right away. I mostly used the same troupe but always left open a few slots for new talent. I danced a few nights at *Kucheza*, which helped with the chemistry of the new troupe and got me back into “tour” shape.

One night, Mr. Jealous Baby’s Daddy pulled up to my club and called me to the gated parking lot behind a dumpster where he fucked me against the building wall. It was gross and, without reservation, one of my best sexual experiences to date. Did I mention Jas left me against that brick wall, hopped in his truck, and continued to his date with Josie? I knew it was a way to lowkey snub Sergio who he knew was likely at work that night. Maybe I shouldn’t have admitted to bringing Serge on to make Jas jealous.

Yup.

The perfect storm.



Part III

August | Three Years Later

Jas assisted me out of the car, keeping my heels in mind as I stood and straightened my sleeveless gown. The sun was still setting, creating an orangey glow as the cars lined up to allow guests out of their vehicles in the circular driveway. I didn’t want to take too long now that ours was one of those being let out at the entrance.

My God...

The entryway was breathtaking. A massive shrubbery arch revealed the hues of a garden. I held on to Jas' hard and sturdy arm as we gaited over the stone walkway carefully paved against perfectly green grass. It was like a village; the maze we'd embarked on was filled with beautiful decorative touches like cemented benches, waterfalls, and cast concrete flowerpots. The landscaping was impeccable, opening to a massive garden filled with even larger water fountains.

There was a line we found ourselves in. The flow was steady, but there was a stop-and-go pace. Stopping allowed me to peruse the absolute beauty of *Elliswoods Palace*, a town I'd never heard of in Hunterdon County, NJ. Taking it all in, I could see what had to be the main house, considering its expansive size. The other small structures were dispersed, and just like the primary building, they all had a theme of low-pitched tiles, construction-made stone, and doorways with deep arches and tall windows. The property was lit with bulbs creating a soft radiance as the sun retreated for the day. Soft, string music flowed over the lush greenery, sparking a charge of energy I quickly decided I was good with.

"Tuscany," I whispered upward to Jas.

His ear descended a little. "Huhn?"

"This property. It's giving Tuscan vibes. The arches, stone exterior, and clay-like roofing tiles," I whispered as much as possible.

Jas straightened, bobbing his head as though understanding my assessment of the sprawling land.

We moved up in the line, and into view came a seasoned couple.

"And look at this muthafucka," the older gentleman croaked, a crooked grin playing at the corner of his mouth.

He was fair-skinned with thin lips. His hair was low, grayed, and curly. Overall, the man was handsome in a full suit, tie, and shoes. The woman at his side was full-figured with the richest syrupy casing in a red-hued sequence gown. She, too, possessed an unusual feature. Her hair was blonde,

which seemed odd, weirdly perfect against her deep mocha skin. She giggled with half-closed eyes expressing fondness.

“Don’t let the old man do me like that, Mrs. E,” Jas playfully groaned before going in for a kiss on her cheek.

With her free arm, she hugged as much of Jas’ broad back as she could. “Hi, there, baby,” she chortled between words.

“Slick muthafucka,” the man gruffed again, eyes going between what he could see of Jas and straight ahead.

This was their dance. Mr. Ellis, Sadik’s father, was expressively fond of Jas, and often to the point of jeering with him.

When Mrs. Ellis released Jas, her attention transitioned to me. “The artful dancer.” Her smile was warm as she examined me from head to toe. “You’re incredibly stunning tonight, love.”

I beamed, shoulders lifting with modesty. Suddenly, I felt like Chi-Chi.

“Mrs. Ellis...” My following words flowed without a preamble. “...may I have my wedding on your estate?”

The Ellises fell into laughter. Tonight was my third visit to *Elliswoods Palace* over the years, and each time its beauty and elegance raised goosebumps on my arms. Jas shook his head petulantly.

“Who you gon’ marry, young lady?” Mr. Ellis inquired. “Not this clown. He can’t be trusted if he ain’t clink you yet.” He winked at me in that ‘cat daddy’ way. Earl Ellis’ swag had not aged a bit. It was as seasoned as the food they served here.

“Ah, man,” Jas mumbled. “Knock it off, old man.”

Giggling, Irene Ellis took both Jas and I by the hand and waggered, “Whenever you two are ready, I’d happily host your special day. It would be my absolute pleasure.”

My heart melted.

“Thank you, Queen Ellis. I’m looking forward to it.” I bowed at my waist. “Happy anniversary to you two.”

“Happy anniversary,” Jas parroted the sentiment as he pulled out an envelope from the inner pocket of his tux and dropped it into the decorative box just behind the Ellises.

“Go on. Get outta here.” Mr. Ellis swung his chin dismissively at Jas. “Go get her a drink. That’ll help her forget how much of a wuss you be.”

That had me tittering as Jas hauled me away from the regal couple as the next set of guests were greeted by the hosts.

We collected our seating card a few feet away. As we traveled to our assigned table in the well-dressed courtyard, I was able to steal views of its layout. Already, there were countless Black and Brown people wearing their best formal knits. There indeed was a live orchestra nestled in the back of the manmade dance floor. This was what I’d come to expect from the Ellises; they functioned like royalty.

Jas guided me across the courtyard until we happened upon the other Ellis family.

“My man,” Sadik greeted Jas, prompting him to release me to do so.

“Bilan!” I greeted as we hugged, then air-kissed to avoid smearing each other’s makeup.

“You look amazing as always, girl,” she complimented animatedly.

“Me? Look at you!” She was killing it in a black, sleeveless chiffon gown with a wide metal gold belt synching her waist. It was paired with gold strappy sandals with bold hardware.

“Thank you!”

Sadik, holding a drink, gaped at his wife unbeknownst to her. His goldish-green eyes were lower than I’d been accustomed to seeing as he pulled her into him with a swift yank. She stumbled smoothly into him, giggling.

“Y’all are gonna have to pardon my husband. He’s so excited for his parents; he began celebrating a bit too early.” She crossed her eyes, making a silly expression.

As I laughed, Jas breathed, “Damn. The *Mauve* got you like that, duke?”

“Yup.” Sadik nuzzled into Bilan’s neck as she squirmed beautifully. “And guess who gon’ be there, helping me work it outta my system?” I gagged, elbowing Jas, who, once again, shook his head. Sadik raised his tumbler. “Love’s in the air, man. My parents are a shining example of enduring love. I’m just here to celebrate that with my Nalib.” He kissed her neck.

They were a very attractive couple with salt-and-pepper chemistry. If I were into voyager kink, it would be their porn I’d watch.

She squeezed his hand as she sweetly asked, “Excuse us. Please?”

Jas chuckled. “You got it. Aye,” he called out to Sadik. “Big bruh gon’ be down for the festivities?”

Sadik lifted his drink into the air again and pointed. “He’ll probably watch from the balcony.”

As they took off, Jas turned to me. “Let me get you to the table, and I’m gonna go holla at Big I.”

He didn’t ask me to join him as we traveled to the table because Jas knew Sadik’s older brother, a maim, skeeved me out the first and only time I met him. From a wheelchair, he managed to look at me in the grossest manner. Barely audible, he slurred his words, mouth stiff. He said something to me a couple of years ago at his nephew’s birthday party. I couldn’t hear but could certainly understand. When I told Jas about it, I could tell he wasn’t happy but was helpless to react. The man was permanently disabled and couldn’t defend himself against the smallest child at the party. From then on, I avoided that Ellis.

The table was empty when we arrived. Jas’ kiss on my bare shoulder caused my spine to shiver. “Be right back.”

I hummed my acknowledgment before pulling out my phone. My father had not responded to the message I left last week, reminding him Noelle and I were still awaiting his approval of her moving in with me. I hated his standstill.

Tonight, I'd text him again and see how long he'd ignore that. I knew it wouldn't be long because my mother had been calling for Chi-Chi. The mother who still hadn't reached out to me since returning "home."

A distinct rasp took my attention from the pictures Shizu texted me on the way here of the new puppy she and David adopted. I glanced up to find a couple resembling the height chemistry I shared with Jas.

Bishop Ezra Carmichael's beard seemed to glisten in the light of the moon. His black tux made him appear slimmer yet still fit. He mumbled over Lex's shoulder as she dug through her clutch. The currant-red gown she wore showed off her toned arms and accentuated her round hips well. Them having a private couple's moment, clueless of my presence, crackled the silent remorse that had been growing for weeks since our run-in in Hackensack at the restaurant.

I stood from my seat, leaving my phone behind. The Carmichaels didn't notice me until I was practically at their feet, grinning sheepishly.

"Shi-Shi," Ezra rasped so kindly, not expecting to see me tonight, I guessed.

"Bishop Carmichael," I replied sweetly, once again lifting my shoulders in humility.

He straightened. "Don't start with the formalities. We're family. Always, I assure you."

I nodded, fingers threaded together at my waist. "I'm sure. Thank you."

Before I could think of a strategy of apology, big hot hands were on my waist. Jas reached down and kissed my shoulder again. Then he tossed his chin. "The maître d' told me they'll be starting soon, so I figured I could go check Iban out later." Then he acknowledged the pastor and his first lady. "Y'all made it. Almost late, I see."

"Don't start, Sin," Lex rolled her eyes. "You know this man don't like being tardy, especially when he has to work."

Ezra's eyes darkened on his wife when he qualified, "My calling isn't exactly work, dear." He palmed her elbow, a small act of endearment. "Speaking of which," Ezra turned to us. "I'm glad you're here, Shi-Shi. I've hated it's taken this long to see you again."

"Me, too." The moment turned awkward instantly. Jas' nudge at the back of my thigh provided the push I needed. "Can I say how sorry I am? My coldness toward you that night at *DiFillippo's* was a showing of my insecurity. It's been a really rough year for me, much of it regarding my family. I feel like you caught a bit of it that night. I was totally out of line for involving the girls. You know I adore your babies."

The wryest smile hit Lex's face, her matte lips perfectly lined. "I hate that we even have to do this. I really, really wanna put this behind us."

Behind me, Jas snickered. I glanced up to see him trying to cover his mouth. "What is wrong with you?"

"Lex got her ass handed to her," he murmured loud enough for them to hear as his eyes bounced around the courtyard.

"Oh, that's what we doing, Sin?" Lex challenged.

"Let me just say this." Ezra shifted around Lex, drawing closer to Jas and me. "I cannot apologize for my wife, but I can tell you, as the head shepherd of my church, I rarely involve myself in match-making. It's something I had to emphasize to my beloved, especially after her attempt with Jas here. I apologize if it made you feel ostracized."

"No." I shook my head, rolling my eyes. "It's okay. I get it. Lex and Jas go back as friends. She was only looking out for him."

"But my timing was off. I wasn't viewing the situation through spiritual lenses," Lex tried to explain.

"What does spirituality have to do with trying to hook your boy up?" I scoffed.

"My beloved has an eye to view things outside of the flesh. Let me make it clear, I would have never, and did not sanction the pairing. Why? Because I knew, spiritually, Jas here was not

available to another woman. His heart—*his spirit*—was already tied to one.”

A chill coursed my spine at the authority in his declaration.

“Shit,” behind me, Jas whispered. I glanced up to find him scratching his forehead distractingly.

“Furthermore, when and if Mr. Ojasvi were to address his ties with said woman, it would—*will*—leave a mess for my leaders to clean,” Ezra expounded. “Shi-Shi, would you care to take a guess at who will be suited with a broom and mop once the dust settles?”

Lex’s eyes rolled up to him, nostrils flared. “I’m saying, honey, we don’t know what will be. This nigga playing lame duck right now.”

“Alexis,” Ezra’s subterranean growl had my brows shooting up.

“Yeah. Chill, Lex,” Jas warned, ironically not finding *that* funny.

Lex rolled her eyes, exhaling as she shifted weight on her legs. “Look, Shi-Shi, I’m sorry. I messed up. I’m still learning and growing. I promise, what I did had nothing against you. My husband’s right: it was a premature move, and totally inappropriate. As you can see, Sin and I act like we’re kids still in Harlem. I’m sorry for my encroachment on your family. I was out of line.”

I winked at her. “Thanks for that. And you’re right: he is a lame duck.” I referred to Jas still dating Josie. “But it’s all good: I’m getting married here at *Elliswoods Palace*, girl!” I danced on my toes.

I’d never seen Ezra fight back amusement in my life. Lex took it, though. She howled back in laughter at my pitiful attempt at hope. I *would be* getting married on this estate: I was simply unsure of the suitor.

Grumbling, Jas instructed me to take my seat. The ceremony began seconds after Lex planted herself in the chair next to me and squeezed my hand from under the table.

Moved by her meekness, I pivoted in my chair and pulled her in for a hug.

The program opened with R&B god, Ragee, taking the slightly elevated stage with none other than Young Lord on the baby grand piano. What a sight!

As Young curled over the keys B-Boy-style in his signature all-black, he played a seamless melody. Raj's gritty timber explained into the microphone, "When you lose a bet to your boy and have to flex the piano skills, he coached you on in front of an audience." A resounding titter cracked the air above us. "Yeah..." Raj rocked the pole of the microphone stand. "...the best emcee of the decade is going to serenade us tonight. Leggo."

As we continued laughing, Lord, shaking his head, switched melodies. Then Raj began his rendition of Luther Vandross' "*A House is Not a Home*."

With my right hand, I reached for Jas' and squeezed. When he peered up from our joined fists, I mouthed, "We're good." I felt he should have had that confidence after a tough conversation with his pastor about our messy life together. It was important to me that he knew he had my grace. The man met and proposed to me four years ago, then for the second time months later. In the three years we'd had our daughter, the man hadn't dated anyone. Now that he'd put himself out there with another woman, I had to apply patience. Ojasvi Lamont Sinclair was the embodiment of patience when it came to me. I'd wait until he decided. "I promise."

He brought my fist to his mouth and kissed me with sweet understanding.





“You’re walking in now?” Josie yawned into the phone as I let myself into the house from the garage.

“Yup.” I blinked my dry eyes.

“I wish I was going home. Get right in my bed and fall out.” I could hear the exhaustion in her voice. She worked two jobs, and today was one of the longest days of her week.

“I feel you, shortie, but you’ll get there.”

“I guess I shouldn’t complain. Look at you, getting home five hours late from Cuba because of a flight delay.” This time, I yawned. It was true. There was some fishy shit happening at Teterboro earlier today when I should have been flying in. Then my jet malfunctioned. Something electronic with the control board. That took about two hours to fix. I was supposed to be home hours ago. Tonight was my night with Chivon. Her mother had to fly out with her troupe for costume fittings in Atlanta in the morning. They were using the jet, which was why I had to be patient with the jet repair. “At least you can sleep late.”

“Nah.” I rubbed my right eye on the way to the kitchen. “I gotta get lil’ Blueberry in the morning.”

“Awwww,” she cooed. “Maybe Juggy can swing by and pick her up.”

“He’s outta dodge.” Jug was ninety percent back to his normal health again. He’d been in Miami for a few a days, calling Jos-Renee every damn day, begging her to come down there with him. Ashira and I had been trying to remind the nigga she was married. I believed Juggy feared finally losing her friendship now that he was healed. “I’ll be a’ight. Just have to fix a big ass cup of tea before I leave to get her in the morning.”

Josie laughed into the phone. “You and that darn tea.”

“It’s *the*—” I heard a loud ass noise coming from outside of the kitchen. “—drink of life,” I finished.

“Is everything okay?”

“I heard some weird ass noise.”

“Mouth, Ojasvi!”

I dropped my keys and went back out into the hallway to the front of the house. “My bad, Queen J. Lemme hit you back. I need to see where this is coming from.”

“Okay. I’ll be here.”

“A’ight.” I made sure the call was disconnected before slipping the phone into my pocket. That was when I learned the sounds were rhythmic. I stopped in the foyer, listening again. The next round led me to the den. It was loud as hell, and from the doorway, I could see a pair of *J*’s hanging from the arm of a sofa. I stepped inside and rounded the couch. Sighing, I gripped the space between my eyes. Clearly, I wasn’t paying attention to my property when I pulled up and headed into the garage. I slapped his leg then wiggled it until my baby brother stirred awake. “Yo. Yo!”

Nicholas jumped up, eyes tight and red. “Aye, man.”

“Aye, man?” I was lowkey offended. “You smell like a fuckin’ bar dumpster. How many you throw back tonight?” It was after one in the morning.

What time did he get here?

Nicholas had his own place but stayed at my crib randomly. Here he could get a good meal and visit his niece. I never tripped, liking his access to my world that way.

“Shit, man,” he groaned, brushing back his long hair with his pale hands. “I came to kick it with you. Where you been? Cuba that far?” His slur game was thick.

“Flight delay. Why you wasted, king?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Dad’s tripping.”

“How?” *What now?*

The nigga barely spoke to me now. If it wasn't about Chivon, he had nothing for me, and I learned to live with it.

“I told my mom you were flying me to Vegas for my birthday. She ratted me out to Dad, and now he's saying he won't let Mom cook me a birthday dinner and cake. He's fucked up, bro.”

When Nicholas had become an adult and grew closer to me, my father distanced himself from us emotionally and physically. Nicholas hadn't been taking it well. Jug tried to tell me last year, dude been drinking more than casually. He was straight at work, but after hours was when he'd go to the local bar or wildin' out at his lady friends' place, drunk.

I took a deep breath, scratching my head. “Yeah, man. He is, but you ain't. C'mon, and kick off those shoes.” I ran his pockets for his car keys. How this little nigga made it here this wasted, I was afraid to find out. “You're crashing here tonight. In the morning, we're gonna kick it about getting you some help with this Daddy shit.” That would help with the drinking, I was sure.

“Nah, man,” he slurred. “I'm good. I'mma go—”

“Nick, man!” I spoke over him. “Yo' ass is sleepin' this shit off here. You leave when I say.”

My brother cringed before turning over and lying down. Before I was done pulling his sneakers off, the snoring had resumed.

I made my way upstairs. On the way to my room, I passed Chivon's and noticed the night light was on. Backing up to confirm it, I walked inside. Sure enough, my baby was stretched out in her little bed, pushing out quiet snores. Then my neck whipped back to the full-sized bed near the door.

Ashira...

She'd brought her by when I called her about the flight delay. Ashira didn't want me to have to drive all the way out to Edgewater to pick up my little Blueberry in the morning.

Sweet...

I smiled down at her, dick thickening by the second. A surge of energy hit me as I approached her. The woman drove me wild. I didn't think twice when pulling back the comforter and scooping her in my arms, bringing her to my chest.

“*Shhhhh...*” I tried to tell her as her body jerked, startled next to my chest. Then I kissed her lips. “It's me.”

“Jas,” she moaned, in a haze of sleep as I paid Chivon one last glance to be sure we didn't wake her.

I quickly walked her down to my room, pushing both doors close with my feet, then lay her on my bed. Before Ashira could move on my mattress, I kicked my shoes off and pulled down her pajama shorts. I spread her legs wide and dipped my face at the juncture, kissing my favorite lips down low.

Ashira squirmed beneath me, “*Oooh, Jas...*”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Part III

August | Three Years Later



“**N**o, Mommy! No!” I heard in the deepest of sleep. “Move, Mommy! Go!” A dream. It was all a dream, and I wanted sleep. Needed sleep. “This Daddy room! Get up! Daddy bed!”

Nah...

My eyes flew open because that’s when I knew it was no dream. I popped up from the mattress to see Chivon, pulling at her mother’s arm as Ashira lay on her stomach. The blanket was pulled up to her bare shoulder blades. If my baby’s mind was more developed, she’d be able to deduce her mother’s nakedness under the comforter. Ashira didn’t move, and I understood why. She was tired as hell. I wasn’t expecting her to be here last night when I’d gotten in late. Just knowing Ashira was in my home made me feel she was accessible to me. This woman was like my favorite toy; there was no way in hell I could leave her to sleep in a room away from me. Not now.

What started out as my attempt for a quickie led to me having her draped over the sofa in my sitting room while I deep-stroked her from the back well into the four o'clock hour. It felt like we'd just showered and laid down. That was how Ashira had forgotten to creep back into her bed in Chivon's room. And my tired ass was no help to remind her.

"Mommy, you got you own bed at you house!" Chivon screamed, pulling at her mother's arm. My brain was too fuzzy to address it yet. I could only watch it go down. Besides, my ass was naked, too, under the blanket. "Mommy, get out my Daddy bed!" She began to cry.

"Chivon," I was finally able to speak. "*Don't—*"

Ashira's head swung up. "If you don't stop being fresh, little girl! Don't you see Mommy's sleeping? Get those little legs in your bed. Now!"

My eyes burst wide.

"You in my Daddy bed!" Chivon argued with her mother.

"Chi-Chi, Daddy's my friend!"

"No!" Chivon's eyes cut to me then swung back to her mother. "That's my Daddy! Get up, Mommy!"

Ashira's body jerked up, swung over to her backside as she pulled the blanket to her bare chest. "Again, little girl: if you don't carry your butt back to bed, I'm going to spank those legs. You do not tell me I can't be Daddy's friend. He's *my* friend, Chivon. And I can be in his bed! He can be in my bed. You, little girl, go back to your bed and stop being fresh!"

Ashira never referred to my baby by her first name.

Fuck...

Shit just got real.

Chivon's eyes flew to me, and when I was too frozen to say shit, her face fell then lifted in torture. Then my baby cried.

"Go!" Ashira demanded.

Chivon began walking backward, crying harder and harder each step she took. Her shoulders were low and she looked so defeated, it tightened my chest. And like a fucking punk, I watched it all go down without helping her.

By the time Chivon reached the hallway, Nicholas slid to a stop in front of her. His wild hair stood in the air and red, tight eyes assessed the situation with a hanging jaw. He looked down at his wailing niece.

“Awwwww, c’mon, Chi-Chi.” Nicholas picked her up, immediately rubbing her back. I knew this was the last thing he needed to wake up to considering the condition he was in just a few short hours ago. “You said you were a big girl now. No more crying. You’re about to start school!”

“Mommy in...my...Daddy bed!” Chivon shouted back at him in tears as he carried her away.

I rubbed my eyes, feeling stuck as hell. “*Ashi—*”

“No!” she grunted, turning back over while adjusting the blanket around her. “I’m over it. I’m over it all!”

Crazy enough, I believed I understood why. Ashira was tired of being an outlier.

You ever devise a plan to protect your heart all to eventually realize you didn’t have the stamina to carry said plan through?

Nah?

I did. And I was fucked.



Just when I thought I’d gotten rid of the Samson spirit, I learned painfully how tempered the flesh could be under the right circumstances.

Hours after the blow up with our daughter, Ashira left for Atlanta. Chivon and I chilled into the weekend, even taking the boat out Saturday. It was only right to have some Daddy and daughter alone time after that possessive melee with her

mother. Although her young mind had but so much capacity for understanding relationship dynamics, I tried explaining to her how her mother was indeed my friend and could sleep in my bed, kiss me, use my bathroom, and hug me whenever she wanted to. Chivon gave me a little pushback, but by the end of our ride, she conceded to “allowing Mommy in our circle.”

The following morning, Frankie had taken Chivon to the park, and afterward they’d get a bite to eat. The community the little girl had was amazing. And I praised God for it. Ashira and I traveled a lot, and in order to provide Chivon with the stability of two homes, it took our friends and family to chip in when we worked.

After they left, I found myself working in the office. Then I took to my gym to get in some cardio work. Once that was done, I showered then threw on a pair of basketball shorts and ankle socks. I headed down to kitchen for a bowl of cereal. *Redeeming Souls* was live streaming, and I figured I’d catch some of the morning service in the den before working on my boat. An engine valve needed to be replaced and I wanted it done before Ashira came back into town so I could take her out for a ride. It would be just the two of us without having to ghost Chivon to sneak in some alone time.

Before I could make the selection on the remote, I caught a sports channel giving commentary on the upcoming Tori McNabb fight. I kept it there, listening to their exchange for a minute.

“Well, good morning!” Josie came strutting into the room, her hands holding her purse behind her back. “And a good morning it is, I see.”

“Oh, shit,” I breathed, chewing on cereal as I stood in the middle of the room. “I ain’t know you were pulling up this morning.” I was dead ass shocked as she giggled, looking a little shy about the pop up visit. “What’s good?”

“You know,” her voice a high octave, eyes squinting. “I’m glad you asked. I won’t be long; I need to get across that bridge for morning worship. However, I woke up this morning with a rich spirit of expectation. Something refreshing. And I

began to talk to God as I got ready for church. One of the things heavy on my heart is my future. Where am I going? What do I want out of life? Will my next year resemble my last year, because this year certainly does. And that led me to you.”

I snorted, checking out her style, long pleated skirt with a “*I Love Me*” logo t-shirt tucked inside. Her sandals showed off her pink toenails and Josie’s bright red lipstick was popping on this Sunday morning.

But why did she come all the way here on a Sunday morning before church?

“Word? Say more.”

“Really?” Her brows lifted and she smirked sassily. Josie was in flirt mode and I found it cute. Her pop up was cute. “Okay. No more being patient with you. I want to move us along. I know we had the setback after your vacation with Chivon and her mother, but the longer we sit idle, the farther I am from my goals. I want to be a wife just like you told me”—She poked my bare chest with her index finger—“God has designed you to be a husband.” *Oh, no...* Life for me had been complicated beyond that simple desire. Her shoulders lifted in excitement as I pushed the cereal around the milk in the bowl with the spoon. “I want you, and I know you want me. I mean,” she snorted. “you bought me a car. Men don’t go around buying random women *Mercedes Benzes*, Ojasvi.” Her head bounced and eyes beamed. It was used and an older model, but I let Josie have it. “I’m ready. No more holding back.”

Grinning at her with my forehead wrinkled, I shook my head. “I ‘on’t even know what that *mea*—”

Josie pushed up from her toes and kissed me. Now, foreign to me at this proximity, her berry perfume hit me first. I can’t lie, I was aroused instantly. Then before I knew it, her tongue had found mine and we were kissing. Her lips were as soft as I was used to, but Josie had a seduction in her kiss. Her breathing into it turned me on. Before I knew it, my dick was

thickening in my boxers and shorts. It happened so fast, and didn't stop when she pulled back.

She smiled seductively while backing away from me. Accomplished. The chick pulled up to my crib with an agenda. Josie was making it clear she'd reached her goal, leaving me revved up and hard as shit. I didn't move, didn't speak. I just watched her leave my den, and head to the front of the house. I couldn't see her beyond the den, but eventually heard the front door close. That's how much of a fucking stupor I was left in, standing in the same position because I damn sure didn't hear her coming in.

What I saw next stole my fucking lungs. Ashira, with a distinct line formed between her arched brows stepped into the room. When had she'd flown in? She didn't mention it when I spoke with her this morning. Her aura was obvious. She knew Josie was just in here with me. Right? She had to. Josie likely hadn't even pulled off yet. My baby girl's eyes were so dark and lips in a slight twist as she approached me. Incongruently, I was relieved to see her. I'd been plotting on her return, missing her like crazy.

So, when she stood right in front of me, in such close proximity, my natural inclination was to lean down for a kiss.

POW!

I didn't see her hand flying up toward the side of my face. Ashira cold clocked the shit out of me. Taking the bowl in one hand, I used the other to cup my stinging face.

"Yo..." I didn't know what to say...to do. Nigga's been sent up for less offenses than that.

But the look in my baby's eyes hurt far more than her quick hand game. Harsh breaths pushed from her nose as her lips almost reached it in disgust. Tears pooled at her lids, but hadn't fallen yet. She just...stared at me, and I didn't know what to say.

Then she sunk down in front of me. Her soft hands quickly yanking at the waistband of my shorts. When they fell to my feet, my boxers were next. Ashira's warm hands wrapped

around my shaft, causing blood to rush all to one place. When her mouth joined, my stomach flexed over her. Her tongue swiped over my head, lining the rim as I watched. She jerked me with the right pressure from her palms, the perfect speed of them and her mouth. The suctioning she did on my shaft when taking me to the back of her throat wasn't for the faint of heart. My eyes blurred and pulse pounded. Helplessly, I rocked into her blowjob, losing my fucking mind by the second. The feel of her saliva pacing down my balls had my fucking brain spinning. I was ready to blow so damn soon.

But should I?

I had no fucking clue of the protocol. My plan didn't include this height of passion. My lady worked hard, sucking me so good, her eyes on me, watching me lose my shit. Boss bitch. That was her. Ashira. She did shit like this to me, keeping my fucking heart wide open for her. I couldn't let go of her if she begged me to. And I couldn't stop shit at this point. My balls tingled and spine stiffened. I was about to blast and couldn't control it. Maybe I should try.

Fuck it.

My feet curled as I bucked into her mouth. Then the first tear fell from her face. The bowl of cereal hit the floor just as the second flow of tears raced down to her chin. I couldn't stop. I was coming and hard as hell. As I melted, body trembling all over against a stiff spine, I didn't make a sound other than my heavy breathing as my brain spun fast in my skull. This nut was met with mixed emotions. As my knees buckled, I knew her skillful performance was this for this very reaction, but she'd also done it from her pain.

When my orgasm had run its course, and I could stand straight again, I watched Ashira take to her feet. Her eyes were just fixed on me, but no words were exchanged. Her face was soaked with tears and saliva—because she sucked back my nut. Ashira didn't play with that.

“I will never be Bella,” she spoke shakily through gritted teeth. “allowing you to commit to another woman and give me what's left over.”

Damn!

What the fuck just happened?

She walked away, leaving me out of breath and ass naked in the den. Just as I'd done with Josie, I stood in one place, muted. This time my mind was blown, which I understood to be Ashira's agenda. I don't know how long I stayed there.

But when I heard, "Fuck is you doin', yo?" I stumbled backward, losing my balance until I hit the sofa behind me. Shuffling for my ankles, I pulled my boxers up as fast as I could, which wasn't a smooth feat as Jug walked farther into the room. "Bruh!"

He looked mad as hell.

"Yo, what the fuck is you doin'," I begged his pardon, out of breath.

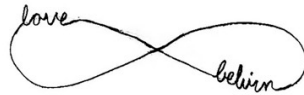
"Lookin' at your dumb ass act like a fuckin' boy, man. Fuckin' Nicholas got more sense than your childish ass."

Angry as I fixed my clothes, I asked, "The fuck you mean?"

His arms swung as he grunted, "Stop this fuckin' game you got going. You got these chicks after you knowin' damn well it's only one you want. Your dumb ass 'on't even know how to juggle bitches. You ain't never learned the game, and to keep it real, you ain't built for it no way." He stood over me, spitting as he tried keeping his voice down. This juxtaposition could get you shanked on the yard, some shit I'd never allow. But how fitting was it now, seeing how vulnerable I was after an orgasm.

"Aye, man. Don't disrespect my sister like that either. Got her fuckin' blowin' you 'cause ya other bitch pullin' up on you without permission. That's some pussy shit. Josie cool, but you can't be fuckin' with my lil' sis, bruh. You just copped her another ring! Why the fuck you still got Josie on the hook? Man, get ya shit together, bruh!" He swung away from me, face screwed with disgust as he left the room, too.

That fucking Samson spirit wasn't as far behind me as I thought, neither was my flesh as strong as I believed it to be.



ashira

If I thought the winter and spring were hell for me emotionally, the summer wanted in, too. Patience is a virtue for sure. I stupidly prayed for it when I decided to switch courses with Jas in Europe. The problem with beseeching it was hanging on while it arrived, kicking your ass.

I told Jas I'd wait and I had. There were no men I entertained. My time was spent working, being present with my daughter, and extending grace to her father. I made love to him with ferocious passion and listened to his heart when we'd cruise for hours on his boat. I'd be hitting the road in less than two months and wanted to milk every waking experience with the Sinclair father-daughter duo as much as possible.

It was mid-August when I flew in earlier than planned from Atlanta. Once the designer for Pixie's upcoming tour realized I didn't need the alterations as other dancers did, I booked a commercial flight home first thing Sunday morning. Bob had been on vacation, leaving Jas to trust me as an adult to protect myself. I drove up to his place, not recognizing the old model baby *Benz* parked in front of the house. Entering through the open garage, I heard chatting in the front of the house after passing the kitchen and dining room. That's when I found the owner of the older model, *C-Class*, baby *Benz* and her sponsor. It was a culmination of jealousy and getting my ass kicked by the virtue of patience that had me attempt a better kiss on Jas than Josie after she'd strutted out of the house, sporting an accomplished grin.

Short bitch...

I didn't dwell in my jealousy. Immediately, I got back in the ring with that bitch called patience. What was key was that I wasn't fighting for Jas' heart. I knew I owned the man there. When we left Europe, my only goal was to have him trust me again. Since then, I had changed. I now wanted him to give me the chance to do right by his heart. Maybe we could talk about marriage, explore what that union would look like for us. My position had officially changed about the man. I realized it was because the reformed, antisocial personality disorder-having, violent thug felon had owned my heart, too. I wasn't competing with Josie. My heart bled for the woman, but she wasn't my opponent: my reputation with Jas' heart was. I held it in my hands. Now, I would exercise patience as he watched me care for it this time.

The courtesy of my patience didn't extend to everyone, though. There were some people who, like me with Jas, needed to be held at arms-length due to the damage they caused.

Days after the Josie-gate event, we gave Chi-Chi a pool party at Jas' place to celebrate her start of preschool. We kept it as small as possible, not inviting the whole Harlem as had happened for Jas' birthday party. The event went well, bringing both Jas' and my parents under one roof. Thankfully, everyone played nice. Honestly, they typically did when it came to celebrating Chi-Chi. What made this event different was my mother's presence.

She didn't speak to Noelle, who'd come with her cousin. Noelle didn't appear slighted, enjoying her time in the water with Nicholas and others. The teen did what teens do at pool parties: she ate, laughed, and swam. My father, however, didn't interact with her much, which wasn't unusual. It just irritated me more this time because my mother remained at his side, possessively. Celestine, held court with the guests, sharing her extensive travel and dancing accomplishments. My mother hadn't lost her hosting skills—although, she wasn't the host.

When the event was dwindling down and she my father were prepared to leave, she asked for a moment to speak

privately. It was a moment I'd hoped for since my teen years, but when it finally presented itself, my stamina had been consumed by the bitch called patience.

Inside Jas' dining room, she sighed, appearing uncharacteristically flustered. "Can we just thaw the ice for the sake of my granddaughter, Ashira?"

It had been a long day of being the real host of the party. My body ached and I was completely exhausted, had been for over a week at this point. I wasn't interested in giving my mother the compliance she required. There was no energy to be undertaken by her intimidation. I had bigger fish to fry, and I'd also known for months, my secret weapon to get what I needed from her and my father.

"The ice you created? I'm just surviving in the freezer you built for me."

She gasped. "Whatever do you mean? I've given you your space as a woman?"

"Yeah. A lot of it. You dumped me because of my father's indiscretions all those years ago, then magically, you're over it and back with him. But guess who's still in the doghouse? You've been in the U.S. since what? March? And not once during your reconciliation period with the source of your implied hurt and betrayal did you think to make things right with me, your only child? That's grand." I found myself laughing, swimming in her audacity.

"Did you expect for me to come to your home? Where that woman lives, too?"

I nodded. "The woman who is your sister you refuse to acknowledge?"

"The alleged one you refuse to let go of. She's been your leach for years."

"She's been present," I argued. "For years...in your absence. You can't be kind to her for the sake of Chi-Chi, at least? The girl adores Ines, and the feeling is mutual." I began to feel nauseous, no longer wanting to continue this conversation. I grabbed my forehead. "You know what? You

coming back to be with Dad again means you have to adjust to the life we were forced to create while you were away.”

“Ines isn’t in Noel’s life.” She scoffed.

“But his namesake, his daughter, Noelle is. Did you speak to the innocent kid? She’s really sweet.” I shrugged. “She’d be taken away by all your feminine charm, culture, and confidence. Her mother’s dead, out of the way. But my sister’s here. How are you adjusting to that when she visits?”

Petulantly, my mother lifted her chin in the air. “The young lady hasn’t stepped foot in my home since my return.”

“Does that mean Noelle isn’t allowed there?” My mother didn’t respond. *The bitch!* “You know *what*—”

“No, young lady! Do *you* know what?” She waved her arm in the air dismissively. “I’m human, and haven’t always made the best decisions, but I’m a good person. I love my family, including you. I adore my grandbaby more than life itself. So what, if I don’t want to embrace the physical manifestation of my husband’s betrayal! I will not stand in judgement by a woman who’s lived half my life’s experience. You’re not married, you wouldn’t understand, Ashira.”

I shook my head, twisting my lips to keep myself from saying something I’d regret. “I’m not married because you showed me how it could anger you to the point of tossing out your own child. Why would I want to participate in something that would compromise my womanhood? You’re right: I’ve not lived half of your life experience and I have no interest to. However, I will tell you this; the moment you disappoint or abandon Chivon Ojasvi Sinclair, I will pursue you as if you didn’t give birth to me. And newsflash, mother: not accepting her biological aunts will disappoint her.”

Then I left her ass in the dining room alone to sit in her ugly.



The following week, with more pushing against my father's pussy whooped will, Noelle moved in with me. She forced my clothes out of the fourth bedroom of my apartment, causing me to rent a storage unit in my building's basement. That was when I began to toy with the idea of purchasing a single-family home. I was stretched to capacity with all feminine energy under one roof. Searching for new property couldn't be a priority, though. I had a tour approaching and a baby girl beginning school.

love  believe



“You want to marry her?” Noel chuckled, fat fingers against his chin as we sat in the smoke room of his home.

His daughter, blowing cigar smoke directly in my face turned me the hell on: having her father do it across from a coffee table, irritated the shit out of me.

“I'm going to marry her.”

Noel shook his head, still taking his time with words. I was sure when I called and asked to meet with him, this was the last thing he'd expected.

He scoffed, “Your confidence has always been uncanny. At first, I thought it was your immaturity and recklessness as a kid. Then I believed it was arrogance when my baby girl showed up with you at my house four years ago. Now, I know...”

“I'm going to marry your daughter,” I completed for him. “She will be my wife, and won't nothing come between us.”

His head pulled back, and Noel scoffed. “So, this isn’t for my blessing. It’s for your ego?”

“It’s me being respectful to Ashira’s father and Chivon’s grandfather. I’m going to propose to her next month.”

“Next month?”

“Her birthday. I’m taking her to a private island in Antigua.”

“How is it private in Antigua, Sinclair?”

“It’s the vicinity of the island. A smaller one in the Caribbean. My guy owns it, and I want to celebrate her birthday there and propose.”

“Well,” He swung a fat hand. “I can’t stop you.”

That’s when I chuckled. “Nah. You can’t, but you can come. It’ll be dope to have you and Celestine there.”

“*Tha—*” his words failed him. “That right there is a difficult feat.” It was his turn to laugh.

“That’s why I came to meet with you face-to-face. This shit between those two ain’t healthy. It ain’t productive for Chivon. And it won’t be for the other kids we’ll have. This is your legacy, Witherspoon. You need to step the fuck up and take the reins.”

“I don’t know who you think you’re talking to, Sinclair. I’m a *man—*”

I stood to leave. “Take the fuckin’ reins, man.”

love
belvin

ashira

“This is damn cute!” Shizu held up to Corinne a hickory bikini with ivory straps on a hanger.

“Yeah, but my meat needs more threading,” Corinne explained. “Look at this one.” She showed a latte-hued one piece on a wooden hanger with the company’s logo engraved into it.

“Cute!” Peach squealed.

I fought rolling eyes. My mind was on to other things like food. I needed to fill my empty stomach. We were at *Short Hills Mall*, shopping for something to wear to the Tori McNabb fight this week. Jas had bought out a half a row with my friends in mind. As the date approached, I had to finally figure out what to wear. Work had been beating my ass, and Jas had been even more demanding.

He’d broken things off with Josie. After that morning in his den when I sucked that last ounce of his desire for her from him, Jas ended his “friendship” with Josie. I didn’t have time to wonder how she felt about his decision. We’d been spending mostly every night together. I was smart enough to tell Noelle about us “dating” again before she moved in. I knew she’d see him over a lot, or know Chi-Chi and I were at his place. It was only right not to blindside her. The problem was the message I was sending to my sister about what dating was: we’d been sharing a bed at night. She was old enough to know what fucking looked like. That didn’t sit too well with me, but we had lots of adjusting to do.

In other news: Jas mentioned taking me away to the Caribbean for my birthday coming up in two weeks. Earl Ellis owned an island near Antigua and was allowing us to stay there for the weekend. I’d been debating if I wanted to take Chi-Chi. The idea thrilled me because I’d be leaving for the Pixie tour at the end of September and wouldn’t be home until Thanksgiving. This time, the prospect of parting from my family was met with unbearable sadness. So, I’d take the trip to the Caribbean with or without Chi-Chi. I just wanted to make great memories with my family.

“What do you think about this wrap?” Peach asked, grinning with pride.

“It’s tan,” I remarked, annoyed. “Why are y’all attracted to these nude shades?”

I walked off, needing to get out of there. Food. I needed sustenance. I’d already purchased a few pieces from the boutique, and was ready to eat.

“Whatever, Shi-Shi!” Corinne shouted to my back.

I wandered into the hall, loving the virtual emptiness a weekday shopping event offered here.

Ooooh....

I found myself meandering into a cute baby boutique. The cribs and other furniture pieces caught my eye. I adored the patterns and colors on display. It made me realize how much the nursery styles had changed over three short years. I enjoyed decorating Chi-Chi’s nursery. Suddenly, I giggled at the memory of Jas biting off of me for his own.

“Damn,” an accented man remarked. “That is you.”

Haris stood just inside the small boutique, his smile just as illuminating as always. As a modestly handsome man, it was his best feature.

I found my smile. “It is. How are you?”

He shrugged, beam still bright. “It was good until I saw you, love.”

That was odd. Coming into view from the window of the store were two women. They were gazing curiously inside.

“Haris,” one called with an accent herself I couldn’t identify.

He peered over his shoulder. “One second, sweetie.” Then his attention returned to me.

“I hope I’m not keeping you from anything.”

“No. Not since I flew all the way down to Costa Rica to visit you, all for you to touch my ‘old man’ and run off. You

even blocked me.”

I blinked, stunned and embarrassed. “I did, did I?”

“You did, being a little bitch. Did you also run and tell your baby daddy?” His attempt at American slang repulsed me.

“Did I? I hear you’ve reached out to him as well.”

He shrugged. “Just business, my love.”

“Oh. Okay.” I bit my lip nervously. How long would this awkward encounter go? “Good. Just so you know, Jas isn’t very friendly. His business astute is off the meters, but socially...” I shook my head. “He’s a bit challenged, which is why I thought it was best to...cut things off with you.”

“Oh, really?” His smile broadened. “I thought it was because you got a touch of a real man, thought you couldn’t handle it, and ran back to your American corner thug.”

That incensed me. “A corner thug who would rip your ass into pieces with his bare hands.” I cringed then sighed, “Haris, it was nice knowing you. No need for us to ever speak again.”

“You don’t mean he’d shoot me with one of the big guns he’s been on record for firing and expiring lives with?” He winked. “I can’t beat a bullet, but I’d beat your thug’s arse with these fists.”

Where had Haris’ ire for me began? He certainly showed none of this the few times we dated. Was it all a ruse?

I nodded and winked. “A little too obsessive, buddy. You sure you don’t want to be *his*—”

Haris cocked back phlegm from the back of his throat and slung it toward me. The shit landed on my stomach and sandal.

I gazed back up to him, anger bubbling in my belly. “Motherfucker!” I lunged at him, but Haris moved quicker.

I snatched the closest object to me and hurled it toward his head. It was a couple of feet too short to land. Laughing, Haris was out of the boutique with just a few quick strides. I gripped

a metal bear no bigger than my palm, throwing that, too, and missed again.

“Excuse me!” someone from the boutique called to me.

I followed him to the door. Haris quickly got the two women to walk off. My hand grabbed another object I couldn't identify; just went for it. But it was seized by the store clerk's hand over my own.

My head swung wildly to the interceptor.

“Ma'am, you're paying for all of this!”

“Shi-Shi, what's wrong?”

“What the hell?”

Seeing my friends appear in the boutique, snapped me out of my rage. My wild eyes swung around, and suddenly I felt my lungs again.

That motherfucker spit on me!

Out of nowhere, I cried. It wasn't for the blatant disrespect. It was because I wouldn't be able to handle Jas' response to this.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Part III

August | Three Years Later



“**W**heew, man! *The Banger!*” Juggy shouted inside the gold lined elevator with a bottle of *Mauve* in the air. “She whooped that lil’ bitch ass! That’s what the fuck I’m talkin’ ‘bout!” He leaped in the car, making us all laugh. The elevator operator even found his antics funny. “And, yo! You saw how slow with it *The Banger* was? She could’ve knocked the bitch, Davies, out from the first bell, but took her time with ‘er. She was showing that bitch she wasn’t ready to come off that breastmilk and bleed from her pussy the way real women do!” He laughed at himself.

The two women with him found Jug hilarious. Homie brought two of them down here to Atlantic City for the McNabb vs. Davies fight. He’d been living it up. Man and LaKim were with us, too, cracking the hell up.

We’d just left the arena at *KAHRI Resort and Casino*, another property of one A.D. Jacobs. It was the place Tori McNabb fought her last fight before retiring. Tonight was no different. The building and town was littered with loads of

celebrities and street high-rollers. The energy was electrifying. People betted against Tori, saying after having kids and only taking seven weeks to prepare, she wouldn't be fight-ready. Well, they were broke fools now. Tori beat the girl's ass, knotted her shit up.

Everyone was celebrating and laughing except the beauty with her back nestled into my chest as we ascended to the suite-level for our room. Her girls decided to go party in dry ass, Atlantic City. I was surprised when Ashira declined. Then again, I wasn't. Shortie hadn't been herself since the Haris shit a few days ago.

Bob called me once Ashira and her girls got to the truck where he was waiting on them at *Short Hills Mall*. I asked him to take the girls home and to bring Ashira to me at my *Prism Built* office complex. She cried into my chest, telling me about their exchange, even the shit about her almost fucking him in Costa Rica. I could have flexed, but decided not to. Ugly shit like this would try to distract us now that we were finally on one accord. Just like Josie not taking my decision to end our friendship well.

We'd just have to get through the mess from our mistakes. That day, in my office, Ashira wailed into my chest, begging me to not do anything stupid. She made me swear it to her. I did it without an issue. I'd have my time to formally introduce myself to Haris Elba. For now, I had to tighten things up with my family. God had spoken to me, revealed His heart. He told me it was time.

The elevator tolled and we exited out at penthouse level. With Ashira's hand clenched to mine, she followed me to our suite.

"Later, knuckleheads!" Jug yelled, going into the opposite direction.

Man and LaKim right behind them, laughing their heads off.

Ashira waved, but kept her head low. I opened the doors to the suite and allowed her to step inside first. She went straight into the bedroom while I pulled out of my blazer and draped it

over the sofa in the living room. The skyline was beautiful from the suite, a blazing view of lights across the city.

I thought to check my phones, being sure I'd missed a lot being in the arena. The biggest surprise was the voice message from Josie. She called two hours ago. I hit the speaker icon and let the message play.

"Jas, it's Josie." The girl sounded sad; angry, too. "I spoke to First Lady and Bishop Carmichael. They advised that I delete the recording and not share it with anyone else." There was a delay before she sighed. "I'm sorry. It was petty of me. I was—*am*—angry about how you deceived me all this time. I still believe you had feelings for Shi-Shi when you pursued me. I just wish you would've been honest...and I wouldn't have been so naïve when I found out you two were still together. Anyway, bye for good. Bishop told me you were letting me keep the car. I guess that's what I deserve after what you put me through this summer." She disconnected the call.

Suddenly, I sensed her. Ashira was a few feet away, leaning into the wall with her hands behind her back. She was beautiful. Hair up in a fancy ponytail with loose hairs falling into her face. The dress she wore looked to be painted on. Off-white, all fitted with three circles cut out on each side; just beneath her breasts, her small waist, and hips. The whole Atlantic City knew my lady wore no undergarments. The sight of her hipbones turned me on. *Shit*. Ashira's whole body turned me on. I hoped she'd let me express it tonight.

"You heard that?" I asked. She nodded, beautifully made up face empty. "That make you feel better?"

The day after Josie left my house, two weeks ago, I met up with her to tell her it was over. It was hard to do, because I really liked Josie. It wasn't about romance; the girl was good people. Maybe in another lifetime, we could have been something more. This lifetime, though, belonged to the sexy chick with the dopest body and saddest face.

The night of her run-in with pussy ass Haris, Lex called me saying Josie screen-recorded the call where she heard Ashira and I having sex. Josie's crazy ass brought the

recording to church and played it for Lex in the Bishop's Office. Shit got ugly because the Carmichaels were my people. Josie, obviously upset, threatened to send it to [Spilling That Hot Tea](#). Lex tried to remind the crazy girl how Ashira wasn't a real celebrity; she only worked with them. Between her and Ezra, Josie was talked off the ledge, and this message was confirmation of that.

“Then what's got your panties in a bunch, Witherspoon? Don't tell me you still trippin' off of that Haris shit?” He was a marked man. I'd already had Sadik, one of the most hands-on, resourceful people I knew, looking for him. Last month, Haris claimed to want to do business with him. I was hoping to catch him that way. She had nothing to worry about. “You miss your lil' cupcake, Chi-Chi?”

Baby girl was psyched about starting school next week. She'd even been so good at accepting her mother in my personal space, and vice versa. Having Noelle around more had helped distract Chivon. She hadn't been sticking underneath us since big auntie moved in last week. I was happy as hell for Noelle. I'd be spending more time with her now.

Ashira shook her head.

“You still feel bad about Nicholas?” I was fishing now.

Nicholas had begun speaking to a therapist, who right away, identified unhealthy amounts of alcohol intake to cope with issues my little brother had been struggling with. We knew it was my pops. Dude was on the path to alcoholism. Nicholas had a long road ahead of him, but my faith was rooted in the ultimate Healer and Deliverer. I'd be right by my brother's side every step of the way.

Pieces of Ashira's long bangs aside her gorgeous face whipped when her head swung from left to right. Then her face folded, and she began to cry. I jumped to my feet, dropping my phone onto the sofa.

Her one arm pushed out, telling me to stay away. When I looked at the girl like she'd lost her mind—because she had if she thought I'd ever stay away from her—Ashira's other arm

pulled from her back and toward me. In her hand were three pregnancy testing sticks.

They were used.

The shits were all positive.

That's when it all started coming back to me in spades. Ashira didn't drink a single drop of alcohol at dinner, the fight, or the little afterparty Azmir held that we walked through. There were no cigars either. In fact, I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen her drink or smoke.

I swept over her body from head to toe. The dress revealed nothing. Ashira was walkway ready with a killer body in damn near five inch heels. I could see her lungs work—her abs—as she cried.

“You're on birth control.”

Her head shook. “Not since the night I won *IDC*.”

My eyes rolled up and fell backward.

“Fuck, Witherspoon!” I groaned, feeling fucked up for the both of us.



Part III

September | Three Years Later

ashira

My eyelids parted immediately taking in the sunrays of the bright room. All-white walls, flowy linen drapes dancing against the salty breeze. And there, in the corner of the palatial bedroom was beautifully marred chestnut skin casing

powerfully defined muscles curled over into a prostrate position. His voluminous coils were longer, yet lineup cut with precision. And he was mine. All mine.

Abruptly, his eyes opened, and his neck twisted to face me. The softness in Jas' eyes melted my core. My legs shifted over the mattress.

“You're up.”

I blinked, tight eyes straining. “You're stalking me.”

Jas stood in just russet linen pants, and as he sauntered over to me, I tried making out his dick even through the layer of his boxer briefs.

“Who's stalking who now?” His face was void of an expression. “You hungry?”

“I should eat.”

He sat on the bed, big hot hand caressing my side and hip as I lay facing him. Jas' eyes shot above my head, and I followed his line of view to the nightstand. A charcuterie board lay there topped with an assortment of cheeses, meats, veggies, and fruits.

“You're trying to fatten me up.” I sighed, lifting my torso from the mattress to slide up toward the food. “I see your plan, Sinclair. Fatten me up so I get no work or no play from any dudes.” I plucked a cube of cheese and a sliced strawberry from the board.

“I ain't want you getting sick,” his delivery monotoned. “And you'll never get fat. Just like you'll never get play from any other nigga, Ashira.” There was a distinct bite to his tone as he plopped a few grapes into his alluring mouth.

I knew he was being supportive by having food ready for me when I awakened from my nap. Sometimes, morning sickness kicked my ass after a long nap. Today's kip was definitely long. Jas and I made slow love an hour after waking up for the day. That shit put my ass right back to sleep. And, likely, the tranquility this place provided as well.

The property was so peaceful. A private island in the Caribbean, rooting several properties, this being the primary. The entire land was heavily guarded, too. There were armed men monitoring the islet from each end. Earl Ellis was a very wealthy man with exotic taste, and clearly carried an obsession with security like Jas.

“How do you know the Ellises?”

A single thick brow of his lifted as Jas side-eyed me. “What? You *FEDS*, Witherspoon?”

I laughed. “I think you just answered a part of that question. But does he just loan you his toys whenever you ask? Is he this way with everyone he knows?”

Jas shook his head, picking through the fruits on the board. “Ashira, Ashira, Ashira,” he sighed, eyes tossed to the open patio doors revealing an endless sea. “There’s so much to share, but at this point in my life, the details are irrelevant, yet still dangerous to some people.”

My eyes fell to my lap. “That’s how we started out: you not trusting me with those details.”

He shook his head. “We’re not back there, though. We’re here where my current life is an open book. I’ve outlined for you the savage I used to be. I’m just not comfortable coloring in the lines.”

“The savage who nearly ripped the head off a man who attempted to shanghai my best friend and me? The one who pummeled my movie star ex-boyfriend in a small bathroom in the back of a privately-owned restaurant? Or the one who viciously beat his cousin whom he felt was flirting with me?” My nipples tingled, and I felt my eyes narrowing.

Why did speaking those truths arouse me?

Continuing to eat without flinching, Jas nodded, triceps bulged as he fed himself. “That nigga. Yeah,” he mumbled.

“What does he have to do with Earl Ellis?”

Jas shrugged. “Double E Bags respected the savage. I ‘on’t know what made me special, but the man’s been solid with me

since I was a pup. He respected the savage and respects the man.” He shrugged. “I’m grateful for him.” Then he leaned in to kiss me sweetly. “I get to spend my crush’s birthday with her on a private island.” He kissed me again, this time sucking my bottom lip before pulling it away from my face until it retracted. “Happy birthday, Ashira.”

“It’s been the perfect birthday,” I breathed. “The perfect day until some loud thud woke me up.”

Jas’ face contorted, lips pouting. “Oh, I ain’t hear it. Guess I was wrapped up in prayer.”

That mention warmed me. “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot,” he agreed, facing forward with rounded shoulders and broad wings.

“What do you think of me? Like really think of me now?” His head whipped to face me. “I mean... I knew you were into me when we first met—or after I forced you to see me. I felt appealing to you. But now, after all the drama, do you find me just as appealing or am I now just a circumstance of a deviation from your trusted list?”

Jas peered toward the ceiling, appearing to consider the question while pulling in a hefty breath through his nostrils. “I get the question. I really do. What I don’t understand is how you could think I’m a settling man? Ashira, I get what I want. It’s my relationship with the King mixed with my hustle. ‘Trust in the Lord, and do good. Dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness. Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass. He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday. Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him.’ I can go on and on about how I never had to settle for shit even before my walk. It’s not what I do.”

Oh, how I loved when he waxed scripture to me. It was inspiring and, incongruently, arousing. Hope blossomed in my chest.

“So you do choose me to complete your list with because I...” My damn eyes fell again and nervousness descended upon me.

“You what, Ashira?” he snipped.

“I know what I want for my birthday.”

Jas, playfully, twisted his neck to peer around the room. “I got us a whole damn island in the Caribbean, and you want more? How much bread you think I got, girl?”

A soft smile lifted on my face, acknowledging his humor. “What I want money can’t buy,” I whispered.

Jas’ hand reached for me, brushing lightly over my belly. “I’ve already put another one in you. Two was farther down on my list, shortie. Money can’t buy no more.”

He was being playful, something I appreciated, but I wasn’t there. Blame the erratic pregnancy hormones, but I’d been doing a bit of soul-searching since learning about being pregnant.

“I want you. I want you to...” I pulled in a breath, braving myself. “Let’s get married.”

It happened again. A flipping in his pupils, a veil being lifted, exposing a maelstrom of emotions flashing between his narrowed lids. I’d seen the darkness of his soul a million times before and it terrified the shit out of me. Even now my pulse began to race, mouth secreted unbelievably fast to the point of salivation. Danger.

I pushed from the pillows, lunging at his muscular frame with a pulsing clit. My lips landed on him first, tongue pushing through his mouth to find his own. I managed my dress to my hips, onto his lap, and straddled him. My fingers pushed into his soft coils, pressing into his scalp. I fluttered my tongue, sucked his lips while squeezing his frame, melding his essence to me. Jas’ dick swelled against my ass just as fast as I lost my breath.

Pulling away from his mouth, I murmured with full confidence, “Marry me.”

His lids were low, jaw relaxed as he studied me. “You up for a swim?”

“Now?”

“Yeah.” Jas’ expression tightened.

What?

“Ummm...” I glanced down at my tube dress. “I guess. I need to change first, though.”

“Nah.” He took me at the cheeks and stood from the bed. “We got the whole island.”

Jas carried me from the room, down the steps to the lower level as though I was weightless.

I bit his ear, feeling insecure about how he totally ignored my question. “You’re not going to be able to carry me like this for long.”

He slapped my ass. “I’ll always carry you, girl.”

I readjusted my arms around his neck and kissed him again. It was another nasty one. God, I wanted him again, even after the long session this morning. I even kissed Jas while he stood me on my feet, and shuffled my bodycon dress over my hips and down my thighs.

Pulling away from me, he called, “Ashira.” I smiled, rubbing my nose against his. Yeah, I was fully aware of Jas’ past. The violence, the killings...his capability. I hated it for him, but understood I couldn’t change it. I also knew he’d been the biggest protector of me, and would be for our children. The security I felt in that could rival the insecurities caused by my mother’s abandonment. I had a family now, a village to cultivate. This man was at the helm of it, and I wanted it to be official. “Happy birthday, baby,” he murmured against my face.

I smiled. Hard. “Thank you, Ojasvi.”

When Jas’ head lifted above my own, his face left the grasp of my palms. I could tell something else had his attention. Peering over my shoulder, through the open doors

off the side of the house, I saw giant balloons. Ivory, tan, a dulled pink—all nude colors.

My head whipped back to face him. “What were you up to while I napped?”

Still expressionless, Jas took me by the hand and we walked toward the doors. Music sounded and, at first, I didn’t recognize it, so stunned by the swift changes of our conversations and moods in such a short span. We padded barefoot outside into the salted air. The balloons were en mass, creating an endless color coordinated wall.

People appeared—whoa! Lots of people. Familiar, smiling faces.

Oh, my god!

Shizu and David. Corinne—Peach, Becky, and Connor! Chelsea, Tanya, *Antoine*—Jonathan!

I turned to Jas, my mouth hanging agape. This was a birthday party. His family and mine. They came all the way out here to celebrate my birthday. My senses were on overload, synapses firing off in my brain.

The music.

Kamasi Washington.

“*Truth!*” I asked, wide-eyed and breathless.

Jas’ beautiful smile broadened into a full beam then he pointed. I followed his line of vision to a band. An actual band playing the song Jas introduced me to that touched my soul. This was all too much.

“Mommy!” I could hear Chi-Chi.

I turned to find her on Ines’ hip. Ines. *She* flew all the way out here? *Whoa!*

A tear slipped as I waved to them both. There were stations of food all around, drinks and desserts in beautiful display.

“How were you able to pull this off?”

Jas' eyes blossomed wide as he exhaled and shook his head. "With a bunch of people because this shit has had my ass stressed since we landed. You think this morning was about giving you all those orgasms just for fun?" I tossed my head back and laughed. "Thank God your ass took a long nap."

Ahhh... "That's what woke me up?"

Jas laughed. "I'm pretty sure of it. Look..." He pointed behind me.

My parents stood together, smiles on their faces. So overwhelmed with emotion, I pulled Jas behind me as I approached them for a hug. It was the first time I'd hugged my mother in more years than I could count. The gesture was odd and quick, but necessary for the occasion.

"Thanks for coming," I told my mother.

She winked then peered over to Jas. "That's a lot, young man."

Shit. His chest was exposed. Jas was shirtless. And it was a tempting piece of art to behold.

"I got you, ock," Juggy appeared out of nowhere.

"Juggy!" I screamed, pulling him into the tightest hug before he could take off.

I took my time greeting guests. Cecil, Borys, and Maria were near a table topped with colorful appetizers. That was when I began to pay attention to the color palette. All nude hues. The décor and the clothing of the guests. I turned to find my best friends and approached them.

"Is this why you guys were shopping for neutral-colored swimwear at the mall last month?"

Corinne winked, sipping on a delicious looking cocktail through a straw. "Yes, dahling! We'll be swimming in the nude."

I found that funny. All the girls did, including my baby sister Noelle standing near Ines and Chi-Chi. She approached

me with a tight squeeze from the side. I kissed the top of her braided head, thankful for her affection.

“Who came up with the theme?” I wondered.

Shizu winked. “I helped when Jas told us what today meant for him.”

“Which is?”

“Unveiling,” she answered. “He feels you two have finally gotten to a place where you can be free and honest about who you are.”

“I swear to god, that’s so fucking sweet, Shi-Shi!” Becky yelled, face red. I could tell she’d had a few drinks. It was what we did when away.

“So, we’re all here in nude hues,” Peach pointed out. “We’re all naked, revealing who we are in celebration of your birthday, girl!” she shouted, prompting the girls to do the same.

“Happy birthday, bitch!” Cecil was suddenly at my side jumping from his toes.

Noelle joined him. “Happy birthday to my aggy big sister!”

I was happy. Sheer joy burst from my heart. I couldn’t have asked for a better birthday.

“Oh, shit,” David swore, pointing behind me. “Look.”

I turned to find my guests had parted a path, bringing into view big, four feet tall standing alphabets spelling out “MARRY ME.”

My belly leaped. Jas stood in front of them, his chin low, eyes searing me. His attention was always on me. He now had on an russet simple V-neck tee, matching his linen pants. He called me over with the tossing of his chin. *Such a damn b-boy*. And like a moth to a flame, I floated to his side with tears racing down my face.

He pulled out the purple square box with a gold logo. *Andreatta’s Promises*. We’d been down this road before. I

knew the game.

My lungs seized as Jas went down on one knee. His hand trembled when he grabbed mine. His expression gravely enigmatic as he peered up to me. He was nervous. The murderous thug from Harlem with a personality disorder was anxious.

“Yes, Jas,” I cried. I heard snickering behind me, now surrounded by family and friends with phones in the air, capturing my big moment.

“Let him speak,” Ines quipped.

I rolled my eyes. She’d always been so soft for him. “I just proposed to him upstairs in bed. He can skip the pomp and circumstance.” As the group laughed, all I could see when gazing at the love of my life was the man I sat across from in *Brown Baristas*, trying to get into his head. Jas sat nonchalant and cold, but there was a confidence to his aura. A light beaming from him. He’d never changed on me. Even when he decided to let the hope of us go, he still cared for me. He may have been on one knee, sporting a stoic expression from nervousness, but I felt his unchanging love blazing through those eyes. I returned his passionate gaze with a bobbing head and tearful eyes. “I’m yours.”

“Will you be my wife forever?”

“And ever. Amen!”

Our party found my silly ass response funny, too. I couldn’t help it. My heart was elated.

When he opened the box and retrieved the ring, I noticed right away it wasn’t the emerald-cut hollow ring with pave diamonds surrounding a platinum band. This one was a slightly larger round brilliant cut with the same platinum band, but no pave diamonds. It was gorgeous, nothing competing with the primary stone.

“Thank you,” I cried, uselessly wiping my face with an already soddened hand.

Jas stood and took me into his arms for impassioned kiss. “Thank you,” he returned. “I was going to wait until later

when the sun set, but your aggressive, anxious ass wanted to lay down my G upstairs, proposing to me. You ruined the surprise.”

With a tear-stained face and the goofiest smile, I quipped, “Say less, Sin.”

Chi-Chi was at his leg. “Daddy!” She lifted her arms.

Jas picked her up, kissing her cheek as the crowd went up in with cheers and whistles. They congratulated the most fulfilling accomplishment in my life.

Jas twirled me around with his free hand as we danced to “*Truth.*”

Epilogue

Part III

November | Three Years Later



“No, Mommy. Not too much,” Chivon whined as her mother painted her toenails a burnt orange color she wanted for the holiday.

“Sorry, baby.” Ashira focus game was serious, speaking slowly while stroking the brush. “It’s just hard for Mommy to do it in this position.”

Noelle, sitting on the floor against the wall, glanced up from her phone. “You want me to do it?”

“No!” With one arm holding her *iPad*, Chivon’s other palm shot up into the air. “Mommy do it, Auntie. Just mommy!” Then she went back to watching a video.

I snorted while Noelle rolled her eyes.

Ashira had been promising Chivon to change the color of her toenails when she came home on a break from the Pixie tour for weeks now. I would have taken her to the nail salon,

but Chivon found something special in her mother's work, even if she was a bit bossy when her moms did it.

"Jas!" Ashira's leg jerk and she giggled.

"What? I ain't applying no pressure," I reminded her at the foot of the bed, rubbing her feet with an oil Rose sent up to help Ashira with circulation during the tour.

"No, but you're too light-handed, making it tickle." She smiled while still applying a coat to Chivon's toes.

We were a sight in my bedroom. Ashira lay on her back against a mountain of pillows, leaning over to Chivon's little feet near her round belly. And Noelle wasn't far at all from her big sister. Everyone wanted a piece of Ashira. This was what happened when she hadn't been home for eight weeks. We'd all missed her and didn't spare a moment of time in her presence. I didn't mind sharing her this evening after eating leftover Thanksgiving dinner because I'd seen her out on the road.

Four times, I flew out to see her shows, and refuel on her charm and body when the tour stopped in Miami, New Orleans, San Diego, and Boston. I took the girls with me to the last one because of the short distance. But the others would have been hard with their school schedules, so they stayed behind with Ines, Consuela, and Frankie, when she'd come through.

"When's Juggy coming back?" Noelle asked. "Tomorrow?"

"Nah. Maybe the weekend," I answered.

"Why?" Ashira's eyes were still on the toe she worked on.

"Because he said when he came back he would start teaching me how to drive."

Damn. "We there now?"

"Yeeeeeah, boyeeee!" She waved her arms in the air, swaying her torso. It reminded me so much of her big sister.

They were wildly expressive that way.

“I guess it is that time. Huhn?” Ashira murmured, still focused.

Jug had been in *Della* for the holidays. Dude got a special invitation. Rose called him down for a checkup. She’d taken a liking to my G, which was why I felt the invitation was for his company. The whole family liked Jug from his time down there last summer. Dude left a lasting impression. And because they were so hospitable, he was in no rush to come home. That and because Diana had taken a special liking to the dude. They tried being downlow with their shit, but I knew he’d been fucking her since the summer.

“You can try and ask Nicholas.” I quickly tapped Ashira’s foot when she suggested that.

Her eyes crawled to me and I shook my head, telling her it wasn’t a good idea. My little brother got hit with two DUI’s since September. The first one was days before Ashira’s birthday party in Antigua. He was in court, being handed down his fate. It stressed me that I couldn’t be there for him that day.

I ended up flying him out the following night, and he was able to celebrate with us for a couple of days and clear his mind. Ashira and I suggested he give up his apartment for a little while and stay here in *Lake Sha’Ron* with me. We didn’t want him isolated, which contributed to his issues. He agreed, and had moved in. I still had him in therapy, and now the courts had him in a treatment program. He had an apparatus installed in his car, forcing him to take a sobriety breath-test before being able to start the engine. I didn’t think Noelle needed to be involve with all of that. Plus, Nicholas deserved his privacy.

“I can take you out, N.O. Elle,” I offered.

Her eyes blew up and she sucked in air. “Really, Jas? I know how busy you are.”

“S’all good. Say less. We can get started tomorrow after I take your sister to the airport in the morning.”

My lady was leaving us again. She wouldn't be done with the Pixie tour until January. After tonight, I'd be back to a cold ass bed, a hard ass wood, and occasionally a kicking ass, farting ass toddler.

"Oh, shit!" Ashira jumped, smiling hard, eyes beautifully wild as she turned to face me.

Chivon's head flew up from the device. "Mommy! You mess it up!"

"My bad, baby." Ashira turned back to her toes. "No, I didn't. See. Just fine." Then she turned, her attention swinging between Noelle and me. "Shizu's pregnant."

Noelle's face twisted. "By David?"

I laughed. "Who else?"

"Ben!" Ashira's face was wide—gossipy wide.

"Say word," I mumbled, shocked as hell.

"See!" Noelle emphasized, animated as hell. "Shizu's that girl. She's always had options."

Ashira nodded with a conspiratorial grin. "We're going crazy with the news."

"Pregnant?" I, more or less, repeated than asked.

"Yup. Found out like three days ago. I forgot to tell you, so hyped about coming home," Ashira admitted. "And check this."—*Yup*. My lady was in full gossip mode about her best friend, and my beat ass was here for it.—"They're engaged!"

"What?" Noelle shrieked.

Ashira nodded again. "Yup. They've got a wedding date and all."

"When?" I asked.

"Shizu told Becky, who told me, she didn't want to do it while I was pregnant. Since I'm due March thirtieth, Shizu was sweet enough to plan an early May date to give me enough time to snapback. Isn't she the best?"

"But she'll be pregnant." Noelle shook her head.

“She doesn’t care. Shizu’s been wanting Ben all this time. She was biding her time with David. Peach and I believe the week after my birthday party, when Shizu snuck off with Ben is likely when she got pregnant.”

“When are you two getting married?” Noelle’s eyes swung between her sister and me.

Ashira and I met glances. She smiled and answered, “Next year. Unlike Shizu, I don’t want to be a swollen bride. I’m trying to twerk down the aisle.” She stuck her tongue out and rolled her neck playfully. “I’m not rushing the planning of the wedding part; I already have the location.”

Noelle asked, “Where?”

“*Elliswoods Palace* in Hunterdon County. Oh, my god, Noelle, you’ve got to see it. It’s like the most elegant estate I’ve ever seen.”

“Bigger than daddy’s?”

“Way bigger. It’s like a whole town. And the owner—the wife—told me I could use their property. That’s whose island we were on for my birthday. Isn’t that wild?” Ashira laughed. “When we came back from Antigua, I called her up and told her I’d finally found a man crazy enough to marry me. She said she’d known—” She softly kicked at my hand. I snorted. “—about it for some time. Anyway, I told her I wanted a late June wedding day. She promised to keep the property available the entire month. The woman is so sweet.”

She was. Queen Ellis had always been the epitome of a village mother. The woman took care of everyone attached to her.

“At least you and Shizu won’t be getting married at the same time. But y’all friends are gonna be broke for two months straight.” Noelle laughed.

She brought my mind back to that. “Damn.” That was some shit. David was at Ashira’s birthday party. “Shuzi’s gangsta.” I blinked hard.

“She ain’t never heard of birth control?” Noelle seemed disgusted.

Ashira smiled, going back to Chivon's toes and mumbled, "Like me, she got off birth control."

"Why you get off birth control?"

I would have thought the question was inappropriate for Noelle to ask, but my ass wanted to know, too.

Ashira shrugged, still at work on my baby's toes. "Being rebellious, I guess. I contemplated tossing my case the night before *IDC*. I was mad at a certain baby's daddy with too much *Harlem Pride*. So getting off the pill made me feel like I was 'getting off' of him. No need to be on the pill when there's no risk of getting pregnant."

But her ass ain't say that shit when we started fucking again. Ashira had so many opportunities to remember we had no protection during sex. So many, but stayed quiet on it.

"If you wanted another baby by my big bro, just say that, Shi-Shi!"

"That's what I'm saying!" My head collapsed.

Noelle cracked up while I chuckled, somewhat serious. Her big sister rolled her eyes while blowing on Chivon's toes like she was annoyed.

Ashira wanted another baby. Bottom line. She once again made me a baby's daddy. She played her cards, and I played mine by asking her to marry me so soon after learning about the pregnancy. Yeah. I was a calculating ass motherfucker when it came to her. Even if it meant involving other women to get Ashira to grow the fuck up and get in line with me. I wanted her as my wife, not as a casual baby's mother.

My phone rang over the comforter.

"S.Q.E., whaddup," I answered seeing Sadik's name on the screen.

"London Bridge. It's falling down." My eyes shot up to Ashira, who was already looking at me."

"Word? Where?"

“Warehouse.” Something exploded in my stomach hearing those two syllables. Something that felt good. Familiar. Fun.

Oh, it's going down...

With my eyes still locked into Ashira's, I assured him, “Leaving in ten.”

“See you.”

The moment I disconnected the call, Ashira reminded me, “I'm leaving first thing in the morning.” I recognized the warning in that message, but my pulse had already begun beating loud in my head.

I reached down and kissed her toes. “I'll be back in a couple of hours. Put Chivon down and you'll have me to yourself.”

“Ewwwww!” Noelle expressed her disgust of that innuendo, looking into her phone.

“Jas,” Ashira cried again. “Nothing's more important than us.”

I shook my head. “Nothing's more important than y'all.” I gestured the ladies in the room before heading to the closet.



The metal door of the warehouse lifted, and coming into view were soldiers of the Ellis army. DeMarcus, a general, stood with his hands behind his back in a typical expensive ass suit; the Ellis uniform. He nodded in acknowledgment of Man and me then prompted us to follow him. There was no need for words; we'd been expected. Plus, I was tweaking. My pulse beat so loud in my head, I'd begun to enjoy it as music. The gum I chewed helped minimize the twisting of my jaw. My hands flexed over and over, and I found myself rolling my shoulders every so often.

As we walked the cemented floors of the warehouse, the scent hadn't changed, just some shit I hadn't smelled in years. Cocaine, pure marijuana leaves, and pill production happening

all around behind the walls. The Ellis production house was fully encompassed and well-guarded.

We took the elevator up a level before traveling down another narrow hall. DeMarcus stopped at a large window where he wanted me to see two men: one white with spikey hair and the other of Asian lineage rocking black eyeliner and nails. *British shit*. I knew right away they were Haris' muscle. I snorted. One was fixing himself coffee as though in an office break room. The Asian kid's attention was fixed to the plasma TV mounted on the wall.

Pups...

These niggas were untrained pups. It was clear to me Sadik had already begun the work. He separated Haris from his "security," enticing them with the accoutrements of a break room. Shaking my head, I motioned for us to move on. DeMarcus led us to a closed door further down the hall. When it swung open, Sadik sat at the edge of a desk facing an uninformed Haris. At the first sight of the back of his head, I could tell he was comfortable...loosened, engaged in a conversation.

When Sadik's clear looking eyes reached me, Haris turned to see what had taken his attention. The slow work of the bullshit ass grin he loved to sport that day on the video call with him melting away so quickly at the sight of me, here tonight, made my dick twitch. I had to pace myself, though. I'd be savage, but not too brutal. I was no longer Sin the Harlem terror. Leaning against the wall, measuring my prey, I was now Jas, the protector of my family. This would be light work.

I'd hoped.

"Here I am," I announced to Haris with a grin.

He shot to his feet, examining Sadik for answers before facing me again. "Pardon?"

I pushed off the wall. "I'm here. You finally have me. It's what you've been wanting for years now. Right?"

Haris scoffed, looking over to Deek again. “What do you mean?” The delivery of his question so British.

I shook my head, stopping in front him. “I respect your patience, but you were out of your league with this one.”

“Pardon me?” He looked to an amused Sadik once more. “I’m here talking investment opportunities. I thought...” His head whipped back to Sadik. “I thought this was legit. Where are my men?”

Haris was finally getting the picture.

“I’ll get them in a minute,” Sadik assured with a smile. “My guy, Sin here, needs a word with you. Seems like your attempts in the American market has been met with some confusion. My brother needs a little clarity—or at least, to make sure you have some.”

“Clarity on what?”

“That this American thug ain’t nothing to fuck with.” When the muscles in Haris’ face dropped, I continued. “You think we’re less than intelligent, and especially me. Why?”

“I don’t even know *you*—”

“Because I actually did time after hittin’ your boy and his peoples?” Haris didn’t answer. “You do know I didn’t get knocked for the hit; I got caught slippin’ with them thangs you told my lady I liked last summer when you approached her in *Short Hills Mall*.”

Haris exhaled, eyes rolling as he adjusted his stance. I smelled it on him. Fear. He reeked of it, finally understanding the shit he was standing in right now.

“You went too far. I let the false business inquiries go. Found out you were behind my club getting hit up a few years ago, and took it on the chin. I ain’t even trip when you tried going after my lady.” I whispered, “Light work.”

His lips trembled. “Hey, man. Ashira and I had our moment, but that was it. Just a lit-ule petting and wild kissing, bro. We didn’t make it there.”

“Yeah. She told me.” I laughed. “Imagine how different and sooner this meeting would’ve been a lot if you had. Thank God for little peckers. Otherwise, you would’ve been sent up with your Bartinicki buddy. Was spittin’ on my lady worth finally meeting me today?”

Haris’ eyes closed in defeat.

I nodded laughing. “You remember how those niggas you hired to shakedown my joint ended up? Do you even care how the ‘dumb American thugs’ you hired now have permanent bodily consequences from that shit you pulled?”

“He was my friend, bro.” ‘Bro’ sounded hilarious with his accent. “Nicki was my friend, man,” Haris groaned. “My real friend. You would want to avenge the brutal death of your friend. You can’t say you wouldn’t. At least, I wasn’t trying to seek revenge by way of death.”

“Wasn’t that kid a rapist?” Sadik asked. “I think the news reports was saying that after he was sprayed. Ain’t that right?” He asked me.

I shrugged. “Didn’t matter then. Don’t matter much now. What matters now is Haris knowing me. My transgressions.” I slapped him.

It was a quick, neat one with good impact. I only wanted to wake him up a little.

Man laughed behind me.

“*Wha*—hang on!” Haris struggled with showing just how terrified he was.

This time, I punched him, knocking his ass backward. A dark cloud had begun descending over me: the blanket I used to love.

“Shit!” Man shouted. “This ‘bout to be a good night, Sadik. You got some fuckin’ popcorn? Jug gon’ be fucked up he missed this. That nigga Sin is back!”

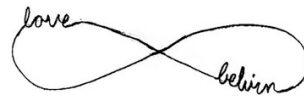
Sadik, less expressive about his amusement, stood from the desk. “What’s gonna be your candy of choice tonight? The four-fifth or nine-milli? Oh, wait.” He addressed DeMarcus.

“We got a trey-eight accessible to him tonight, too. Right?” I didn’t see DeMarcus’ reaction; my eyes were glued to the prey. The bitch spit on my lady...our baby was baking in there at the time. “Yup. You have three options, sir.”

Shakily, Haris threw up his hands. “Wait. Wait now, gentlemen! We’re all businessmen here.” Then his face folded.

Peeling out of my jacket while staring a crying ass Haris dead in the eye, I told Sadik, “I ‘on’t know right now. Let me get started, and I’ll decide later.”

Then I clocked his ass again, blood splattering as Haris howled, thickening my cock.



Air-sparring in my six by nine cell, I’m energized. Ready for war. They’re coming. I know they’ll be. It’s what they want. They put me in this low-security prison, and in pods with violent offenders. They’ve been watching me like a lab rat from the jump. That last nigga they put in my pod is crazy as hell, and they knew it.

I dance on my toes, tossing jabs into the air, remember him throwing his shit over the walls, on my bunk...on my books. The motherfucker literary took a shit in the middle of the pod, and flung it everywhere because he was mad at the C.O.s. So what was I supposed to do? Eat it? Nah. I’m new here. It was time for me to send a message to everybody in this motherfucker, including the officers. I don’t fuck with nobody and nobody should fuck with me.

My lungs start to open. Air coming in, preparing me for this war. How much these C.O.s is about to beat my ass, I don’t know, but if I can give them a tussle, they’ll know. Don’t fuck with me. Don’t observe me like I’m crazy. I ain’t no lunatic. I’m just a nigga with Harlem Pride. So when they come with those sticks and shields, I’ll go low and catch a pair of legs, using that to knock a few of them back.

Jumping around, my feet start to warm and pelvis loosens. The fuck is this? The devil be in these walls of the hole, I know. He can't be in my head or body. Right? Why am I feeling... funny? Yeah, my dick gets hard when it's time to put in work, but that's it. I don't feel like I want to fuck; just excited at the high violence brings.

Shit!

I hear rhythmic sounds. They're coming! I position myself two feet away from the metal door. They coming now. The more I hear, the closer they come. The closer they come, the more I hear. I'm tensed all over, ready for war. Heart is pounding, armpits misting, and fists clenched tight—

“Jas...” a feminine voice.

The fuck is this? They putting niggas in the box to make them crazy, too? Nah. Not me. I'm solid. I'm Sin, nigga. Ain't shit crazy about—”

“Jas, baby.” A familiar whisper. “Please!”

Who the fuck— My legs jerk. What the fuck's going on?”

“Mmmmmm...”

My eyes shoot to the walls. They got porno playing in hidden speakers in here? They making me a lab rat, for real!

“Yes, baby!” an erotic cry was so clear.

The sounds...they're closer! I go back into my caddy fight stance, bouncing on my knees.

“Jas, please!” the whisper more forceful.

My balls are drawing up in a way they only do when—

My eyes flashed open to a dark room. My room. My bedroom.

As I looked down seeing her between my legs, necking me fast and good, my heart pounded.

What in the hell?

How did I get here? When did I come home? My last memories were screaming—nasty masculine, ear-splitting

screams. Then I remembered being in the shower when had I gotten back home.

And why's Ashira's face wet with tears?

I grabbed her shoulder, then pulled at her chin, telling her to stop with the oral pleasure.

She caught on and released me from her mouth, out of breath.

“Wait,” was all I could say, panting my damn self. “I ‘on’t...” I didn’t know what to say. “Did I?”

She nodded. “Another nightmare,” she whispered. “Were you in prison again?” I nodded my head, wiping the sweat from my face. “Shit, Jas! It scared me so bad. It’s been so long since you’ve had one.”

“I know,” I pushed out with no base, feeling embarrassed and confused. I’d done so well with not having one—that I’d been aware of. Then I thought of this happening if Chivon was here sleeping with me.

“Do you see your fists? They’re swollen!” She was alarmed, forcing me to look at my knuckles in the shadowy light in the room. They were busted for sure. I’d hope the right one wasn’t broken. It throbbed way more than the left. “You met up with Haris,” Ashira whispered again. “Don’t lie to me. I could hear Sadik mention ‘London Bridge’ on the phone earlier.”

Guilt set in. I’d been doing better with my conduct. Praying, believing, and even abstaining from alcohol and drugs since my release. Flashes of Haris’ loose teeth splayed out on the cemented floor lit in my brain. The memories of his screams still echoed in my ears. It disappointed me to see how easily I got back on my favorite horse.

I nodded, too wounded to be dishonest. I was who I was. She needed to know. The woman was in her second trimester, wearing the ring I promised to marry her with. Who would want to spend their life with *someone*—thing. Some *thing* like me?

“I told you not to go,” she whispered.

Nodding again, I admitted, “I know.”

Ashira wiped her face. “Jas, we’re about to have another baby. We have Nicholas and Noelle to look after, not just Chi-Chi.” Ashira was disappointed in me, too.

Shit!

It fucked me up. She sniffled, wiping her face dry. And my stupid ass sat there with my dick out, still hard at the sound of whispers and warm breaths hitting it. I couldn’t apologize. I was only sorry she had to live with my predilections. I thought I’d changed, and I had. Just not enough.

Ashira exhaled again, eyes falling. Within seconds, she took me into her soft hands again, caressed my shaft firmly. Her eyes appeared when the tip of her tongue swiped me at the head. Then before I knew it, I was in her mouth, both her curled palms jerking me. My head tossed back. Defeated, I didn’t deserve this. I should be begging her to forgive me and to forget tonight ever happened. Instead, my hips stroked up against her loving care. My flesh. I allowed it to enjoy the moment. I couldn’t help it when she necked me so good like this.

When she stopped, my head slowly lifted. Out of breath again, I looked to her for answers. Ashira’s face was blank, but eyes heavy as hell as she stood from her knees and straddled me on the sofa. She reached behind to grab my dick then placed it at the opening of her lips, and sank down on me. I watched her eyes roll back as she did. All the air left my lungs, feeling how wet and hot she was.

Clutching me at the head and shoulders, Ashira pushed tits into my face, feeding them to me like a child. Her belly, our baby, snuggled against my chest as she rode me. Feeling so fucking raw and needy, I sucked on them, grateful for the intimacy of her touch. It humanized me, soften me, reminded me of another facet of my manhood. It calmed the inner demons telling me to fight. She was my sedative, my medicine.

Licking on her, I grabbed her soft ass, pleased by its tightening and jiggle repetition over me. Ashira lay her cheek

on the top of my head like an adoring mother to its fragile child. A bit of me felt that way in this moment. I needed her nurturing, her ability to view me as safe and loveable. Her hips began to move faster, breathing harsher. I knew what this meant. She was having a good time. The friction between our private parts had been coming to a plateau. That got me closer to my own as I pushed and lifted her from her ass onto my dick.

“Jas,” she didn’t whisper this time. There was urgency in her tone. My mouth stilled, and I looked up at her. Ashira’s eyes were low, nostrils spread as her face strained. “Did you kill him?”

What?

Of course, I didn’t respond to that. I had none. Then I realized I didn’t need one for her. Ashira squinted even more, biting her bottom lips as she bucked harder down onto me until her spine tremored and thighs contracted.

Once, again, I was right behind her because that’s where she wanted me to be. With her. Ashira, in that quick act of erotica, told me she accepted my shit. There was no judgement to be had.

And.

Fuck...

I was good with it as I pounded into her from beneath, releasing my fear and love for her at the same damn time. Shooting into my love, one sentiment shouted in my wounded brain.

Say. The. Fuck. More.

The End

###

~Love Acknowledges

Visuals: [Indelible Images](#) – Mae, once again, your professionalism was impressive. Your patience and diligence saved us in the ninth inning. Thanks so much! Leo Watkins – You were a true save in the eleventh hour! Thanks for opening your mind and participating in my madness. LOL! Eriel – It was you on sight! Ashira was officially personified by your beauty. My best to you in all your endeavors!

Beta Reader: — Yorubia, aka Uncle GWORL, YOU'RE FIRED! Applications for your potential successor have been pouring in. You have five minutes to gather all of your pertinent belongings and leave the premises. What is left will be mailed to the address in your file. Love you!

Research: Special thanks to Adrienne G. and her A.G. for helping me with Jas' background. I appreciate it more than you know!

Christina C. Jones aka CCJ — You got that good-good, girl. #Pause Hahahaha! Love to love you much, momma! ☐ This, tho.

Interior Artist: Cedeara Ardell McCollum — Thanks, baby girl, for the imagery you've designed for my books! Love you always!

Proof Reader: Tina V. Young — What would I do without you? You know what? Let's not even go there. *tears #SecretWeapon

Editors: Zakiya Walden of *I've Got Something to Say!* — You're amazing, knowing me well enough to explain what I was tryna say in a scene that I have no recollection of even writing. LOL! Crazy, but you know that about me, too.

LaMia Ashley of *Lethal Red Pen* — Salute to you for jumping into the deep end head first. I appreciate your undeniable talent. Kudos, my fellow-NJ native!

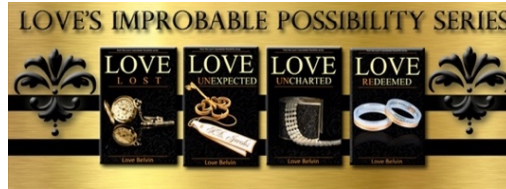
MDT: Thanks for your patience during this year full of grief. On to the next!

Master, my **Jireh**, my **Rohi**, Job 11:18 (NRSV) “And you will have confidence, because there is hope; you will be protected and take your rest in safety.” *Father, I bless you for the confidence of hope.*

~Other Books by Love Belvin

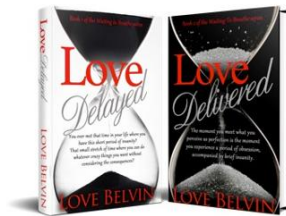
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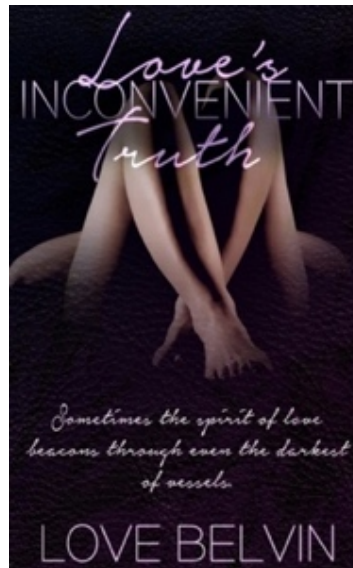


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The Muted Hopelessness series:

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The Prism series:

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~Extra

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